

'Extremism in defense of subsistence is no vice'

By Tommy Ongtooguk

I became aware of my northern world speaking only the Eskimo language (Inupiat). In the everyday conversations of the people around me, the language's shade and color conveyed a sense of timeless continuity, of permanency.

Our isolation and remote location enhanced the feeling of permanency as I grew up in the village. The pace of life was integrated with the arctic's ecosystem. Time was measured by the seasons and seasonal change determined the tempos of our lives.

Ever so gradually, the tempo began to pick up during the 1930's. We were receiving monthly mail deliveries by dog team! The advent of World War II and the government's defense measures compromised our isolation and the seasonal pace of our lives. We never returned to the ecosystem's natural time cycle.

Nevertheless, growing up in the village of Sinrock, now Sinuk, during the early thirties gave me a sense of participating in a timeless world that would never change. The village was virtually unique. All of its people were Eskimo. Even our teachers and preachers were Eskimo. Being a part of an entirely Eskimo village strengthened my sense of permanency and a belief in the timeless continuity of our lifestyle. Later I was to have my faith in that belief shaken as the world's events began to intrude on my community and otherwise secure environment.

When my parents were young they saw their parents as the arctic region's leading actors. They saw their parents acting out their role as a unique part of the human race and as an integral part of their environment. Their lives spanned the critical era between traditional times and the first contact with whalers and missionaries.

My parents' lifestyle was already being influenced by the sudden tides of change. The way of life that had been passed along for generations

was being altered by the world outside our immediate environment. Sudden change was occurring over a very brief period of time.

Our special relationship with the land contributed to the feeling of continuity associated with our lifestyle. We did not have a concept of boundaries, of unseen lines traced over the earth and dividing the land. The division of land was considered only as a concept of territories. Those concepts were honored. If someone established a fish camp, it was considered that person's or that family's fish camp. It was permanent in everyone's mind and considered settled.

Now with deeds, lawyers, and the BLM who can be sure of anything? I personally lost two sites while I was overseas with the military because my thoughts of land ownership were territorial in concept. Many of our elders lost their land because they could not speak English and were unable to file a claim with the BLM. The BLM never provided translators.

When I left Alaska in 1951 it was still a territory. I returned after a 20-year absence, a 10-year tour of duty overseas and a second decade in the "Lower 48." The changes I witnessed were striking. The old culture was still there, but it was being changed by a school system we could not control or even influence. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was another powerful agent of change. The act, passed by Congress in 1971, brought about a shotgun union which married the placid Native people in their arctic environment to that cherished modern American institution, the corporation.

It is still not clear how this marriage is going to work out. Has the American system found a way to treat us fairly or are we being molded to fit into a system that will destroy us and rob us of our land?

The Native Claims Settlement Act has altered my sense of our lifestyle's continuity

more than any other encounter I have had with the dominant society over the past half century.

Later, when I attended the citizen's participation conference during March of 1981, I learned that my belief in the evolution of our lifestyle according to our own concepts of survival and utilizing the best from both worlds was to be challenged.

The questions of subsistence arose during the conference. There were strong feelings, pro and con, on Native subsistence users. Natives have strong feelings about their subsistence rights. The lifestyle of Alaska's Native people not only depends on subsistence resources; their claim to subsistence resources has been established by centuries of use and custom. During this conference Rep. Romona L. Barnes (R-Anchorage) accused Natives of being prejudiced in their views.

How was I to answer this accusation without appearing to be as prejudiced as she claims us to be? I waited for time to elapse before I attempted to answer this accusation, but I found that my response might still appear to be prejudiced.

I needed time to contemplate and reflect on my past to completely realize how our special relationship to our world contributes to a unique social reality, and to our collective self-esteem and well being. From this perspective it follows that action is creative

and creative subsistence means survival. Indeed, I am very prejudiced about this lifestyle. The permanence, the continuity of not only my people's culture and identity, but of my people's very survival de-

pends on subsistence.

Then I asked myself, who does Romona Barnes represent? I discovered that among Anchorage's current 200,000

(Continued on Page Eight)

My Turn

(Continued from Page Three)

residents the average residency is two years and that more than 90 percent of the residents have never been to rural Alaska!

This is where the infamous "yellow sheets" attacking Native subsistence rights flowed from. Over 60,000 yellow circulars defining the Alaska Outdoor Association's crude political position regarding subsistence were distributed in the daily papers.

The "yellow sheets" bore the inflammatory headline: "Fishermen and Hunters! You can stop your rights from being given away to the Alaskan Natives and/or the so-called subsistence users."

Our way of life consumes less energy than the lifestyle of those who attack us. In fact as much as six times as much energy and resources are needed to maintain the lifestyle of those who now challenge our way of life. Perhaps we are accused of being prejudiced because we have not modeled our lifestyle after theirs. They fail to understand that our lifestyle has been shaped by the environment, recognizes resource limits, and has been developed over centuries. I guess we will always appear prejudiced when we defend our way of life.

From our point of view, extremism in the defense of our subsistence rights is no vice and moderation when faced with an assault on our lifestyle is no virtue.