

Sharing the load

The Alaska Federation of Natives can never be all things to all Native people, and in fairness, it never set out to be. But the 27-year old statewide organization still packs a lot of valuable discussion into a full week of convention activities each fall. This year was no exception.

There were flash points of course; moments of tension, anger, frustration. There were concerns voiced that the organization is dominated by regional and village corporations formed under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). Some feel the corporate bias may be impeding full discussion and proper resolution of subsistence and sovereignty issues... What should we make of these concerns?

First, it would be useful to note that AFN has its corporate critics, too, those who say the organization is not doing enough to help corporations fulfill their historic ANCSA mandates.

Second, it would be helpful to remember that several years ago, the concern was raised that social issues and village needs—corporate or otherwise—came second to the priorities of Native regional corporations. Now, village corporations and Native non-profit regional associations have become much more a part of the AFN.

Third, subsistence is a thorny, and complicated problem that nobody has figured out yet. To their credit, ANCSA corporations have lent considerable resources and political capital to develop and promote positions widely accepted in the Native community. Their leadership stems in part from the fact that ANCSA not only created the corporations to manage the settlement but also made it a matter of federal policy to protect subsistence use of fish, game and other resources by Alaska Natives. Thus the linkage of corporate and subsistence concerns within AFN has a historic rationale that continues to the present. AFN president Julie Kitka asserted forcefully in her report to the convention that AFN would never stifle the energetic subsistence debate within its ranks. Every indication is that the organization will continue to work closely with its members and allies to find a sensible subsistence solution.

Fourth, we may ask: is the sovereignty issue any different than subsistence? On the one hand, there is less statewide consensus on this issue. The enemy is less clearly defined. If anything, it is even more complicated.

But on the other hand, tribal sovereignty has been dramatically advanced and legitimized in Alaska in recent months. This has come about not only as a result of refreshing championship by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Assistant Secretary Ada Deer, but also by the arduous efforts of the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, a statewide consortium of tribes that has vigorously advocated tribal sovereignty as an important tool for Native self-determination. Given recent developments, no rational person can think that sovereignty is a passing fancy.

Native corporate leaders are and should be concerned about where the sovereignty road may lead. This way is not without uncertainties and many valid questions remain to be answered. Because of these concerns, AFN may not be the best vehicle to push sovereignty into the light where it can be examined and fully discussed by Alaska Natives themselves. And that's okay. The Alaska Inter-Tribal Council has emerged to fill this necessary role. The two groups can and should work together, maintaining goodwill and open lines of communication. They both represent the same people.

It is critical to remember this simple fact: Alaska Natives are both shareholders and tribal members. As such they have everything to lose if they fracture, and everything to gain from unity.