

H.716 Testimony from Chief Stevens from the Nulhegan Band of Coosuk – Abenaki Nation 6/25/2020

I would like to put things into perspective:

There are two separate issues at play here: Our Abenaki rights (which most have agreed is the right thing to do) and funding for the Fish and Wildlife Department. I do agree with funding the FWS Department because of the important role they play. However, that funding discussion is more appropriate under a different bill like H.581 which specifically addresses funding sources for the FWS Department overall. H.716 should only deal with Abenaki rights and our access to our food sources.

I would like to take a moment to explain what implicit bias is and how it affected discussions around this bill so far as a teaching moment:

Implicit Bias refers to attitudes or stereotypes that affect understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.

1. Amendments in the house were submitted that would divide our people into categories and assert continued European dominance over our people. Using legislative power to determine which Abenaki should have rights and which ones shouldn't. Abenaki are Abenaki no matter where they reside – all Abenaki have retained our rights through prior agreements and it is not proper for the state to try to divide our families based on geographical location. Luckily this amendment was not adopted.

2. Insinuations that the Abenaki are some sort of social club where anyone can join to get a free license. We are a sovereign people and government, we cherish our heritage and one must show their lineage to be a citizen of our tribes. We don't give our heritage away just for a free license. We had to prove ourselves to the State of Vermont to gain our recognition as a people, has any European or others race had to go through this sort of process? Please give us some dignity on how we function as tribal governments.

3. It is disappointing when individuals use fear and scare tactics, during testimony, to limit Abenaki Rights by theoretical financial concerns as a distraction. Especially when the same financial concerns are not expressed for White Europeans receiving free permanent licenses. Some try to convince themselves and others that New Abenaki Licenses is an uncontrolled loss in revenue to the FWS Department; when in fact it was never part of their budget to begin with and is unrealized revenue – not a loss. Only actual current license holders would be a loss and why the fiscal budget office estimated the 40,000 dollar cost to the department, which the commissioner has testified is a minimal impact to his budget. Legislators will know the real revenue loss when the commissioner submits his report by 2024 and legislators can adjust budgets accordingly.

Why is this important?

We all agree that at least 95% of Vermont is white and hence 95% of seniors are also white. Over 121,000 seniors currently qualify for permanent Hunting and Fishing Licenses and 8,500 to 10,000 people turn 66 each year based on the Agency of Human Services Website Data. Seniors qualifying for free hunting and fishing licenses, each year, are double that of our entire Abenaki population. In 2018,

the age for free hunting and fishing rights was dropped from 70 to 66. Financial concerns over free licenses are not as big of a concern as being made out to be. I doubt that this legislative body concentrates on the financial impact that seniors have on the FWS Department on a year to year basis and how that impacts Federal dollars. It is because the State draws down the minimum amount of Federal Funding as a default because we are a small state. I ask that we receive at least the same rights that senior citizens now enjoy when they get their free permanent Hunting and Fishing licenses.

I ask that the Senate follow the Houses lead. Please support and pass H.716 without delay so that the Governor can sign it into law. Our people have been waiting a very long time for this moment.

Wliwni (Thank You)

Chief Stevens

Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk – Abenaki Nation