

Fish camp teaches youngsters traditional values

by Lyn Kidder

The children of Sitka had a chance this summer to live, eat and work in the manner that the Natives of Southeast Alaska have done for centuries. They were participants at The NATIVE (North American Traditional Indian Values) Fish Camp, located in a sheltered cove on Dog Point.

The camp is largely the creation of John and Roby Littlefield. John, a Sitka Tlingit and Roby, a lifelong Alaskan raised on a homestead near Fairbanks, began the camp six years ago, at John's family fish camp

several miles north of Sitka.

"I was younger than these kids when I first started coming out here," John remembers. His family spent the summers there, doing the same things that the campers do today. The camp is for Native and non-Native children between the ages of 6 and 16. They bring their tents and camp out, though the smallest ones often sleep in the bunkhouse with an adult or two.

On the first day of one camp session, the children netted a large catch of sockeye salmon. Just as they were hauling in the net, a tour boat rounded the point. Fish were



Paul Chulik (seated center) shares a story with campers.

Photo by Lyn Kidder

flopping, cameras were clicking and everyone was cheering. The children then prepared the salmon for smoking in the smokehouse, cutting alder logs into stove size pieces and stripping the bark, which can give a bitter flavor to the fish. They harvest and dry black seaweed in the traditional way, and gather wild edibles such as goosetongue, beach peas and huckleberries. They learn to bake bread, and sometimes a deer or seal will be taken. Older "multiple year" campers act as leaders, teaching and assigning tasks.

"You can really see the results in the kids," John said. "We've had

kids come out here who couldn't spend the night here. We had to take them in. It was so 'unnatural.' But then the next year, if they have the idea that they can't do something and we convince them that they can do it, they stay. And by the third year, they're the camp leaders."

The idea for the camp grew out of a one year program sponsored by the Sitka Native Education Program entitled "Food the Native Way," a program that Roby was involved with. This program worked with teenagers, but Roby felt that it might be better to "target the little kids who are really enthu-

siastic about everything."

The camp is supported in many ways by local businesses and people. For the first time this year, the camp received a grant from the Elihu Foundation.

"Elders are encouraged to share their experience and -- around the evening fire -- their songs and stories.

"We try to have mostly Raven children in one camp and Eagle children in the other, and then have the elders from that clan come out and tell their stories," said John.

"We teach respect for elders out here. We keep passing these traditions on to our kids," says John.