

Adaptability, one of our biggest downfalls

by Rudy Hamilton
for the Tundra Times

We at times seem to advance pell mell into the future without any sort of guidance. Adaptability, one of our greatest attributes as Alaska Natives, is also one of our biggest downfalls.

OPINION

Den Nena Henash Our Land Speaks

We have adapted so well to present conditions in our villages that our elders seem to think we do not need to know anything about the traditions of our people. They believe past deeds and ways we survived are not considered relevant to the modern way of life.

When you talk to some elders about the past, they are somewhat reluctant to talk about it. It seems they think that your modern knowledge about computers, schooling and use of technology will be far more useful than the knowledge of who you are and why you are here. Our identity as Alaska Natives is at great risk as the modern world cannot answer those two critical questions.

The most dangerous thing to Native politics is a Native person who is uneducated in politics and is self-centered with short-range goals.

Long ago, leaders were chosen because they were able to demonstrate their leadership qualities. During those days you followed a "doer" instead of a "talker." Today we seem to follow the predominant Western way of doing things — we follow whoever has the slipperiest tongue.

Modern Native youth are at great risk at this time.

Any child is impressed with the whiz-bang technology of the modern world. But Native youth are taught that just to survive is good enough. Most are not pushed to attain personal materialistic wealth on which the modern Western world thrives.

The rural Native is a gambler at heart. That's why bingo and card

games thrive. Unfortunately, this type of gambling teaches a "safe" way to gamble and can become an addiction.

Long ago a Native gambled with his life, as a people we learned about life this way. The gamble was the ultimate risk taken for survival in an environment with all sorts of dangerous situations.

Most youth are ill-advised to try that type of gamble now. The elders used to give you a percentage if you could survive or not. Any Native person will gamble with 50 percent odds. But now the youth will try it in the modern world with 100 percent against them. You might as well throw them off a cliff. Everyone blames them but no one teaches them to strive in any setting — modern or traditional.

The rural education system is also failing miserably. Teachers seem to try to take the place of our elders and often appear to put themselves in the primary role as a replacement for a Native parent or traditional person. But these teachers don't have the doctorate degree in that "specialized field."

The teachers, overall, aren't even teaching the youth enough academics in the schools to get by in the modern world. No one pushes the child to excel in anything except sports.

By the time the youth tries to correct their educational shortcomings, school is over. They now have to contend with trying to make a living on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps or laborer's wages. Meanwhile modern technology is almost making the position of the laborer a thing of the past. Again, a no win situation.

I think that education is the key — in and out of the classroom. Right now teachers think they own the school system. "Native control" seems mostly talk but rarely confirmed in action.

When a concerned parent or community member tries to offer suggestions to better the education process, the teachers respond as if to a little kid, their actions saying "you're not as smart as me," "you don't have a degree," "I am schooled in the latest

teaching techniques," and even "your skin color is not right."

The educational process of today is jumping all over the place searching for a quick fix-it to education. They study the trends in current learning situation. They wonder how the Bureau of Indian Affairs or boarding schools like Mt. Edgecumbe could have somehow or another taught us Natives a basic education.

My teachers at the BIA never took shortcuts, gave odd interpretations of education or used glamorous programs. We weren't guinea pigs who fell by the wayside after their experiments.

The ownership of this whole program has to be brought back to the Native people. The school system has to be integrated into the village rather than the life of a village revolving around what happens in the school.

The elders have to be integrated into this system.

Before it is too late we have to change things around. As Natives we almost exclusively support some businesses in urban Alaska, yet racial prejudice is allowed to continue. The only time we are on equal terms is if non-Natives want possession of our land, want to hunt on our land or take jobs that we could do and get training for in our own villages.

Even the state government is hard to deal with. Do you see anyone scrambling to upgrade conditions in rural Alaska even after the honorable Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, said after his visit to rural Alaska that conditions were "mind-boggling?"

As the non-Native child grows older, learning grows a little harder. But a whole support system is there. All the while they are rewarded with pieces of paper recognizing success and accomplishments to hang on the wall.

The trauma that occurs in our villages has made the stress level so high it is hard to see how we can even help ourselves.

A few weeks ago, two Native boys drowned in our area. Within 24 hours, two state troopers passed judgement and decided there was no reason for

*This one time
I've had the
chance to say my
piece even though
I've lived with it
all my life.*

a search.

Meanwhile, a white hiker out wandering on seized Native land turns up missing. Four teams of people — probably all state troopers — assisted by a helicopter found him wandering 92 miles off course. With two-to-one odds we still didn't get any help in our search.

The state had no sonar or anything to detect a body on the bottom or any detector to find the boat, absolutely nothing to assist in our search. The troopers even tried to claim the drags we made from another tragic death of a young person the year before. They said it was their contribution to the search. We had to take more this year, and those drags will probably be claimed by them too. Amazing!

The people in my community are all subsistence oriented, yet we have to sit by as rich fishermen and people with year-round jobs are allowed by state laws to hunt in our area.

Our own Native people from down river and other rivers and cities come to hunt in our area with \$30,000 fishing boats. I have never seen so much wasted as when these people leave.

This one time I've had the chance to say my piece even though I've lived with it all my life.

The load becomes staggering for Natives living in villages. Two boys from a nearby village drowned, in another village a young man commits suicide and my dear sister, a mother with three children, is dying of cancer.

But when I was growing up I remember standing, facing the flag with my hand on my heart saying, "with liberty and justice for all."