

Article

In the fall of 2007, West Anchorage High School students wrote a proposal for funding from the National Park Service. This proposal, named Ground Zero, outlined a three-year plan of cultural and informational exchanges centered on raising awareness about climate change in the Arctic Beringia region. Beringia is the area between the Russian region of Chukotka and the state of Alaska. Both the Russian and Alaskan students noticed severe changes in their common Beringian climate. The students from both countries conducted research and interviews in preparation for their two-week long group effort in Anadyr.

The Alaskan students traveled to Anadyr to collaborate on information with their Russian counterparts. The students exchanged interviews and overviewed problems specific to their environments, such as melting permafrost and the changing migration patterns of animals crucial to a subsistence lifestyle. The students pooled their research and language skills to create an informative presentation in Russian and English on Arctic climate change for the 2008 Beringia Days Conference in Fairbanks, as well as for many classrooms both in Anchorage and Anadyr.

Alaskan students gathered information from interviews with people exceptionally informed on the political, scientific, and sociological aspects of arctic climate change. Such people interviewed were environmental scientists, ecologists, native elders, and the Commissioner of the Environment in Alaska. The interviews of the mayors of Anadyr and Anchorage, Andrei Shchegolkov and Mark Begich, led to the discovery that the local leaders had coinciding viewpoints on environmental policy. Both city leaders strongly believe in taking action, as opposed to merely discussing the issue and writing reports. The mayors wish to see results from their citizens' direct action to improve the environment. The Chukotkan students also conducted interviews with longtime citizens about the changing climate of Anadyr. The permafrost on the tundra is melting at a considerable rate, and ice caves that formed below ground are now caving in, destroying infrastructures built above. Although the warming temperatures may make everyday life more comfortable for the citizens, it remains a major environmental concern.

As part of their plan for action, Alaskan students intend to help the Russian students develop a carbon calculator that will enable the average Russian household to find their carbon emission footprint. This will be developed using a model from the English carbon calculator found online. Using the carbon calculator, Alaskan students found that America's average carbon footprint was 110 tons per year, surpassing the world's average by 88 tons per year. Due to the difficulties in harsh climates for various industries, Alaska's carbon footprint is considerably smaller than America's average. However, prospects for a natural gas line and two Pebble Mines may increase Alaska's carbon footprint. New and possibly devastating industries in the arctic region can overshadow the small deeds that can be done in favor of the environment.

As a group, the students dedicated their time to improving the environment step by step. Both groups took the first step by cleaning up their local areas. The Chukotkan students improved local parks, and the Alaskan students cleaned up creeks in the Anchorage area. At West Anchorage High School, members of Ground Zero are also a part of the youth organization Green Team, Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, and Anchorage Waterways Council. The students involved in the project pledged to volunteer a minimum of five hours of environmental community service, and hope to do more in the future.

The Ground Zero participants made personal pledges to do their own small part for the environment. Such pledges include vegetarianism, recycling, and reducing energy consumption. A more difficult pledge aims to create cleaner energy laws and policies by writing government officials. Change begins with the youth, and by making small contributions to the environmental cause, a bigger change will be seen in later years.

Artem Stasinets, a student of the Chukotka College will be making his way to university in Moscow or St. Petersburg in the fall. He joined up with Ground Zero because of his interest in global warming. Artem conducted research on ecology in Chukotka. At his university, he intends to inform his newfound colleagues about the changes in the arctic climate. Artem enjoyed the cultural exchange, particularly the interactive aspect of the project. Sydney Treuer, a student of West Anchorage High School, joined up with Ground Zero in its most infant stage, before the grant was written. She viewed the project as, "a good experience that combined two of her interests, the Russian language and environmentalism." Both students embody the morale of the project, in that their commitment is based on a love for diversity and a desire to improve our environment.

During their trip to Anadyr, students participated in an ongoing cultural exchange. The Alaskans learned Chukchi, Yupik, and traditional Russian dancing at the college. Master artists taught Alaskan students the art of crafting sun necklaces out of fur, leather, and beads. The Russian students showed the Alaskans their town and explained the history of various landmarks. The visiting students gave a presentation on Anchorage and West Anchorage High School. Students also went on two excursions to the local museum, where they learned about the culture and history of Chukotka. The students from Alaska were also fortunate enough to experience the festivities of Russian Independence Day. During the celebration, the entire Ground Zero group danced in the cultural square. Over the two week trip, students learned much about each other's culture and way of life, furthering a sense of international cooperation and friendship.

The trip to Anadyr fostered an informational exchange as well as long lasting international friendships. The 2008 Beringia Days Conference in Fairbanks will further the collaboration of ideas to better improve the shared environment. The three-year program will prove to be a successful project because of the level of commitment of each of the members. In the hopes of protecting the environment, Ground Zero stands to inform the world about the changes that are occurring in the Arctic climate.