

WAISC comes home for 2016

In 2016, the Western Alaska Interdisciplinary Science Conference (WAISC) got back to its roots.

For the third time, the conference took place in the fishing town of Dillingham, home of the University of Alaska Fairbanks Bristol Bay Campus and Associate Professor of Environmental Science Todd Radenbaugh, who founded the event in 2008. The 2016 theme was “Adaptation: Tides of Change.”

“Western Alaska is undergoing rapid change, mostly because of climate change, but also because of cultural influences,” Radenbaugh noted. “So the adaptation and change component is always important in WAISC conferences.”

The annual event rotates among Western Alaska communities, bringing together residents and researchers to discuss local concerns. The 2016 event included panel discussions on the proposed Pebble Mine and on rural education, and a major focus of the event was the impacts of climate change on subsistence activities. Attendees also got a firsthand look at the local environment through a field trip to see local coastal erosion, the town’s new landfill and incinerator, and the nearby village of Aleknagik.

“Instead of talking about global climate change, which you’d expect at a national conference, here we’re talking about how climate change is affecting local culture and geography,” Radenbaugh said. “The most immediate climate change issue for Western Alaska is subsistence, and changes to subsistence hunting and shoreline erosion.”

Radenbaugh estimated the three-day event drew close to 100 participants, including a number of local residents and even a group of Dillingham high school students. Alaska EPSCoR supports the conference by awarding competitive travel funding, including paying for five University of Alaska students and one staff member to attend in 2016.

Kristin Brown, a Masters student in Fisheries at UAF in Juneau, presented on her studies of the diet composition of sea otters outside of Glacier Bay. “I need to be ready for my thesis defense, but also I really wanted



photo by Tom Moran/Alaska EPSCoR

Todd Radenbaugh leads a WAISC field trip on the tundra near Dillingham.

to network with people and hear the other talks,” she said. “I’ve never actually been to a conference like this, and there’s a very diverse array of topics that were presented here that I’ve never really been exposed to.”

Another EPSCoR-funded attendee, UAF Economics Masters student Barbara Johnson, presented on her research into a new affordability indicator for rural water utilities. She appreciated the chance to see a rural water system in person, including an impromptu tour of the local water utility. “The networking was definitely really successful and I was able to talk to people who work in the field, who have worked in it for 20-30 years,” she said.



Ethnographic filmmaker Sarah Betcher presents at WAISC.

 Alaska EPSCoR is funded through NSF award #OIA-1208927 & the State of Alaska 

