

Congressional Testimony on Outdoor Recreation & Climate Change

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Representative Deb Haaland, Chairwoman
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Examining the Impacts of Climate Change on Public Lands Recreation

Good afternoon Chairwoman Haaland and members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands.

My name is Callan Chythlook-Sifsof. I am former professional athlete, coach and environmental and indigenous advocate. I was a member of the US Snowboard Team from 2005 to 2014, and I was honored to represent the United States in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, as the first-ever Alaskan Native to make an Olympic Team. I have served as a US Snowboard Team Development Coach and private snowboard coach, working to bring the Olympic dream to the next generation of winter athletes.

I grew up in the Yupik village of Aleknagik, along the Bering Sea coast. Rural communities like mine maintain deep connections to the environment as it is integral to our cultural practices and present in every facet of our subsistence ways of life. In these regions only accessible by boat or plane, hunting and gathering is crucial to survival. A warming climate and continued fossil fuel extraction threatens the future of rural Alaska and has the potential to jeopardize our ecosystems forever.

My experiences as a Yupik Alaskan and as an Olympic Snowboarder have been vastly different, but there has been a common thread: observing of a changing climate on our nation's public lands. Today, I hope to bring a broader understanding of the impacts of climate change that I have witnessed in my lifetime, and how it has– and will continue to– impact our public lands.

Where I grew up, it is clear that a rising sea level is eroding our community and that increased water temperatures are harming aquatic ecosystems and thus one of our major food sources, the sockeye salmon population. But, the consequences of climate change are not simply environmental. A changing climate impacts the health, well-being and economic prosperity of all populations, and for rural arctic regions of Alaska, like my own home, these changes are seen more acutely. They directly affect the viability of life and the continuation of culture.

At the age of thirteen, I left Aleknagik and relocated to Girdwood, Alaska where my Olympic dream took flight, and I began competing at Alyeska Ski Resort. Five hundred miles away from my indigenous homeland, I saw that I had not left the detrimental consequences of climate

change behind. Alyeska Resort has faced a substantial lack of snowfall in the last decade, which has caused severe economic consequences, including refunding season passes to compensate for limited skiable days. Alyeska Resort has been put up for sale this year, and without a consistent snowpack, the future of Anchorage's snowsports economy is under threat.

Throughout my career as a professional snowboarder, I have witnessed a diminishing snowpack that has had direct impacts on the environmental feasibility and economics of my sport. In 2018, a study found that more than half of the former host cities for the Winter Olympics would be too hot to handle the Games by the end of the century. Pair that with a 2016 study that found that most cities would be too hot to host the Summer Olympics by 2080: it is not hard to see the pattern here.

When I competed in the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, snow was helicoptered in from higher elevations to create the competition venue, making it the most expensive Winter Olympics to date. That record was quickly surpassed in the 2014 Sochi Games, which made headlines as athletes in nearly every discipline faced increased chances of injury due to poor snow conditions, and costs increased yet again in the 2018 PyeongChang Games, where the snow was 98% manmade.

Inconsistencies in snowfall across the globe have spawned new industries of "snow-making" and "snow-farming," technologies which nearly all ski resorts must use in order to remain viable. It is clear this is not sustainable, and instead of developing short-term fixes, we need to address the real issue at hand: warming winters.

It is important to note that snowpack loss does not come without severe economic consequences. Nationwide, the snowsports economy generates \$72 billion and provides 695,000 jobs each year. A large part of this economic activity is wrapped up in competitions, from the X Games to the Olympics. If we want a prosperous future of snowsports in the US, we need to remember this sport is nothing without snow.

Now, as a coach for the next generation of athletes, I am deeply concerned about the future of our sport. Over half of the North American Cup Tour races in the last three years have been cancelled, postponed, or held under sub-par conditions due to snow conditions. These events are where young athletes have an opportunity to qualify for National Teams and World Cup spots, positioning them in qualification for the Olympics. When I competed, I would have ten to fifteen chances to qualify each season, and the kids I coach today are lucky if they have four or five opportunities. Event cancellation not only wipes out the opportunity to draw in tens of thousands of spectators who pump millions into local economies, but it also challenges the reality of the Olympic dream.

I have shaped my career as an athlete on our nation's great public lands. My home mountain, Alyeska, opened through a special use permit on the Chugach National Forest, and I've coached for three years in Park City, Utah adjacent to the Uinta Wasatch Cache National Forest. Growing up in Alaska, we learn much about our state's 220 million acres of public lands, including the iconic Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. These places not only fuel the spirit of

adventure and provide unparalleled access to the outdoors, but they are home, and have been, to indigenous cultures and diverse wildlife for hundreds of generations. In the face of a changing climate, these lands should be protected. This is not the time to open our public lands to fossil fuel development, which would not only irreversibly destroy landscapes and deeply impact outdoor enthusiasts who seek adventure— but would also add significantly to the climate crisis at a time in which it is imperative to curb emissions and transition to a clean energy economy.

I speak to you today as a 30 year old who, even in a short lifetime, has witnessed the impacts of climate change. From the slopes of Mount Alyeska to the Bering Sea coast, the devastating impacts are undeniable. I ask you to take climate change head on, including protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The future of my culture and my career depend on it. Thank you.