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Youth to speak up for the polar regions at United Nations Rio+20 Earth Summit

STUDENTS ON ICE ALUMNI DELEGATION

An international group of youth wants to see the polar regions included in the final agreement that will be negotiated at next month's Rio+20 sustainable development conference in Brazil.

And they're heading to Rio to try to make it happen.

The group of 14 young people, aged 17-24, is from Canada, Norway and Hong Kong and will soon be lobbying for the Arctic and Antarctica in Brazil at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) from June 17-24.

They aren't taking their task lightly. Called the Students on Ice (SOI) Alumni Delegation, all of these students have been to either the Arctic or Antarctic. What they experienced changed the way they look at the world and they've been planning their trip to Rio for nearly a year. Students on Ice takes young people to the poles to give them hands-on education on the regions.

"The polar regions aren't on the agenda at this year's world summit, but we hope to change that," says Andrew Wong, Executive Director of the Students on Ice Alumni Delegation. "We want to see a global agreement that fairly and effectively addresses the sustainable development challenges of our time, and you can't do that without factoring in the incredible changes taking place at both poles."

Using their unique perspective, the SOI Alumni Delegation will advocate for the long-term sustainability of the polar regions.

Rio+20 will be the most significant meeting on sustainable development since the historic 1992 Earth Summit. At Rio+20, countries will finalize negotiations towards the institutional framework needed for sustainable development, discuss the creation of a green economy to eradicate poverty, and address emerging sustainable development challenges. The SOI Alumni Delegation is likely the only group that will focus on the polar regions at Rio+20.

"SOI Alumni delegates are united by the rare privilege of having studied and experienced first-hand the Arctic and/or the Antarctic," says Jenna Gall, co-director of communications for the delegation. "Some of us live in the north. We've seen the effects that rapid climate change is having on these regions, and we've learned about what effect those changes will have on our ability to develop sustainably in the future."

The SOI Alumni Delegation has researched polar issues and developed a detailed position paper and recommendations that they are sending to delegates and others planning to attend the Summit. Their four main recommendations are:

1. Recognize the importance of the polar regions as an emerging challenge in the context of sustainable development.
2. Strive for carbon neutrality in Antarctica.
3. Recognize the rights of Indigenous peoples in the context of sustainable Arctic resource development.
4. Commit to protecting polar oceans to protect global oceans.

They have also developed wording for the text that they are lobbying negotiators to adopt.

“The rapidly changing Arctic climate is opening the north to the prospect of new resource development. If we want development to be sustainable, we need to recognize the polar regions as an emerging issue at Rio+20,” says Wong.

Inspired by Students on Ice Expeditions, the delegation will host a side event on June 18th where they will present their recommendations and discuss with delegates the importance of the polar regions. The delegation is also supported by an international Home Team of 16 youth. In total, they are 30 passionate, talented youth involved who include students, professionals, Aboriginals, and people living in the Arctic regions. As part of their preparations, members of the group have fanned out across the country giving public presentations on why the circumpolar regions should be part of the discussion in Rio.

“It is vital to include the voice of youth at such international negotiations as it is our future that is being discussed around the table,” says Audrey Yank another Communication Co-Director. “We can’t wait to see the difference we will make in Rio. By using our creativity and ideas, we plan to bring a sense of urgency to the discussion about sustainable development and the polar regions.”

“The poles matter to every one of us. We cannot wait another ten years until the next Earth Summit to take action.”

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For more information, or to get in touch with a delegate from your community, contact us:

Audrey Yank - Communication Co-Director - 438-884-6471 (QC) audrey@soidelegation.com

Jenna Gall - Communication Co-Director - 250-826-7571 (SK) – jenna@soidelegation.com

Andrew Wong – Executive Director - 226-791-8378 (ON) – andrew@soidelegation.com