

# Subsistence is concern of Elders Conference

By Sabra McCracken

For the Tundra Times

NOME — A determination to survive and to maintain their subsistence lifestyle brought together Alaska Natives in the Bering Straits region for an elders conference which opened here last week.

"We intend to survive," said Matthew Iya, 33, director of subsistence for Kawerak Inc., the non-profit arm of the Bering Straits Native Corp. and sponsor of the gathering. Veronica Iya, Matthew's wife, was the conference coordinator.

Iya spoke Tuesday to a group of nearly 500 people — elders, friends and relatives gathered for the fourth annual Bering Straits Elders Conference.

Speakers at the conference displayed a determination to succeed in the legal battle for subsistence rights, saying they believe the continuation of their culture depends on that right.

During the past year, Iya said, progress had been made on the subsistence issue. He cited the reauthorization of the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act which placed the management of marine mammals in the hands of the federal government.

"If the state wants to make rules and regulations regarding the use of marine mammals it must first determine the need for subsistence users," he said.

If there is any gain beyond subsistence, the state must ask the villagers first if they want to harvest that excess limit for a commercial operation. And, Iya explained, they are supposed to help the villages gain economic stability before the harvest goes to anybody else.

"We're trading off our resources while others are gaining monetary benefit. It seems like we are always trading something away and getting less in return.

"It has to stop. We cannot compromise any longer," Iya said.

The Alaskans for Equal Hunting and Fishing have collected about 20,000 signatures to put an initiative to repeal the subsistence law on next fall's ballot, Iya explained.

"Most of them live in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau."

"Only one percent of the fish in Anchorage goes to subsistence use. Four percent goes to sport fishing and 95 percent to commercial use. They're fighting over a mere one percent. But we have customary and traditional use," he said.

Other speakers echoed Iya's concern for the Eskimo heritage. Caleb Pungowiyi, 40, the executive vice-president of Kawerak Inc., said that the Native people have a special, spiritual relationship to their

environment.

"White people don't understand the way we feel," he said. "Their definition of subsistence is totally different from ours."

"Our culture and our lives are at stake. In order to survive we must maintain our spiritual relationship with the land, the animals and the world."

Pungowiyi said that at last year's Alaska Federation of Natives Convention in Anchorage he noticed that the Lower 48 Indian elders looked sad. "They were confined to living on reservations so it is no wonder their spirits were broken. They lost their spiritual relationship to the land."

Pungowiyi and Iya said potential oil and gas development in the Norton Sound threaten their traditional way of life. Pungowiyi added that the initiative to repeal the subsistence law, the possible ban on subsistence bowhead whaling, and the enforcement of the migratory bird treaty would also have an impact on Eskimo people.

On the brighter side, the Eskimo people should not despair, said Jude Henzler, of the Rural Alaska Resource Association. He told the elders that when they were young there was no Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, no Eskimo Walrus Commission and no Fish and Game Advisory Committee to help them.

"Kawerak, the local Fish and Game Advisory Committees, the Subsistence Division of the Fish and Game Department, and the Subsistence Department at Rural Cap are working hard to make sure the Fisheries Board and the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council protect the subsistence resource," Henzler said.

He further urged the elders to register to vote. "If you want to help keep that subsistence law then you need to vote . . . And you need to advise your children how important their votes are."

The elders conference continued for one week with a full agenda of speakers, taping sessions of the cultural traditions and dancing by Eskimo groups in the Bering Straits Region.

All the speeches were translated from English into Yupik; St. Lawrence Island Yupik and Inupiaq.

Represented at the conference were elders from 16 villages in the approximately 26,000 square-mile region ranging from Diomed and St. Lawrence Islands in the Northwest to Stebbins and Unalakleet in the southeast.

The theme "Subsistence is Survival" was chosen by the Elders Committee consisting of Margaret Seegana, Minnie Fagerstrom, Peter Curran, Clarence Irrigoo, Job Kokochuruk, Alfred Mazonna and Will Senungatuk.



Andrew Otten, 66, of St. Michael tells how he and others in his village use, prepare and store different parts of marine mammals. His statements, as well as those of other elders, were taped during the Bering Straits Elders Conference.

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