Tucked into the eastern end of the Aleutians, Dutch Harbor is known for its fishing industry, its rugged beauty and its ferocious weather – hardly the usual ingredients of a science symposium. But the Western Alaska Interdisciplinary Science Conference isn’t your typical symposium.

“Each WAISC takes on its own personality,” explained Todd Radenbaugh, an assistant professor at the UAF-Bristol Bay Campus who has helped organize the annual conferences since they began in 2008. “So this one is very much Unalaska- fish plant tours, and a lot of commercial fishing operations as well as sustainability issues.”

The annual conferences are held in Western Alaska communities in order to encourage community participation and interactions. The 2010 conference was the first to be held in Southwest Alaska, following the ’08 event in Dillingham and ’09 in Nome. The remote location didn’t hurt attendance: the event attracted about 100 people, a quarter of them locals and the rest scientists and students from across the state.

“I love this meeting,” said Valerie Barber, an assistant research professor with the UAF experiment station in Palmer who attended the ’09 and ’10 WAISCs. “It’s good to hear what’s going on and what everyone else is doing, and I’m just really interested in Western Alaska.”

The conference mainly consisted of research presentations by close to 40 academics, resource managers, local residents and other speakers. Subject matter varied from the effects of climate change on fisheries, to an evaluation of local potential for wind energy, to a description of using GIS technology to virtually re-create a vanished Aleutian village.

“I’m a true believer in this (format),” said Reid Brewer, Unalaska’s UAF Marine Advisory Program extension agent and the principal organizer of the 2010 conference. “You get a vast array of speakers from all disciplines and all levels. You get some of the top researchers in the field, and then you get high school kids talking about a project they’ve done in their backyard.”

Alaska EPSCoR has contributed to all three WAISC conferences, mainly through travel grants. This year EPSCoR helped pay ten peoples’ way, including Barber, who spoke on the effects of climate change on low-income and indigenous peoples; French mariner Phillippe Hercher, who did a ‘green’ retrofit of a French Navy tugboat then piloted it from Corsica to the Aleutians; and Kevin Jernigan of UAF’s Kuskokwin campus, who is compiling a Yu’pik language ethnobotany textbook.

“I wanted to plug our program a little bit,” Jernigan said of his presentation. “It was also an opportunity to see what research other people are doing, and to see what kind of connections we can make with people here in the Aleutian area.”

Other conference activities included a reception at the Museum of the Aleutians, a film on ocean acidification, a birding expedition, and field trips to the city’s new power plant and to the UniSea seafood processing plant.

But the presentations remain the heart of the conference. The reason for the event, Radenbaugh noted, was to give people working in Western Alaska a chance to share knowledge with locals and with each other.

“What’s the purpose of collecting information,” he asked, “If you don’t tell people about it?”