

SCIENTISTS NOTE NATIVE AID

Arctic Knowledge Acquired Throughout Many Generations

By CHARLES J. MALLEY

For generations, Native Alaskans living in the Arctic accumulated scientific knowledge about their environment, but have been given very little public credit for what they learned.

The trouble is, said one biology professor at the University of Alaska, is that official acknowledgement of Native work is usually given in scientific publications read almost exclusively by scientists.

Thus, scientific achievements of Native Alaskans are not popularly known. Yet, it's not unusual for a person to pick up a book on Arctic studies and see photographs of Natives he knows who have aided scientists in their work.

Dr. Laurence Irving, advisory scientific director and professor of zoophysiology, U.A., tells an interesting story. He once spent a number of years identifying some 100 species of birds at Anaktuvuk.

"It was a lot of work," said Irving, who has 25 years experience in the Arctic. "Fortunately for me, before starting, Simon Paneak of the Village of Anaktuvuk came to me with a list of all local birds and their Eskimo names.

"Simon even knew the habits of the birds! I also found out that another scientist, Dr. Jim Morrow, was given a new species of trout by Simon."

Dr. Irving also credited Pete Sovalik of Barrow (and his ancestors) with possessing accurate scientific knowledge of the many kinds of white fish in the lakes. Sovalik has worked with the Arctic Research Laboratory at Barrow.

And in A.H. Bailey's well-known book on Arctic birds, considerable credit is given to the Native Brower family at Barrow, said Dr. Irving.

Bailey acknowledged in the book that of all the species of birds now, the Brower family provided most of the first known specimens to science.

Many Natives have been credited with aiding scientific study in the Arctic and it would take a lot of newspaper space to name them all. Unfortunately, as Dr. Irving agrees, their work is cited in publications that are not widely read.

Scientific knowledge in the minds of Natives remains unwritten except in cases where they have aided scientists who have published the material.

Dr. Irving points out that biologists who study in the Arctic are concerned chiefly with analytical laboratory work, while the body of Native scientific knowledge is based on observation.

"It's my hope that more Natives come to join us as scientists by obtaining formal educations," he said. "That way they can take a more proper role in scientific study." The Native would also have the advantage of a natural body of knowledge handed down to him through

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the years.

The reason why Eskimos have such a thorough knowledge of their environment, including fish, plants, animals and humans found in it, is an impressive one.

Dr. Irving points out that Eskimos can reach back in time for many generations to find their truths, while most white men in America can't go back beyond grandparents.

Citing Sir John Richardson's account of the famous lost Franklin expedition in the Arctic, Irving recalled reading that Eskimos have occupied the longest span of time any people have stayed in one environment in the history of man.

"I guess that kind of a record says something about the accumulated knowledge—scientific and in other areas—that Eskimos possess," said the UA professor.

Another interesting story was related by Dr. Fred Milan, an anthropologist who in recent years has led the International Biological Program's team of medical scientists in a study of the people of Wainwright. During 25 years, Milan has studied while living in Arctic villages.

The scientist told of an experience he once had in Northwest Greenland. One day he went by a "tippy" kayak from his camp to the Village of Thule, an Eskimo settlement. There he met a man named Odak.

To Milan's astonishment, Odak said he had been to the Pole with Peary, the famous explorer.

"We were sitting talking in Odak's house," said Milan, "when the old man started rummaging through a box. String, screwdrivers and harpoon heads came from the box.

"Finally, Odak found what he was looking for—a paper certificate announcing his Honorable Membership in the Explorers Club."

This modest Eskimo had been a part of one of the most daring expeditions undertaken in the history of man, but had probably never been credited for it.

Said Milan, "If it weren't for people like Odak, we probably wouldn't be very far ahead in the Arctic today.

In answer to a Feb. 6 editorial in the Tundra Times citing the sorrowful lack of recognition given to the scientific accomplishments of Natives, Dr. Irving wrote:

"I am indebted to many Eskimo friends for hospitality, information and help in studying physiological adaptations that enable birds, mammals generally and people to live comfortably in the Arctic. Without their help I know a little and see much more that could be learned.

In discussing another subject, the UA scientist gave three reasons why he thinks the future of Natives in Alaska is an "exciting" one: oil, the Alaska Natives Land Claim Settlement Act and the emergence of 12 Native corporations.

"I look to the corporations to be a valuable guide and balance to the whole development of Alaska's future," he said, and it looks like the young Native leaders are extremely competent and will become a powerful force in guiding the future of their people."

Dr. Irving has proposed that the Department of the Interior utilize Natives and other local residents as guides and hosts for the 83 million acres of federal land proposed for withdrawal

by Washington.

The advantage would be twofold, he believes, first insuring residents of an income and, second, using the people who can best acquaint visitors with a given locale in a short period of time.

"Natives have a genuine pride in their land," said Irving. "They are bright, friendly and enjoy a delightful sense of humor. This makes them perfect hosts in their own home."

Besides, he added, many outsiders brought in to perform such work are more apt to consider an assignment to a remote area "not quite the way to move up in the bureaucracy . . . They wouldn't make the best hosts."

Anthropologist Milan said the Settlement Act brings power to Natives in politics, education and economics. "Unless Natives are economically successful, their way of life may eventually be eradicated."

And both men agreed that a successful and increasing Native population will serve as a stabilizing influence in an Alaskan society in which the greater white population is largely transient.