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Interior Elders face modern challenges

By Bill Hess
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Everywhere they look, Athabaskan Elders from Alaska's interior see threats to their subsistence lifestyle, land ownership, language, traditional education and good health. Concern over these and other matters and a desire to do something about it brought Elders from dozens of villages together in Minto this month for the second Denakkanaaga' Elders' conference.

"You are the seed of the Athabaskan Nation," Al Grant, a member of the Elders' board and moderator for much of the meeting, told a number of young people mixed in with the Elders, before warning them of future dangers.

"You are the ones who are going to pick up the leadership of Peter John (traditional chief of Minto) and Andrew Isaac (Athabaskan traditional chief living in Dot Lake). Listen to

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Madeline Soloman of Galena speaks to other Elders from the Interior at a potlatch held in conjunction with the Denakkanaaga' Elders conference in Minto. For story and photos, see pages 9-12.

Sell the paper, sell the land

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them!" Grant delivered his words during a well-attended potlatch. "I should have listened to the chief," he recalled younger days, "instead of throwing firecrackers at squirrels!"

As did most others who attended, Grant praised the people of Minto for the hospitality they showed their visitors, and for the Potlatch they had thrown with more than enough food for everybody. "What a wonderful culture we have!" Grant said. "You go into Fairbanks, you think they're going to put food in front of you?" They might, Grant noted, but they'd also place a big bill in front of you.

Then Grant brought up the spectre of 1991, the year in which shares in the Native regional and village corporations created by the Alaska Native Claims Act of 1971, will be alienable for sell to non-Natives. "Hang onto it!" Grant urged. "Hang onto your land! After you get your \$60,000 for your land, you might be driving a Cadillac for three or four years.

"After that, you've got nothing. You'll go back to Minto and find you don't have nothing!"

Spud Williams, president of the Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC), also addressed 1991. "I think we're finally realizing that that little piece of paper shares is our land!" Williams said. "Sell that little piece of



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The old and the very young get involved with the singing and dancing of the potlatch.

paper and you'll be eating pork chops and weiners for the rest of your lives! When you sell that paper, you sell our land where our food comes from!"

The Elders considered 1991 an important enough issue to

pass a total of six resolutions dealing with it. In their resolutions, they called for new regulations protecting ANCSA lands and corporation shares from sale in 1991, urged that special meetings on 1991 be

held in each of the 43 Interior villages to be sure that all the residents understood what the issue involves, and they sought more information concerning actions that the Alaska Federation of Natives is directing

towards 1991.

They also urged Doyon, Ltd., the Native regional corporation serving the Interior, and the village corporations to join their efforts in solving the
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Drinking in village brings fine

(Continued from Page Nine) problems of 1991, to include an Elder on its 1991 planning committee, and they recommended that TCC form a 1991 planning committee.

Up till now, the Denakkanaaga' Elders have been a rather loose knit group. They met last year for the first time and then as now, Doyon put up \$40,000 to sponsor the meeting, and TCC planned and organized it. This year, the Elders voted to form a non-profit organization and to seek their own funding.

In arguing for the vote, Grant pointed out that Doyon was established under ANCSA to make profits. "This is costing us \$40,000 which could be in the bank, earning money," he said.

First Chief Neal Charlie praised the decision to form a non-profit group. "We're going to be recognized better," he said. "We're going to have a stronger voice!"

One subject on which the Elders decided they needed to raise that voice was alcohol and drug abuse in the villages. They passed resolutions calling for support groups for prevention of such abuse in the villages, and to sponsor alcohol awareness activities and to establish village-based family rehabilitation services and a children's receiving home.

Dixie Alexander, a young mother, told the Elders of the frustrations that she has dealt with concerning alcohol. "I come from Fort Yukon where there is a liquor store," she said. "I see what it is doing... How many artists have stopped their art? How many... have stopped making snowshoes... have stopped trapping, have stopped fishing?" she asked.

Alcohol is weakening all aspects of Athabascan culture, Alexander said. She tied it into 1991, arguing that people who were drinking would be much more likely to sell their shares so that they could buy even more drinks.

Paul George of Nenana said he once had an alcohol problem. "If you quit drinking, you'll be chief," the Elder remembered being told, "with all that money you are throwing away!"

