

Natives must oppose ANWR opening

by Paul Swetzof
for the Tundra Times

On Sept. 5 at 5:10 a.m., my son, Nathan Paul, was born. I participated in his birth.

I felt his first breath, and believe me, there is no way to describe or explain the feeling of the very beginning of a new independent life. It felt as though all of the air in the world was being sucked into the first breath of this new life.

It is this experience which will always be a vital part of me and will be reflected in my writing and all other aspects of my life.

A life doesn't have much meaning without an identity. And individual identity is very shallow and self-centered without a cultural identity to anchor it.

We must not allow money, greed and power to destroy our indigenous cultural identities. It is with this in mind that I am asking all Alaska Native villages/tribes to stand together and fight against oil development in the land of the Gwich'in known as the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

We must not be quiet while the Gwich'in culture is jeopardized for the sake of big-oil and the greed of a very few corporate Natives.

All of the oil under the coastal plain, using the most optimistic assumptions, is only equal to a year or two of total U.S. consumption. Is this worth the tearing down of the Gwich'in?

Is more money for the state, for profit Native corporations, the oil companies, increased population and more pressure on our wildlife resources a reason to chance the destruction of these wonderful Native people who live on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border?

Canada has protested the development of the coastal plain of the refuge because Canada's national policy is to protect the culture of the Gwich'in. Surely Alaska Natives can call for protection as well.

OPINION

Aleut

Not only does morality require us to stand up for our Gwich'in brothers and sisters, but our own self interest demands that we prevent a tragedy from taking place.

If we allow the Gwich'in to die then it will not be long before the rest of our cultures will be in the path of greed. Our silence will result in our being picked off one at a time, and there will be no one left to stand with us.

The Porcupine Caribou herd calves and eats in the heart of the coastal plain. It is the caribou which is the most important part of the Gwich'in people.

It is impossible to separate the caribou from the Gwich'in or the Gwich'in from the caribou.

If the caribou change their migration patterns to avoid development then the Gwich'in will be no more. If the caribou are destroyed or diminished, the Gwich'in will be destroyed as well.

If roads, increased non-Native population and sport hunting or poaching rise, then the Gwich'in will fall.

For the sake of the Gwich'in people and all of our cultures we must speak up now. Our voices must rise above the corporate players who, though few in number, use their status and money to try and drown our words.

However, if most of our villages/tribes speak with one voice then we will be heard, and those who hear us will listen.

Please join with me to help our Gwich'in brothers and sisters to survive and determine their own future. Following is a sample resolution. Feel free to use this resolution or one of

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your own choosing to send a clear message that Alaska Natives will stand up for each other and that a threat to one of our cultures is a threat to all of us.

The future of all of our children is dependent on our willingness to speak up.

Resolutions sent to the following address will be distributed to members of Congress, the White House, the Canadian and Yukon governments and to the Gwich'in people: Paul Swetzof, Box 103922, Anchorage 99510-3922.

RESOLUTION NO. _____ NATIVE VILLAGE OF _____

WHEREAS, the opening of the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas development may threaten the Porcupine Caribou herd, and;

WHEREAS, the diminishment, destruction, or changes in migration routes of the Porcupine Caribou herd could result in the destruction of the culture and identity of the indigenous Indians, known as Gwich'in, who have populated this land for thousands

of years and who reside in both the United States and Canada, and;

WHEREAS, Both the Canadian government and the government of the Yukon Territory have called on the United States government to protect the Gwich'in people and prohibit oil and gas development on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, now:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Native Village of _____ is opposed to oil and gas development within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and all lands vital to the Porcupine Caribou herd and the Gwich'in people, and;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife preserve be placed in Federally protected status which guarantees that the Porcupine Caribou herd and the Gwich'in people will be allowed to exist undisturbed, forever.

Please send your resolutions to the above address immediately. There is not much time left.