

Natives reach consensus on subsistence

Summit endorses Hoffman proposal

by Geoff Kennedy
for the Tundra Times

Alaska Natives are now publicly speaking with one voice. They've agreed to seek a rural preference constitutional amendment in the immediate future and Native preference as a long-term solution to the state's subsistence problem.

The people speak

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The Alaska Federation of Natives Subsistence Summit Conference, which drew about 700 people, produced the long-awaited consensus after

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● Subsistence: Not race, but historical rights

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wiped out in Dishkakot, as much of the village. The survivors divided up and moved to different areas. My grandmother then married my grandfather, the chief of Holikachuk.

As I was growing up, my grandparents tried valiantly to instill in me the important values of the Native culture and traditions. I learned the family songs and legends which are handed down the generations. They also tried to convey to me that much would change and much of the change would not be good.

I often wonder if they knew how great that change would be. I have often been impressed with their foresight.

You and I are painfully aware of the fallout of the changes my grandparents foresaw. The social devastation of broken families, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, school dropout rate and suicide of our young adults.

Sometimes I am asked to try to figure the single biggest impact of destruction on our Native culture. At first I was usually not able to come up

with just one or the one. In my efforts at first I would say alcohol, then the gold rush, the diseases, and on and on, usually failing to identify a single item as a cause.

Then it finally dawned on me why. What dawned on me will not be any easier to explain.

Native culture is totally interwoven from the individual to the whole oneness of the universe. Natives believe that all life evolves from one Great Spirit source so that all living things have spiritual nature, therefore one must respect all living things.

When the Christians came they misinterpreted our respect for nature and all living things and believed we were superstitious. They tried and succeeded in great measure to destroy our belief system and respect for all life, including our own lives.

Many of us became ashamed and uncomfortable about life. Many of us became self destructive, which is in great evidence today. Many, however, quietly survived in the villages and are living close to nature.

Many others have chosen straddling uncomfortably in two cultures, traveling back and forth from village to ci-

ty and back.

From the time the first white man came, Natives have had to compromise and accommodate. Much has been lost in doing so; most of our lands, our lives, our self-respect.

Can you imagine how painful this must be for the surviving Natives? Each time I get news of a suicide or homicide I am reminded of the sense of loss, and the pain goes deep.

I write you this letter because you have the power to steer the course of history. It is my fervent hope that you will take a less superficial stance on matters which affect the very lives and culture of the Natives of Alaska who have already relinquished much.

It is not a mere matter of race. It is for Natives a life and death issue. Subsistence is not merely food for the body alone, it is also a spiritual activity, a communion with nature.

It would be a great step toward healing in the Native community to have this acknowledged.

Subsistence to be granted to Natives as an ancient historical traditional spiritual activity need not be made a racial issue. After all, we have the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act

(imperfect as it is) because we are the original people of this land.

The Senate Committee of Indian Affairs Special Committee on Investigations opened its findings saying that President Washington promised to deal fairly with the original inhabitants of this land. It goes on to say that Washington's good intentions became lost with the greed and selfishness of people settling in the West.

Their pressure on Congress prevailed. The history of the U.S. government's erratic dealings with the Native peoples of this country is not a kindly one.

It is sad to witness the same, ugly history repeating itself here in Alaska. Now people hide behind the word race to rationalize seizing the last vestige of life blood to Native culture and tradition.

I appeal to your good and decent nature to see that argument for what it really is. Indians and Natives have never defended their rights based on race but always on historical traditional cultural rights and basic needs of the people.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth L. Keating
Nome