

Global Indigenous Peoples Caucus Opening Statement

INC-4 in Punta del Este, Uruguay - June 27, 2012

Thank you Mr. President. We thank the Government of Uruguay for hosting this important meeting, and acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples of this land.

The Global Indigenous Peoples Caucus consists of Indigenous organization representatives from Inui Circumpolar Council, Island Sustainability Alliance Cook Islands Inc., International Indian Treaty Council, and the California Indian Environmental Alliance.

Indigenous Peoples from all over the world suffer disproportionate impacts from mercury contamination. We are not just stakeholders in this process; we are rights holders and should participate fully at every level of decision-making and implementation. We urge that any reference to “vulnerable populations” in the treaty text includes the phrase “and Indigenous Peoples.”

We have a deep connection with the environment that is reciprocal with the ecosystems around us. Environmental and human health are inseparable. We affirm that the protection of our health, lands, air and water, traditional foods, and the transmission of our cultures and traditional knowledge systems to our future generations are inalienable human rights.

All outcomes and decisions in this process must recognize, uphold, and respect the human rights of Indigenous Peoples, including cultural rights, in accordance with the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2007. This *Declaration* was endorsed in the outcome document at the Rio +20 conference recently held in Brazil.

Mercury contamination impacts all Indigenous life-ways and livelihoods, especially health and food. Traditional foods are not only important for our subsistence and health, but also for our social, cultural and spiritual well-being. Many Indigenous Peoples live in remote places where alternative food sources are scarce, and where food insecurity is common. Even low-level exposure to mercury contamination over long periods of time may have considerable health effects. Avoiding our traditional foods or our lands and territories contaminated by mercury is not acceptable and clearly violates our human rights.

There is an urgent need for a global database of information on mercury releases in all environmental media, which is transparent, accountable and accessible, respecting the principle of “right-to-know.” Indigenous Peoples can be an important source of information in this regard, including our traditional knowledge systems.

In conclusion, it is of vital importance that Indigenous Peoples be included in the operative treaty text, and that Indigenous Peoples participate fully in all decision-making processes and implementation.

Thank you Mr. President.