

Elders find more people on hunting lands

PHOTOS BY BILL HESS



Neal Charlie and the land he loves. Although state, borough and federal governments now hold legal title to much of that land, Charlie says it is important to preserving the subsistence lifestyle, and teaching young people the knowledge of their fathers and mothers.

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

Neal Charlie and his wife Geraldine sit on a bench on top of a high bluff overlooking the supermarket serving their home community of Minto. By most standards it does not look like a supermarket; instead of aisles there is a network of countless lakes and swamps, spruce and birch-covered hills in place of shelves; and tiny waves lap gently at the string of long, low boats moored where one might expect to find clerks and check-out stands.

This supermarket stretches on and on, past the eye's ability to take it all in.

"What is a 'settlement'?" asks Charlie, a soft-spoken, gentle man of 64. Charlie was chosen by his peers throughout Interior Alaska to be the First Chief of the Denakkanaaga Elders' group.

The answer to his question comes hesitantly, if there is a cake cut into nine pieces and two families want that cake, they might reach a 'settlement,' with one side taking five and the other side taking four pieces.

"What if you already have that cake," Charlie presses further, "and someone comes in and says, 'I'm taking eight pieces, you can have one!' Is this fair? Is this a settlement?"

Charlie feels that this is what is happening to Minto's supermarket — the land and life of the Athabascan people — since the passage of the Alas-

ka Native Land Claims Settlement Act in 1971.

Once he and his family took their boats and dogs out there and harvested their food without any thought of state land, federal land, corporate land, private land . . .

Then a pipeline was needed to transport oil from Prudhoe Bay, and Native land claims had to be settled so it would have a place to go, and so that future oil and mineral development could take place in Alaska. Hence, ANCSA; and hunters, trappers, and fishers like Charlie suddenly found themselves shareholders in giant corporations.

The corporations offered the possibility of lots of good things from the white man's world, but they also came with the 1991 clause which could result in tremendous losses for Native people.

The act also resulted in more definite boundaries dividing the Minto supermarket into state land, federal land, and private and corporate land, with a few small Native allotments scattered here and there.

"Land claims," Charlie muses. "I thought that meant we were just going to ask for land. This whole big area right here, where we hunt and fish; where we get our food from. It's not working out that way. There is not enough room left to us to get what we need."

There are no lumber mills, factories, refineries, or for-profit agriculture in Minto. The

community is built on a subsistence economy.

"When we hunt and fish, we find lots of people now," adds Geraldine. "More people than animals. We find camps! We find airplanes!" A road was recently built into the Minto Lakes area from Fairbanks.

You can't see that road from Minto, but it makes the "supermarket" much more ac-

cessible to the people from Fairbanks, most of who see it as a recreation area; a place to hunt and fish for fun, not a place to make a living.

Virtually everyone who attended last year's Elder's conference signed a petition urging the Fairbanks North Star Borough not to go ahead with plans to build the road. Charlie made three trips to Fairbanks to tell why the people who

lived in the area did not want to see the road built. Other villagers did the same thing. Tanana Chiefs Conference took up their cry and lobbied against the road.

"The majority of us voted, 'no, we don't want that road!'" Charlie remembers. "Just five people voted yes, let's do it. The borough says they own that part of our land!"

Last night, there was a big potlatch in Minto. Along with the people living in the community, a lot of guests were fed at that potlatch, all with Native food.

"You have to have land to hold a potlatch," Charlie says. "We don't do the potlatch to make fun; there has to be a meaning there, a feeling. That potlatch is very important, it's been handed down to us since man first existed. If we lose our land, we can't get the food for our potlatch. We will not feel satisfied with making a potlatch with pork chops! That is not the right kind of potlatch!"

It is problems such as this that have brought the Elders together.

Since the settlement, Charlie says, there has been a lot of confusion. "It seems like some of us didn't understand. We expected everybody to be satisfied. I believe that's what made a lot of the old people not say much. If they try to say something, people look at them like, 'heathen, what's

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Neal Charlie sings and dances at potlatch. The food for the potlatch comes from the land. Pork chops would not do, Charlie says.

Elder wants land for young Natives

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he got to say, anyway?"

Now the old people are speaking, not only in Minto and the Interior, but all across Alaska. Speaking on land, subsistence, 1991, culture, language; on Native life.

"I feel good about it!" Charlie says of the Elders' conference. "It pulls us together. We'll get to know each other. With everything you do, first you got to get acquainted. Before, maybe some of us would be in Fairbanks at the same time. We'd see each other on the street but we wouldn't say anything because we didn't know each other."

Most important, says Charlie, is that the young people seem to be paying more attention. "They hear strong words coming from their grandparents about 1991," he says. "What they can do is, they can make a rule, so that the young people after 1991, they don't need to sell their share of stocks; their land. Leave it where it is! Let it grow for them!"