Still, said Goerge, "you can't stop them from drinking, I can't stop them." Only when a person decides for himself that he needs and is going to stop can he do it, George said.

"The more you talk to them and tell them they can't do it, the more they do!" added Kitty Evans of Rampart. "You can give them love and encouragement."

Although alcohol had long been a terrible problem in Chalkyitsik, village Chief James Nathaniel told those gathered that since the village passed ordinances banning the importation and use of alcohol in Chalkyitsik early this year, and then rigidly enforced them the alcohol problem has dwindled.



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Sara Malcolm of Eagle votes in favor of village support groups to prevent alcohol and drug abuse.

"We had every problem in our village," Nathaniel said. Child abuse, violence and serious accidents. Now, he said, anyone "seen staggering around or showing evidence of alcohol use is given a fine."

"After a while, it worked out real good," Nathaniel said. "They remember that fine they get... I was alcoholic myself. I still am. Anytime I get a chance I drink... In the Chalkyitsik area, I know what I'll get. I'll get a fine. I realize that if I do drink, the village will fall back down, blow up again."

Many participants urged villages without anti-alcohol ordinances to seek them, and urged that those who do practice stricter enforcement to see that the ordinances are obeyed.

Many Elders complained that hunting, trapping, and fishing rights which they had always considered theirs are being damaged by state laws which do not take traditional laws and practices into concern, and by sportsmen and other users encroaching on their territory. There were stories of long-used fishing spots and traplines being taken over by others.

Al Grant told those attending that even as they talked,

"our rights are being encroached upon." Grant told how state game officials had just confiscated a moose that had been taken for a memorial service in his home village of Tanana, and how the hunters were being sought out for possible arrest.

"This is encroaching upon our rights to take a moose at any time of year," Grant said. "Pray for Tanana! I know there is no more powerful force on earth than the power of prayer!"

About half the villages in the Interior have tribal governments recognized under the In-

dian Reorganization Act of 1934. Many of the Elders knew very little about the act, and a resolution was passed urging Doyon and TCC to provide more information to the villages about IRA governments.

"This resolution is about getting more of the villages to get it done," said Grant. He explained that under IRA governments are recognized as having special sovereign powers by the federal government. Grant also noted that the State of Alaska does not recognize the IRA governments.

"They're afraid of it!"



Minto residents sing "God Be with You Till We Meet Again" as delegates leave for the airport.

Grant said. "They're afraid it will give us too much power!" He also explained how some of the IRA and traditional village councils banded together recently to form the United Tribes of Alaska.

"It's going to be something like AFN," Grant said, "only much more powerful."

Resolutions calling for land claims education for high school youth and supporting the teachings of Native languages, customs, and skills reflected the strong concern the Elders voiced over education.

Elder after Elder lamented the fact that few young people in the Interior can speak the Athabascan language, thanks to intensive efforts by government officials and missionaries early in the century to silence traditional tongues.

Lillian Olin of Galena told how she had taught Native language in the schools, but added that if the parents and grandparents of the students did not use the language at home, the teaching was worthless. She urged adults who are able to use their language with children. "Ask them for something," Olin said. "Have the child help you in your housework."

Madeline Soloman spoke of the frustration she felt as a teacher when the parents of students would not work with them in Athabascan. "They won't help us, because they think we're getting paid to teach," Soloman lamented.

Hannah Soloman contended that book learning would not suffice. "We didn't learn by writing!" she said. "The speaking is what they need!" Soloman noted that all 12 of her children had learned to speak Athabascan "because we never left our language."

People who have not been using their Native language in the home could start out with simple words, Soloman urged, so that the children could get used to it. "Long sentences can come later," Soloman said.

In all, delegates passed 26 resolutions. They heard a special speech by John Schaeffer, president of the NANA region, where Alaska Native Elders' conferences first began, nine years ago. Schaeffer recalled how business seemed to be going well for the corporation, but human values were falling by the wayside and alcohol, crime, and violence were rising at alarming rates.

NANA shareholders then decided to turn to the traditional leaders, Schaeffer remembered.

Along with Charlie and Grant, other board members of the Denakkanaaga' group include Louise Paul, Tok; Lillian Olin, Galena; Peter Gregory, McGrath; David Salmon, Fort Yukon; Poldine Carlo, Fairbanks, and Lillian Walker, Holy Cross.