

Mine foes hold rally at Eagle Rock

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Stan Spruce of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community holds up a water staff with eagle feathers at Sunday's Protect the Earth rally on the Yellow Dog Plains. (Journal photo by Miriam Moeller)

MARQUETTE - A group of 120 anti-mining activists gathered below Eagle Rock on the Yellow Dog Plains Sunday morning, blessing the land and protesting a planned nickel and copper mine nearby.

"Since the 1600s the Ojibwe people have long lived and made their homes in the Upper Great Lakes region," said Susan LaFernier, vice president of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, adding that in 1842 the United States government bought the land in the plains but left treaty rights to the Indian community. "These are rights that we have always had as the first people to occupy these lands, and I am certain that their intent for all people was to honor and respect this creation and not to blast and tunnel underneath this sacred rock and under a fish-filled river."

The rally was part of a two-day Protect the Earth Summit, organized by several local environmental groups, including Yellowdog Summer, Keepers of the Water, Save the Wild U.P. and Students Against Sulfide Mining.

Several American Indian speakers blessed the land, including Fran Van Zile and Jerry Burnett from the Mole Lake Sokaogon Ojibwe Indian Community in Wisconsin, who offered an eagle feather to the Yellow Dog Plains community.

"The eagle feather is the highest honor from the creator because the eagle flies around the Earth and he sees what's going on," Van Zile said. "He takes the prayers to the creator. We put Yellow Dog on here because they are part of what we're doing."

In a sacred ceremony the feather was attached to a water staff that has traveled to many Protect the Earth Summits in the United States, and already features many other eagle feathers. The feather for the Yellow Dog community was provided by Sandy Lyons of Wisconsin, who helped start Protect the Earth Summits in the 1980s.

Al Hunter, poet and author from the Rainy River First Nation in Ontario, Canada, called upon accepting others in the fight against mining industries.

"You have to be open-minded and have open arms," he said, while holding an eagle feather and a rock his grandson had found in the area. "Wherever you are protecting land, always have these ceremonies."

Hunter explained that he came all the way from Canada because he feels connected with the Earth in all places, not just his own backyard.

"My country is the Earth with no boundaries," he said.

Hunter also encouraged rally participants to not give up in the fight against the mining industry.

"They might have the economic power, the political power, but they don't have the spiritual power," he said.

Dave Rulison of the Houghton-Hancock area attended the summit, saying it was awesome to see so many people unified and that the event was well organized.

"I'm really impressed with the attendance," he said. "It was quite moving to see people to come from so many directions. It was awesome to feel this support, and I was impressed with the diversity in age."

The drum circle Summer Cloud, folksinger Victor McManemy and others also were part of the rally.

According to organizer Teresa Bertossi, Protect the Earth Summits are planned to become an annual event in Marquette. For more information, visit www.savethewildup.org.