Patient observers—

Natives & sciences

By
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The recent passing of Simon Paneak, a patriarch of the Nunamiut of Anaktuvuk Pass, is a grim reminder that Alaska's original natural scientists are escaping us with the passage of time. Some of their vast knowledge fortunately is now a matter of written record. However, much of it still remains to be recorded.

It is not necessary to have formally passed through the halls of a university to become a natural scientist. The keen and patient observer of nature, who can long remember what he has seen and who can relate it to other naturally occurring processes and events, also qualifies as a natural scientist or, perhaps even better, as a naturalist.

Simon was an outstanding naturalist, although he was not alone in this regard in the north. However, he has been one of the lucky ones, since much of what he gleaned from nature over the years has been recorded. In some cases he also is listed as one of the coauthors in the scientific publications that resulted.

It was to Simon Paneak's family that a director of the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory entrusted a young undergraduate student in anthropology, from Yale University, for a period of 15 months. The young man learned the language of the Nunamiut, and wrote of his experiences and what he had learned from Simon. He also wrote of the people.

The young student subsequently graduated from Yale with high honors in anthropology and went on to become a Rhodes scholar.

But Simon is only one of a number of northern Native naturalists. His cousin, Peter Sovalik, is as knowledgeable of the coastal environment as Simon was of the northern Brooks Range and the Foothills. Pete is first mentioned in a book, by one of the early explorers doing field work along the Arctic coast, in 1913.

In over a quarter century of working with young scientists, and with some not so young, at the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory, Pete has imparted much of his knowledge to them about the birds, the animals the ocean ice, and the ocean currents in coastal Arctic Alaska.

He knows the animals and their habits so well that he has captured rabid foxes alive for observation, without the use of either trap or gun.

The most definitive book on the animals of the area contains so many quotes from him that one wonders why he didn't author it.

Pete's formal education, however, was interrupted too many times by the need to be on the trail in pursuit of a livelihood. This has not prevented him from correcting or improving maps published by government agencies. Nor has is prevented him from training a generation of young scientists in how to observe and interpret nature, or in how to survive in the Arctic.

Well versed in anatomy, he once came to a small settlement where the people were holding a wake for a young boy, who had been mauled and had his scalp completely torn off by a young polar bear.

Finding the boy not yet dead, Pete preceeded to sew the bits of scalp and hair back on, piece by piece, using binder twine and a sack sewing needle previously used to sew heavy canvas. Some 40 years later this boy still has a full head of hair, and not a scar on his face.

For the first half of this century, most of the Arctic bird collections, bird egg collections, and the animal skins, found in the scientific museums in the southern 48 states, were prepared as specimens by four of the Brower brothers at Barrow.

Their father, the early whaler Charles D. Brower, had trained them to prepart the specimens. They had traveled widely, including up to northern Banks Island in the Canadian Archipelag, and had spent much time in the field, observing wildlife in natural poses and activities, in order to provide realistic appearing specimens.

Today, if a scientist wants to research long-term animal cycles on the North Slope or the earlier snow geese populations in northern Alaska or on Banks Island, he consults with Thomas Brower.

If the scientists is interested in fish populations and ranges, he consults with Arnod Brower. If he wants to develop natural poses and environments for animal and bird specimens, he usually consults with Harry Brower.

This ability and artistry with specimen preparation took a quaint turn for Harry some years ago. As a joke and a parting souvenir for friends, he began making single lemming skins into miniature rugs. He mounted the skins of these mouse-sized animals on velvet backing and with the teeth showing in a full-head mount, just as thoughhe was preparing a polar bear rug. Suddenly, he was inundated with friends who just had to have their lemming skin rugs, and he ended up working way into the nights on the. Several found their way to executive desks in Washington, D.C.

The crowning blow, hoever, came from Mexico. A souvenir shop there sent him an order for 5,000 lemming skin rugs. He gave up that business in a hurry.

People, born and raised without a written language, perpetuate their cultures through storytelling, ceremonial dances, close attention to detail, and long memories. Few are better trained in this regard than Alfred Hopson, Sr. His memories include the first arrival at Barrow of the explorer, Stefansson, in 1906.

Because Stefansson spent considerable time, that first winter, obtaining cranial measurements, he was nicknamed "Head Measure"; a name that he never shook in northern Alaska.

Al, who took the first census in Arctic Alaska traveling over 2000 miles by dogteam in 1930, can provide the socio-economic history of the Natives in Arctic Alaska during this century from memory. His descriptions will be in as great a detail, including statistics, as can be obtained by synthesizing the data from a large number of books written by explorers, from the fragmentary governmen documents available and, more recently, from the university studies of the socio-economics of the people in the north.

Scientific studies in the Arctic often have been carried on the shoulders of the people who have learned to live and to work there over the centuries. The people noted comprise only a small nucleus of those who rightfully could have been mentioned.