

Commentary

Students' fears are about no future subsistence

by Frank Keim

Ever since I came to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta as a teacher 16 years ago, I've been aware of the importance of subsistence (the taking of wildlife for customary and traditional purposes) to villages in the region. In case I should forget,

my students have reminded me of this reality on a regular basis. They did so again the other day in speeches I had assigned them about one of their favorite subjects. Except this time, there was an element that had not been present in the past. It was a fear that perhaps someday in the near future, subsistence would

no longer be their historical and cultural right. Through classroom assignments, they had been keeping track of the ongoing statewide discussion of this issue over the past few years and no doubt had begun to notice a change in the focus of writers and speakers on the topic.

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Their fears may be well-grounded given the kaleidoscope of social, economic, political and demographic events that have lately begun to line up on a collision course. In spite of the subsistence protections for rural Alaskans offered in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, there is a quickly expanding population of non-Natives in the larger "rural" towns, and this has put a strain on limited wildlife resources. There also has been a growing support among many Alaskans to amend the ANILCA itself and so deprive rural Alaskans of their subsistence preference on federal lands. The State has contributed to this effort in the past, although presently, there seems to be a tendency to back off

this position under the Knowles Administration. On the federal stage, our Congressional delegation has been historically reluctant to tamper with the ANILCA for fear they might open up a Pandora's box that would later come back to haunt them. Now, however, with the Republicans in control of Congress (and the Alaskan delegation with powerful committee chairmanships), they may be less reluctant to open up the issue in an attempt to get rid of the rural subsistence preference.

Then there is the reality of increasing Native village populations to throw into the equation. So far, these have not been extremely detrimental to wildlife numbers, but with more and more people, this now small problem can only get worse in spite of shorter hunting

and fishing seasons, smaller bag limits and increased vigilance on the part of authorities and concerned citizens. And if the federal rural preference ultimately changes, then what? Where does subsistence stand then?

All of my students in their speeches were very concerned that hunters not kill too many animals, since if they did, it would mean there would not be enough to eat for future generations and also that state and federal authorities may have to increasingly limit subsistence hunting opportunities. But if the subsistence preference is terminated and there is more competition for the same finite game sources, what alternative would there be but to shorten season, lower bag limits and restrict hunting and fishing areas even more?

With fewer sustainable paying job opportunities and almost certain additional future reductions in transfer payments, does this mean some people may have to break the law to feed their families? I have heard these words spoken as a desperate option, although everyone hopes it never comes to this.

In a very good book entitled *A Long and Terrible Shadow*, by Thomas Berger, he pointedly suggests that the best reason for giving due recognition to subsistence is not only that it is the way of life for village peoples, but also because in spite of official statements to the contrary, there will simply never be enough wage and salaried employment opportunities to replace the hunting, fishing and trapping economy. But the villages of the North, he says, must nevertheless

have an economic base. And in many of them it can only be a subsistence economy derived from the renewable resources of its fish and wildlife.

In the final instance, what I believe will have to occur is a compromise from all sides. That is, legal recognition by the State of a rural subsistence preference but one limited by residential and economic qualifications, in addition to rigorous enforcement by local and regional authorities. When I look into my crystal ball, I see no other alternative. This will please no one completely. But at least, it will keep the subsistence option open for future generations of those rural Alaskans who wish to continue to make their homes in communities that have been around for many hundreds of years.