

An Indigenous peoples' view of development

The following My Turn column was written as a paper to be presented to the recent symposium on Socio-economic Impact Studies and the effect of resource development on rural Alaska.

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Koniag Masks and Hunting Songs

May we tell you a short Koniag story:

"A man once was unsuccessful as a hunter even though he observed the food taboos like other hunters; so he made a general appeal for supernatural aid.

"In a dream one night he saw masks as if they were alive and heard songs sung by an unknown man. Thereafter the man sang the songs and became a great hunter.

"When others wished to know what his secret was, he taught them the songs and made the masks as he had seen them. And this was the beginning of these two things."

What a richness of expression; how abundant the wealth of knowledge lodged in this story. Physical acts of singing and making masks appear so easy, so simple.

But they must be done, without question, without hesitation, and with joy! For these

physical acts illuminate the very profound wisdom which gave them birth. That deep understanding of life is gently carried from one generation to the next on the wings of the story.

There are many lessons in the tale. We choose to focus here on man's relationship to nature. We feel that such a story has great relevance for man's socio-economic condition.

Conventional SIA Approaches

It has become customary for Socio-Economic Impact Assessments (SIAs) to be done by academically accepted professionals.

Although the field of SIA research is young, it is increasingly being seen as an integral part of resource use decision making. The mitigation of developmental socio-economic impacts, while maximizing resource development is the primary focus of SIA studies.

SIA studies purport to utilize the most advanced social-scientific conceptual framework (theories) existing in the Western world. Western theories and developer demands define what are to be considered "impact problems."

The method rationale may be summarized as: the performance of an objective social-scientific description and analysis of the socio-economic cost and benefits of a devel-

opment project. This information is for the use of development decision makers.

An Indigenous View

It has become a modern superstitious belief that SIAs be done by so-called "professionals." These SIA's are authorized by transnational corporations, directly or indirectly as they operate through governments, for the SIA so-called "professionals," the overwhelming seductive motivation is "fees for services rendered," especially if this includes up-front money.

The majority of SIA writers do not live in rural Alaska where natural resource impacts are occurring. They are immigrants — period! Their ingrown world-view is primitively limited. Thus, they talk endlessly among themselves congratulating each other for each new variant of their pet theories.

Because their minds are so pre-occupied with self-congratulation, when they do speak with people whose ancestors have lived with the land for millennia they do not hear.

The only Natives they really listen to are the elite Natives who have been thoroughly brain-washed to think exactly like they do. This assures the social scientists that they will not hear anything contrary to what they think. This communication control is a great

comfort to alien social scientists.

It's an a priori assumption that professionalism only exists for those educated and trained by the colonizers. People who know how to live in harmony with the land and whose ancestors did so for thousands of years are by colonized standards ignorant about man's relationship to the land.

SIAs are exercises in futility; they are low-priority addendas to development decisions.

SIAs are written so as not to conflict with conventional theories of economic development.

It is by sheer luck — not by contrivance, of course, that SIA's consistently discover that development benefits always outweigh costs. SIA writers understand completely the old slogan, "It's best not to bite the hand that feeds you."

By the very fact that SIAs are separate from Environmental Impact Statements indicates the fragmented perception of the non-Native world in which man is separated from the land.

Their concept of community is a stunted version of reality consonant with their low stage of evolutionary development.

The Indigenous view of the world community had progressed much farther than this thousands of years ago. Following the view of our ances-

tors, we have learned to view the community as a comprehensive whole, whose members include: plants, animals, soil, air, water, cosmos, spirits and man.

Consequently, each and every member of the community must be treated equally. Developmental studies must have as their goal the maximization of protection of the community, and minimization of man-made developments. Therefore, because of their limited concept of community, SIAs and symposiums such as these are a waste of time, talents, energies and money.

Let's have symposiums that deal directly with natural resource developers with ample time for critique by the non-professional people who bear the social costs of their development decisions.

Conclusions

There will be a whole range of rationales given in opposition to our concept of community. We propose a new criteria for judging the impacts of development.

That the concept of community be broadened. That any man-made development rigidly adhere to a standard of equality for all members of the community.

That the human members of

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Man should adapt, not change nature

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the community begin to see the gross limitations in the viewpoints expressed by the current non-Native development decision makers and the elite so-called "Native leaders."

It should be instructive for

modern social scientists that when the Native hunter in the story was faced with dire human hungers, instead of changing the environment to meet his needs, he himself changed.

He depends upon supernatural aid for subsistence hunting. He relies on Nature, to provide him a livelihood.

Technological exploitation of Nature's resources doesn't seem to fit this Native. He

even experienced hunger, after "he observed the food taboos." Rather than transforming Nature, this hunter calls on the spirits — who tell him to change his act.

The duty of man is not to change Nature, but to adapt himself to Nature. So the hunter taught the people how to make the masks and sing the songs. And this is the beginning of these two things.