

My project consists of two parts (the one cannot go without the other): A personal letter sent by an inhabitant of Shishmaref to her cousin in Namibia and a power-point presentation. The letter focuses on the emotional and physical trauma the thawing permafrost has on the villagers and their lifestyles while the slide show uses images and video-clips to depict the horror of global warming has brought upon Shishmaref. It also shows the meaning of global warming and how it will most likely affect Namibia and other places worldwide. It urges everyone to make small contributions and in so doing result in big change. It also gives some suggestions as to reduce global warming. The letter and the slideshow are intricately intertwined. The topic lies close to my heart and the length was necessary to encourage everyone to make that needed difference. The letter was sent first from a personal point of view; followed by the power presentation, as a single picture is worth a thousand words. Only with great encouragement and even greater effort, can we make that first step in changing the world.

What happened in Shishmaref has made a difference in my life. I pray that it will make a difference in your life too.

Whishmarek of Jarichet Island

Alaska

27 November 2003

Dear Ammie

I have just finished unpacking the last of my meager belongings into Mrs Sinnock's spare closet. This is not a social visit. We have become global warming refugees. On Thursday a great storm hit and the sea kept pounding away at the sea cliff for two days on end. The barriers we built collapsed before nature's awesome powers. The shore has been eroded to such an extent that I could see the waves breaking below my window. Our home will be next to fall into the ocean's raw. That would increase the total to twenty houses lost to the Chukchi Sea in recent years. Choices are running out and we might have to move the community to the mainland.

The village elders argued for hours on end as to whether the village should be relocated or not. A few people, like the Davis family, seem elated by the prospect of changes. But every time Mr Davis tries to point out the advantages of moving, he is quickly shouted down by Cliff, Sr. Weyjuanna's uncle. Cliff was adamant that he wanted to stay. Most villagers feel this way, but they wonder if they still have a choice. As reluctant as they are to split up the community, the situation may well be out of their hands.

We live here on borrowed time. The thought of the next big storm gnawing away at the town always in the back of everyone's mind. The ocean is steadily creeping inwards to the centre of town and devouring all we put before it. I remember a particularly

bad time when half the storage and drying shelves in the storage shed were washed away. That awful night will haunt me to my grave. Everybody had to pitch in to save the homes that balanced precariously over the earth's edge. We used telephone poles and a tractor to pull the houses away from the bluff. A rope snapped and time froze. For a moment the whiplash wind seemed to exist and everything was stuck in suspended animation. Then it sped up. One moment I was making sandwiches for the exhausted men on the ground, the next we were all running to grab the rope before the house could slide down any further. Hours later we were all spent. We managed to save the houses working together as a community. But the time will come when a group effort will not be enough anymore.

Even if we decide to relocate, where do we go? Should we settle in a developed town, such as Nome, or build our own village from scratch? It has taken generations to acquire the patterns of the weather and animal roots. The thought of starting over at a new place rushes my soul. Nobody is eager to split up the community that has become like an extended family and to start all over again in a different area, nor do we have the funds to afford a new village. I find neither option appealing. This is my home where I grew up and how does one give up who one is when one leaves the land which formed one? Is there no compromise along the way?

Our homes are not the only thing global warming (for I have no doubt that this is the root of our problems) has taken away from us. We are a subsistence-based society with no industry, no economy, no mining and no oil development. Every time the men go out hunting they take just a little longer and come back with a little less. Walrussees, seals and fish, our stable food, are all migrating away. My dad often sighs. He no longer knows what to do. We cannot afford fuel

or the boats to go out that far and the thinning ice has made sleighing too dangerous. Officer Webb came to school to warn us about the unstable ice conditions that have already cost a man his life. A group of people went egg hunting, but nobody saw or was warned about the open inlet and when he hit it, he fell through. He was a good friend of mine, a good person. My heart weeps his lost.

Cindy and I went for a walk through town, both of us in summer shorts (it is unseasonably hot here). Not that there was much left of it. The roads and bridges have all been washed away. We lampered over the broken water-pipes. Nobody wants to fund a lost cause, even if we were able to miraculously gain funding, the sea would only churn away our defenses and continue its pattering beating of the shore. Even if the sea was to seize its abuse, we could not stay. The familiar has become the unfamiliar. Jenn Pecc was the best ice reader of our region. When in doubt, we would find Jenn. But Jenn no longer knows the ice. No one is willing to help us and we're desperate. The ice is changing. Unstable, unpredictable. I can no longer visit JJ in Nome, because it is too far a walking distance and sleighing or skiing is out of the question. The ice is thinner and stays for a shorter period of time. We cannot build here anymore, the very ground is crumbling from beneath us. Is nothing safe? Does it have to be our world we are losing to changing climates? Moving seems inevitable.

I wonder if it is our tears filling the ocean making it unmanagable? Grandma tries to hide it, but we can see through her bravery. She allowed her tears to flow freely just once. At Grandpa's grave. This is the last time we can put flowers at his cross, because next time we will risk tumbling into the sea. This is the most difficult for her. She always found comfort at the base of her

true love by knowing that she would one day rest beside him for all eternity. Where does her comfort come from now? She has been broken beyond repair and I don't know how to help her or if anybody still can.

This angers me. How did this happen!?! Do we have to lose everything near and dear to us in the span of a few short months? The tide is washing away our way of life, our childhood and all people are doing is debating whether global warming is a problem or not! I would love to give them a tour of Shishmaref! You would have to get a ~~diving wet~~ suit to reach the playground we played in as children.

We value the stories of our elders above all. Cindy's dad smiles when he told us how his dad took them camping on the ice and Mr Sinnock recalled how his grandfather helped him kill his first walrus and how he made his first ivory carvings. I prefer Sr Weyiouna's tales. I like hearing about the Sleigh Dog Races (he won twice) and the traditional games on the beach. But that is all they are to us... stories. There are no animals to hunt, the ice is too thin for sleighs or camping and the beach has vanished. Waves are now fearful; not fun anymore.

You mentioned the irregular floods that you are having in Namibia and the words drip like an open tap into my head. Global warming, global warming, global warming. I do not believe that global warming will go away if we just wait it out. Maybe it will, but only after it has killed our entire race. The end is not here, but it is in plain sight. A delegation has been sent to Washington D.C. We hope people will take the effects of global warming seriously, as it is destroying everything we have and places like New York and London are next to fall to rising

temperatures. The world is being destroyed and we are  
a front seat to the chaos.

I remember when we were children and visited you in Swakmund  
you told me the story by Loren Eiseley about the little girl  
who ran along the beach throwing back starfish into the ocean.  
Someone asked her, "Why do you do that? There are too many,  
you cannot possibly make a difference." But the little girl  
continued and said, "It made a big difference to that one."

Remember to make that difference, Ammie.

Your loving cousin  
Gwen

P.S. words cannot speak alone for the gruesome happenings here.  
I will send you the pictures as soon as our lines  
are up again and running again.

