

Letters to the editor



Cowper praises Alaskan efforts on spill cleanup

To the editor:

The first phase of the oil spill cleanup ended recently, marking a turning point in the saga of the *Exxon Valdez*. To the thousands of Alaskans — and to the people who came here to help from all over the world — it's a letdown in a lot of ways.

Jobs are over. Rescue centers have been closed. For most, it's time to go home. For many, their homes will never be the same.

There have been some pretty compelling examples of leadership, strength of character and personal sacrifice in this whole thing.

Hundreds of Alaskans, from Cordova to Kodiak, Seward to Seldovia, took it upon themselves to fight the oil. They built log booms. They sewed bags for oily garbage. They went to remote places without being asked and worked without being paid. They stood up for their communities and for the places they were trying to save.

There were Exxon employers and other industry people who came into a chaotic situation in an unfamiliar place and quietly gained the confidence of their new co-workers and neighbors. We may never know all their names, but they were out there.

Caring crossed boundaries — geographic, philosophic, economic and political. As in other disasters, people pulled together.

The job isn't over yet. It won't be for a long time. But it's important to take a moment now to recognize the many men and women who, without much thought of personal gain, gave what they had to help.

They did whatever needed to be done. They made a difference when the odds were against them, and they should know that it's appreciated.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Gov. Steve Cowper
Juneau

'Subsistence whaling' in the USSR means there is one hunting ship

To the editor:

To introduce ourselves: David Lewis and Mimi George are affiliate professors in anthropology at the University of Alaska Southeast and Fairbanks, and Roger Antogham is vice president of Sivuqaq Native Corp. at Gambell.

In August 1988 we brought 11 Gambell Eskimos in our schooner *Cyrano* on a breakthrough five-day visit with their relatives in Novoye Chaplino, and we are still vitally concerned with reuniting the Native peoples. We will be living for a year in Chukotka studying Native traditional initiatives today, as well as their importance to everyone.

We would like to share with fellow Alaskans some of our experiences since we arrived in Provideniya July 7.

For the last six weeks we have been guests in the homes of hospitable people in Provideniya, Novoye Chaplino, Lavrentiya and Uelen and have also visited Yan Rakynnot and Lorino. All these places are on the Bering Sea coast except Uelen, which fronts the Arctic Ocean.

Last week we attended a whaling festival at Uelen.

We boarded the 75-passenger coaster *Kazange* at Lavrentiya. Every fortnight or so in the summer this little ship calls at the villages between Anadyr and Uelen, carrying passengers and light cargo and serving as the main link between the settlements.

Except for Provideniya and Anadyr there are no jetties. An anchor is dropped astern and the bow run upon the shingle, whereupon an ingenious gangway is swung out over the bow down to the beach. The arrangement works very well except when a swell is breaking on the shore.

This was the case when we left for the festival one stormy night recently. After taking aboard the passengers — Eskimo and Chukchi dancers, elders and media people from Magadan and Moscow — *Kazange* anchored in a sheltered bay off the deserted Eskimo village of Pinakul to

wait out the storm.

These deserted settlements are a sad legacy of the 1950s to 1970s policy of relocating Native settlements. For example, the whole population of Big Diomed Island was moved to the mainland.

The historic Eskimo villages of Naukan, Old Chaplino (Umnaziq), and Avan, to name but a few were closed and their inhabitants resettled to towns and villages whose location was invariably unsuitable for traditional sea mammal hunting.

Only the 700 strong Yupik-Chukchi village of Sireniki was left relatively undisturbed, and here 20 odd walrus skin umiaks still engage in hunting and may shortly resume subsistence whaling. For the rest, between 30 and 40 outboard-powered wooden whaleboats distributed among the settlements are used for harvesting walrus and seal.

During the night the plan was changed. We were fast asleep in the mate's cabin when we were awakened and hustled aboard a tug that took us out to a whale catcher ship that was anchored offshore. She at once set out at 17 knots for Uelen.

Morning brought thick fog, which effectively screened the hunting ship's quarry and heavy surf on Uelen spit that made landing impossible. Back then to reboard *Kazange* in the sheltered cove of Dezhneva. There being no way for her to land us at Uelen in prevailing conditions, we went ashore at Dezhneva and completed our journey overland in "tanks."

Strictly speaking, *visdihods* are not tanks, but tracked armored personnel carriers that transport nine or 10 passengers over the rain-soaked tundra in remarkable comfort.

The communal restaurant at Uelen was opened for our benefit, and we were lodged in the school dormitory.

Next morning an offshore gale had replaced the rain, but Eskimo and Chukchi dancers and singers prepared for the festival undeterred. Meanwhile, the catcher ship reported by radio that she had killed a grey whale and was towing it in.

The Soviet idea of subsistence whal-

ing is very different from ours. In the USSR there is one whale hunting ship which catches a quota of 169 whales and tows them in to the villages along the coasts of Kamchatka and Chukotka. We will quote later a Soviet view of this arrangement.

Eskimo and Chukchi dancing, drumming and singing began on a platform built between hauled-out fishing boats. The bright costumes of the dancers were whipped by the driving wind, while reindeer meat was being cooked over campfires on the shore.

The performances and costumes were superb, though there the audience did not participate as in Alaska. The loudspeaker announcements were made in Russian, despite the presence of so many Native language speakers.

Meanwhile, the catcher ship hove into view with a whale in tow and two whaleboats were launched through the surf in an impressive display of seamanship. Each was powered by a pair of 30-horsepower Japanese outboards, but even so it took some time to tow the whale shore.

By dint of two tractors, manpower and parbuckling (rolling the whale along by means of a line wound round its middle a few times) the whale was hauled up the beach, where it was accorded the traditional welcoming dances and given a drink of water, a token of respect for the animals that give the people life.

There could be no doubt as to the spontaneous delight in the festival of this village of ivory master carvers and of the deep traditional roots of the symbolism they expressed.

But being brought a whale by the catcher ship was a far cry from the dangerous and exacting work of umiak crews (of which Roger has long been a member). And what of the use made of the whale itself. Is it really what is meant by subsistence?

That evening a press conference was called by the local representative of Greenpeace. His argument was as follows:

The subsistence quota of whales was being misused, he said. They were

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used less for human food, as intended, than as food for blue foxes at the breeding farms at Novoye Chaplino, Lorino, Uelen and elsewhere. Moreover, most of the blubber was rendered down in huge vats, such as those we had seen in Novoye Chaplino and Lorino and shipped out to be sold as whale oil to lubricate machinery.

These whale oil and fox farm villages, he said, had whale quotas out of all proportion to their populations,

yet the meat in their shops for human consumption came by sea from Vladivostok.

Several local Natives made it clear that raising foxes was never their idea, nor did they like it much. But it was an important part of the state farm economy. They could not think of an alternative food for the foxes.

There was general agreement that commercial whaling was undesirable, but when the Greenpeace representative announced that to stop "this

travesty," Greenpeace would blockade the whale ship, the villagers disagreed. The people's welfare must come first, they said. The local economies must not be undermined without an alternative.

There is one place in Chukotka where true traditional subsistence whaling in skin umiaks is to be resumed after a hiatus of 50 years. Sireniki has been given a quota of three bowhead whales that villagers may catch themselves. How they fare

we will report in due course.

Our return to Lavrentiya was by scheduled 17-passenger helicopter, a fascinating \$25, 40-mile half-hour ride over desolate tundra, where signs of a solitary reindeer herder were the only indications of human presence.

We will write about the life of the reindeer herders in a later "newsletter."

David Lewis, Mimi George
and Roger Antogham
Provideniya, USSR