

Muktuk Controversy Still Sizzling-

Ired Natives Want Poisoning Statistics, Bacteria Counts

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The muktuk controversy continues in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Outraged Eskimos, Indians, and people who simply like to eat muktuk, responded vociferously to last week's edict by the Alaska Public Health Department that the Tundra Times could not serve muktuk at its

booth during the Tanana State Fair August 16-20.

Native leaders in the city concurred with Howard Rock that the state regulations were highly discriminatory in singling out muktuk, a traditional Native food from the great bowhead whale, while it allows the sale of beef, pork, and fish products of the same nature.

A local radio show sponsored by the Fairbanks Native Center, Tundra Topics, got into the act last week, completely backing the stand taken by the Tundra Times and asking listeners to write and call in their feelings on the subject.

Alan Arnold of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner spoke of the "beauracrat with his bags of wisdom telling the Eskimo he can't eat muktuk because it's dirty and fit for consumption only if you have an iron stomach."

Even the News-Miner's humorous cartoon figure, Sourdough Jack had his say on the matter.

"Sourdough sez: Them state officials are going too far. After all the diseases white men have given the Natives, it is about time he was gettin' something back."

The state officials were getting something back alright. That something was the reaction from the Native people. They want statistics, they want figures on alleged cases of food poisoning, they want bacteria counts, they want the facts that supported Ken Torgerson's decision to ban muktuk. Torgerson is the field supervisor for the state's Division of Environmental Health, which is in charge of food concessions at the Fair.

Certainly no one, Native or
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otherwise, would condone the sale of bad meat which could result in food poisoning. The question raised is whether equal standards have been applied in judging the "cleanliness" of muktuk as compared to other meat and fish products.

The Eskimos maintain that the harvesting of muktuk is carried out under conditions of care and hygiene that are equal to or better than those followed in any beef slaughterhouse or the decks and canneries of the fishing industry.

A large part of the problem may lie in the fact that there are virtually no laws or regulations which apply in this case, and the state's ruling may have been made somewhat arbitrarily in this vacuum.

Tundra Times consulted with Frank Jones, Director of Game, Fish and Game Department in Juneau. The only comparison that could be found was the sale of caribou meat, which is the only game that it is legal

to sell in the state of Alaska, and the sale is limited to the Arctic Circle.

As far as butchering or cleaning regulations on caribou, there are none, said Jones. "The policy boils down very simply to one that allows a Native who has killed a couple of extra caribou to sell a few to someone else or through the village grocery store.

As far as whales go, Jones said that would be a whole different category and is not covered by any of his department's regulations. He regarded muktuk as an item that is usually given away, through friends.

Muktuk has been sold in Fairbanks at Native-sponsored potlatches that are attended by the general public. It has also been purchased directly in whaling communities and shipped back east as a gourmet food item.

Questioned about regulations on sale of muktuk as a commercial food item, Jones said: "By golly, you've brought up a subject and I can't give you an answer."

The Eskimo people would like an official answer from the state of Alaska. Muktuk, very likely, will never be available in large quantities. It is somewhat of a rarity even in Native communities.

The state of Alaska in promoting tourism is forever pointing to the Native peoples' unique life styles and culture patterns. These are not to be exploited for the sake of tourism and then discriminated against in practical everyday matters.

If nothing else, the present muktuk controversy should lead to a re-examination of standards of regulations, and hopefully to sound scientific research into the quality of basic Native foods.