"There has been talk about some young people wanting to sell their shares. Maybe all of them would sell their shares, then we wouldn't have nothing. We'd find we lost what little we have left right now!"

Discouraging as that idea is, Charlie believes the words of the Elders are finally starting to have their effect. "I believe some of the young have started recognizing it now. We didn't hear them say, like last year, 'I want to get my part, I want to sell my shares!'"

The Charlies have given birth to 10 children, nine of whom live today. They have about 17 grandchildren. Those born after 1971 do not hold shares in the ANCSA corporations, and these days, shares represent ownership of Native lands.

Charlie would like to see the ANCSA rules re-opened regularly, to give the young the chance to benefit.

"I think we'll try to get into it by next year. If they can't get money, at least they should be entitled to land. The state should agree to let them have land. I don't think it's right for the state to say, 'we own the land, you can't have nothing to do with it!' I think the first people there, they should be recognized all the time!"

Minto is a dry town. Many of the people are deeply religious and alcohol has been banned because of its devastating effect on small villages. Yet, booze gets in.

"I'm pleased that we're rec-

ognizing that there is an alcohol and drug problem in the villages now," says Charlie. "We're beginning to find out some of our weak points." That is important, he feels, for people seeking to take over what is left to the Natives will exploit those weaknesses.

"One of the things that I believe will help us is to talk about it. The more we talk about it and bring it into the open, the more people seem to recognize that there is a problem.

"It's too bad we talk so much about education," Charlie adds. "That's good to recognize, but we talk about education and say bring the best of the white man's world into ours, and then we learn to drink!"

"We've got to get back, to teach the young people not to drink, not to use drugs! We've got to reach back into our own culture. It's too bad, though. Some old people are trying so hard to get the young to not drink. Other old people are out drinking, acting like it's a good thing to do.

"They go out and drink and they're an example to the young people. They see that and think 'well, the old people do it, so that's the way to do it!'"

Charlie is pleased that the Elders have decided to take a close look at the Indian Reorganization Act tribal governments. Minto has an IRA government, but about half the villages in the region do not. He feels strongly that the state should recognize the tribal governments.

"The state should go by the first people," he explains. "I don't think people should just move in and tell you what to do."

The Denakkanaaga' group faces many challenges. "Last year when we got together, I felt real good about it," Charlie remembers. "This year, I had some different feelings." He remembers making a drive to Fairbanks, and thinking about the problems the Elders faced, and the powerful forces they were up against, forces which seemed to care nothing for small groups of people who make their living off the land.

"I cried," Charlie remembers, "right there on the road." Then again, during the conference, he looked out from his spot at the head table as some of his people discussed the difficulties they faced. Charlie wondered what they could do to protect what had always been theirs; he wondered what

he could do to help them. More tears fell. Then later at his home, he contemplated the same issues again, and had to cry again.

Soon Geraldine leaves. Now that the conference is over, she must get some little things done so that she and her husband can take a little vacation and relax after the pressure of recent weeks. To some, taking a vacation might mean heading to Fairbanks or Anchorage, spending money and having a "good time."

To the Charlies, it means getting into their boat and going out into the woods and finding a quiet place where hopefully they will not be bothered by float planes or anything else; where they can catch some fish, and pick some berries and maybe some wild rhubarb.

"I used to enjoy trapping, and going out hunting and fishing," Charlie remembers as he looks out over the land. "Boy! when we used to go out, I would really be excited! Right now, I don't feel like that no more. I feel like I'm going on somebody else's land! I don't feel like I'm going on my land!"

From this vantage point, that land would seem beauti-

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'We know where to go for fish ...'

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ful to almost anybody, but when Charlie looks out, he sees more than most people could. He has never been Outside, and his formal education took him only to the third grade. Out in that land, however, he is a most educated man.

"Every lake, we know the name of it, in our own Native way. Every hill, every point of the hill. Every tea point, where our grandfathers used to stop to have tea.

"We know where to go for fish. We know where to go for

moose, where to go to trap mink, marten, beaver and muskrats. Where to get ducks. There's an awful lot that's been taken from us with that land!"

Charlie recalls a boy, a young man he met one day outside Minto's one gas station. "He looked disappointed. I asked him, 'what do you think is the problem?'"

"He told me, 'I feel like I got nothing! I feel like I should just start down that road! I feel like that's all I got!'"

"I tell him, 'Boy, you just

do that! Go take a good long walk for yourself in that land! When you come back, you might feel better' I think that boy, he did it. He was satisfied, I think. A good long walk in our land is good for us."

It is just about time for Charlie to go join his wife. "I tell you I'm looking at the land I love! From where I'm sitting right now, I feel like I'll die for that land any day! I feel I own that land. Even though the state says they own it, I feel like it's all my land!"