

Swetzof opinion of sport fishing vs. subsistence

Paul Swetzof

In response to a court order granting the Cook Inlet Native villages of Eklutna, Knik and Ninilchik a so-called "educational fishery," such as that granted to the Kenaitze Indian Tribe, Phil Cutler, president of the Alaska Sportfishing Association, stated his organization sees a need for subsistence but does not feel it should be a priority over other uses because "the fish belong to all the people of the state. It's a natural resource."

This is typical of the mentality we're up against. This guy does not see the difference between a non-Native lifestyle and the survival of Native cultures. He, and apparently members of his organization, believe fish (and I assume game) belong to everyone who resides in Alaska. I'm sure that national sportfishing organizations believe that the fish be-

long to all of the people who reside in the United States.

A chosen lifestyle is important. Few people deny this; however, a lifestyle affects an individual and has nothing to do with a cultural practice and thus the continuation of a culture.

In contrast, fishing and hunting on ones homelands is a primary element linking the past, present and future of Alaska Native cultures and is a vital element of the culture. Our children's cultural future is at stake. This is why Native people know we must win the fight to obtain and keep a subsistence preference. Like any parent, we will not allow any part of our children to die.

I understand Mr. Cutler. I've met people like him a thousand times over. He'll swear he's not a racist and will likely declare it is racist to give a preference to a particular group solely because of their race. The Mr. Cutler's of this country have a hard time realizing

that a subsistence preference for Native people, like sovereignty, is not a question of race. It is a question of the political integrity of Native nations. This concept is as American as the proverbial apple pie.

Using western logic, this concept is embodied in the commerce clause of this nation's governing document, the U.S. constitution (No Mr. Cutler, there is nothing in the constitution which states only Natives living on reservations are sovereign). It is embodied in over a century of U.S. Supreme Court decisions, and these decisions were made by so-called liberal, conservative and middle of the road justices. It is embodied in the explicit recognition of the government-to-government relationship by the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the U.S. But most important, it is morally and ethically right.

Commentary . . .

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Alaska Natives were the first people to live in our respective homelands. After approximately 10,000 years we are still here. Our very culture being, our identity, not our lifestyles, were formed and established here. There are certain rights which we have as a result. These rights can all be lumped under one major heading: self-determination within what's left of our own nations; and one major sub-heading: a priority right to customary and traditional hunting and fishing. Our cultures all grew around hunting and gathering. Even more than our languages, a loss of this priority right would decimate our respective cultures.

To all of the Mr. Cutler's running around I ask you to take a stand. Either learn and abide by this nation's governing document and accompanying laws or state your desire to dismantle this government and start over fashioning

a country which meets your needs and biases. While you're at it, take a second stand. Decide whether you're willing to destroy Native cultures under the guise of so-called "equality" or if you're willing to stand up to your fishing buddies and say, hey, these guys were here first, these are their homelands and they have certain rights related to their survival and once and a while we may need to inconvenience ourselves for the greater good.

One more thing Mr. Cutler. It makes no difference to us if Native cultures are destroyed by avowed racists or people like you. Either way we're dead. We can't allow you to kill our future generations.

Editor's Note: The views expressed by Paul Swetzof are not necessarily those of the Tundra Times. If you are interested in submitting a commentary, please write to: Editor, Tundra Times, P.O. Box 92247, Anchorage, AK 99509