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Representative Tom Stevens, Chairman  
Committee on Military Affairs

Re: Testimony on Apology to Abenaki People

There is a long history before and after the years of active eugenics. We were a forest people. Our way of life was interdependent with the great web of life. Our culture manifested a value system which recognized and respected our dependence on the gifts and teachings of the living north-east ecosystem. When we were occupied, that ecosystem was ravaged, thereby violently forcing us to find ways of surviving and taking care of our families in that web - destroying world. The dominant society's progress to the eugenics program further traumatized the Abenaki people, drove us underground, destroyed whatever trust had been left, and forced us to hide and/or abandon our own culture.

While the horrors of eugenics/genocide were revealed in the 1940's, the loss of cultural elements which occurred as we hid in plain sight has never been recognized. As a school child in the 1940's - 1950's, I was taught that no Indians lived in Vermont. They only hunted and travelled through this area. As my cousin and I sought more information on our Native American heritage, my aunt told us, "First they find out all about you. Then they come for you." Trust? This was

the 1990's. She told us nothing more.

As conditions changed, families focused on the non-public "acceptable" activities of hunting, fishing, and crafts. Eventually a renaissance began, an effort by the next couple of generations to learn more of their Abenaki history, language, and culture. This has grown in the last 30 years, and has drawn more positive attention and some good allies. It also has drawn another strategy of exploitation from big-ego self-promoters and "wannabees". This is part of the colonizer-culture value system which rewards with positions of authority and/or financial gain. They learn history, some language, crafts, or songs to impress others for their advantage.

An apology is a fine gesture if, by acknowledgement of wrongs done, it opens peoples' minds to truth, and to steps which help make things better for Native American people in VT. You will need to be careful, go slow, to avoid this newest challenge of exploitation. The process of recognition and the work of the Commission on Native American Affairs have been very good, helping us to hope for a cultural future.

Thank you very much for accepting and considering oral and written testimony on this very difficult issue.

Sincerely Yours,  
Carol J. Sions  
Abenaki Elder