

Reliable data could reduce fisheries conflict

by Paul Swetzof

It's time to end the fish conflict between the Unungan (Aleut) people who fish the Area M commercial fisheries to sustain themselves and their villages, and the Yupik and other Native people who depend on the subsistence and commercial fisheries of the Yukon and other river drainages to also sustain themselves and their villages.

The issue is whether or not low fish stocks in the Yukon and other drainages are significantly impacted by the incidental catch in the False Pass fishery. The Aleuts say the bulk of the incidental catch is bound for Asia and other non-Alaska rivers and other Natives say it is their fish the Aleuts are catching. The truth is: neither side knows.

This will remain a political issue and never be resolved until the federal and/or state governments put up the money for a comprehensive genetic study of the salmon in question. No one can say for sure if the tragic decrease in chums and other fish in the affected river systems is a result of the Area M fishery, the Cook Inlet fishery, the Bristol Bay fishery, or any combination of incidental commercial fisheries in Alaska. No one knows if the low runs result from environmental factors, legal or illegal fishing in the open

seas of simply a long term natural fluctuation. All we do know is the fish are not returning as expected and Native people on both sides of the issue are pointing the finger at each other. Again, we will never resolve this question until a complete genetic study is accomplished.

It is a terrible thing to see natives fighting Natives. The native people involved in this issue are good people who are not only trying to maintain their own individual lives but are working very hard to save their villages and cultures.

Our disagreement on this issue detracts from other very serious issues now before us and which should and do unite us. We're all faced with the common issues of sovereignty, village/tribal economies and many more. Standing together we'll win our war to save our cultures. Divided, we'll get nowhere.

The Unungan people lost many villages and much of the culture due to the Russian occupation of their homelands. More villages and culture lost because of the battles and occupation of those homelands during World War II. Even today, some villages are at risk of losing their identity because of a large influx of non-Natives who are cashing in on the fisheries of the Bering Sea.

These developments have left

the Aleut people with only ten remaining villages, some of which are overrun by non-Aleuts. Like the Jewish and Palestinian people, that Aleut people and culture still exist today is a testament to the courage of the people and their refusal to go along with the often repeated predictions of their demise. The commercial fisheries is all that sustains the economic viability of all of the remaining Unungan villages, so when they hear people, even Native people, saying the fishery may have to be stopped or drastically reduced, they know that a number of their villages, and thus their culture, could be wiped out. Understandably, this is unacceptable.

The Yup'ik, Inupiaq and Athabascan people living on the river systems have many villages. However, virtually all of their villages are dependent on the annual run of chums and other salmon. They know if they can't catch fish for subsistence and make some money from commercial fishing, their villages and cultures could disappear just as sure as their Aleut brothers and sisters would lose everything without their commercial fishery. They have seen steadily declining fish runs culminating in this year's closure by the State of Alaska of the chum subsistence fishery. The people see that large numbers of chums are

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incidentally taken by the Aleuts and they think it is possible that the fish being taken are their fish. Understandably, this is unacceptable.

What both sides have in common is fear. This is families and cultures we're talking about. It's to be expected that faced with

terrible losses of family and culture rational discussion is sidelined. It is reprehensible that the State of Alaska, which claims to manage the fisheries, has not only failed to manage them properly but has falsely claimed to know where the fish from Area M and other areas of the state are and are not going. It is the state biologists

who have divided us, as Native people, with their know-it-all attitude and without much in the way of facts.

It is the state and the feds who should take responsibility for paying for a comprehensive genetic study of the fisheries. None of us can talk rationally about what fish are going where and what to do about it if most of what we say is speculation.

If genetic studies show the natives living along the rivers are right and the Aleuts in the Area M fishery are intercepting great numbers of their fish, we can sit down, Native to Native, as friends, and work something out to the satisfaction of everyone. If genetic studies demonstrate the Aleuts are right and inconsequential numbers of fish headed for Alaska's rivers are being caught, then we've

been fighting without reason and we can sit down, Native to Native, as friends, and work together to correct the problem as best we can.

Genetic studies are very expensive. Without them, however, the very existence of Native cultures, and the fishery resources, in Alaska are jeopardized. I think we can't afford not to find out, once and for all, what's going on.