

NOME AGAIN

Waste disposal. Reindeer herding. Remote camp energy solutions.

Nome is not your average town, and – as the above topics suggest – the Western Alaska Science Conference (WAISC) is not your average research symposium. In March 2013 the annual event was held in the Bering Sea town of Nome for a second time, bringing with it a unique opportunity for researchers and local residents to discuss the issues most important to their lives and livelihoods.

“Most of the topics that flutter in will be the ones that are relevant and important at our region, for example at this conference we had a big session on waste management,” said Claudia Ihl, an Assistant Professor of Biology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Northwest Campus in Nome and a chief organizer of the 2013 WAISC. “And that’s just a big topic in rural communities, what do we do with our garbage? It may not be of interest at some big fancy science conference, but that’s what people here talk about.”

WAISC is a unique conference structured not around disciplines but geography: the event is held at rotating sites across Western Alaska, with each conference attracting researchers and residents focused on specific local topics. Since its inception in 2008, WAISCs have been held in the towns of Dillingham, Nome, Dutch Harbor and Bethel; major session themes in Nome included subsistence foods, climate and health, marine science, solid waste management, fisheries, water quality, alternative energy, and reindeer production. The event was also preceded by a one-day workshop put on by the Supporting and Advancing Geoscience Education (SAGE) program, which focused on ways to transition two-year college students into full degree programs.

In addition to presentations by researchers, two local teachers arranged talks by their K-12 students, and Nome residents were in evidence throughout the conference as presenters and as attendees. “Science conferences are often held in some fancy resort up on the hill and the local people really aren’t there at all,” noted Ihl. “So we’re trying to get the community more involved.”

Alaska EPSCoR has supported WAISC since its inception, principally by providing travel grants for students and faculty members to attend the conference. EPSCoR funded seven people to travel to Nome, including four UAF students, one UAF research fellow, one UAF faculty member, and one University of Washington student. EPSCoR-funded attendees spoke on topics such as community adaptation to climate change; Russian sea mammal hunting; historic reindeer herding, walrus diet, and electric snowmobiles.

One EPSCoR presenter, UAF postdoctoral fellow Amber Lincoln, said she did her dissertation research on reindeer herding on the Seward Peninsula and was grateful for the opportunity to both present her research and to hear from present-day herders. “That herding session was amazing,” she said, “to hear not just the research, but what herders are doing right now.”

The 2014 conference is being held in Kotzebue for the first time, presenting an opportunity to adopt an entirely new spectrum of local color. “What’s great about this conference is that it takes on the issues, the flavor of the community that it’s in,” said WAISC founder Todd Radenbaugh, an Assistant Professor of Environmental Science at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) campus in Dillingham.

“And the main thing we want to do is we want people to feel very comfortable in expressing themselves, expressing their solutions to local problems, and sharing the knowledge they’ve learned.”



University of Alaska Fairbanks reindeer researcher Greg Finstad presents during the 2013 WAISC in Nome.