

Alaska Natives - First Conservationists

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is a speech delivered by Nels A. Anderson, executive director of the Bristol Bay Native Corporation, before an audience at the 9th Biennial Northwest Wilderness conference held in Seattle last year in April. The intent of the speech, says Anderson, was to "wake up the State and Nation to the fact that Alaska Natives are the FIRST conservationists.")

By NEL S. A. ANDERSON, JR.

Environmental issues are a subject of major concern for many special interest groups in the United States. These issues relate to the environment of areas that may or may not have been closely inspected by those who say they are concerned. How many in my audience have lived, for any length of time, in Alaska?

EXECUTIVE ORDER WITHDRAWALS

1. How were these withdrawals determined?
2. Who was consulted in Alaska when these withdrawals were being considered? The state? Federal agencies in Alaska? Were the people who lived on or near wildlife refuges ever consulted to determine adverse effects to their livelihood by prohibiting access to traditional hunting land?
3. Are there any animals or birds on some game refuges?
4. Did wildlife in refuges withdrawn truly have dominion over the earth with priority over people?

CONSERVATIONISTS

Dialogue between Alaskans (Natives and non-Natives alike) and outside conservationists must be established. People in Alaska don't understand the thinking of the "conservationist." What does he look like? What is his long-term goal? Does he love the land more than a Native, or non-Native Alaskan? Has he seen the land he wishes to preserve? Does he wish to preserve land for the sake of preservation without taking into consideration the human factor?

Conservationists must establish meaningful communication with both rural and urban Alaskans in order to ever hope for a smooth working relationship.

Conservation movements that relate to land at this particular time in history are held highly suspect. Alaska Native people are jealously guarding their newly-won land rights and will tolerate no action of any sort that threatens this property right.

It will take time and a sincere effort on the part of conservationists to reach out and communicate with Native villagers in Alaska. Once again, let me remind you that we don't know any living conservationists. We don't know what you have in your minds concerning the disposition of our land.

PARTICIPATION

Alaska Natives demand the right to be represented at all policy making levels of Alaska—state, federal, and private organizations that have or will have a direct or indirect effect on our land, economy, politics or general welfare.

Alaska Natives cannot be expected to passively sit still while special interest groups are striving for legislative regulatory measures that seriously affect our traditional cultural ways of life. We must be completely and totally involved in all planning processes that in any way wish to regulate how our land will or will not be used. Not only will we be involved but we, the Native people, will make the final decisions, concerning our land. This way, it is then clear in our minds and in yours that with the final decision being in our hands we also take full responsibility for our actions.

CONSERVATIONIST — One who advocates conservation, especially of natural resources.

CONSERVATION — A careful preservation and protection of something — planned management of a natural resource to prevent exploitation, destruction or neglect.

To my knowledge, many animals, birds and fish have been protected in Alaska by man. There are all types of game reserves, bird sanctuaries, moose ranges and other types of reserves in Alaska. In most cases the boundaries were drawn indiscriminantly by our brothers in Washington, D.C. These lines cut off traditional hunting areas of people of Alaska. Aleuts, Eskimo, Indian rights to hunt and fish cut off. Cut off! With no warning! Is this planned management?

For once I'd like to see aborigines take the last of a specie. The buffalo was nearly wiped out by white men. Not by Indians. Who was planning management then?

What about the bowhead whale? Who or what industry kills these mighty creatures? Eskimo people take 15 to 20 per year and each is used. This hunting has gone on for centuries. There was no United States when Eskimo men of Alaska took the first whale. Columbus hadn't accidentally stumbled upon North America and ruined the neighborhood. Yet the Eskimo killed the whale. He took the whale to survive, not to make perfume.

I say the whale was, and still is, being exploited. The definition of conservation is planned management of a resource to prevent exploitation, destruction, or neglect. It is clear the Eskimo was not exploiting, destroying or neglecting. Someone else, whom we did not see, did these terrible things. I ask: Who is the conservationist? It must be the Eskimo.

What about the salmon of Alaska? The salmon spawn in Alaska, they run down our rivers and to the open sea, they grow up and four to five years later they return to Alaska's streams to once again begin the cycle of life. This particular species is the object of a big hunt every spring and summer in Alaska. For many of Alaska's people the catch of this fish is the only way of making money to last throughout the year.

Salmon once was taken for food, traded for goods not found on the coast, dried for dog feed (pre-sno machine), etc. Today, the salmon industry, which employs outsiders for upper-level jobs, is controlled by outsiders and very little of the total worth of the salmon remains in the State of Alaska. This resource is being exploited, not only by outsiders, but by foreign nations. The Alaska fishermen need this resource and we know it cannot be destroyed. No one does anything about this resource that decreases in size every year. The United States seems to be more concerned about foreign relations than the interests of a few fishermen in Alaska. The foreign countries take the salmon where they mature in the open sea and the U.S. doesn't do a single thing to stop the foreign countries. Who is the conservationist?

PEOPLE

What about people? Do conservationists regard people in their efforts to preserve land and life? Don't conservationists ever stop to think about the immediate effects of prohibiting people from hunting or fishing without talking to the people affected? Conservationists, game wardens, or other enforcement officers do not speak the language of the people affected. No one ever explains why one cannot do something because of a law passed thousands of miles away. No one ever explains that the animals, birds or fish are endangered if hunted further. No one ever consults with the people who live on the land and off the life to survive. Please remember that these are people.

I have often thought that I would like to protect the cattle. I think they are beautiful creatures who deserve to live. I bear no ill will against those who eat beef, but the cattle should not be killed. How would this go over in the Lower 48 states? What about prohibiting killing of pigs and chickens?

If the conservation movement does not include people in their efforts to preserve land and wild life, then I must begin a campaign to preserve the Aleut, Eskimo and Indian people. There will have to be a Friends of the People Movement. Because this preservation movement is taking food and a way of life from our people. In order to survive we will have to organize and hope to be treated as well as the otter, moose, bear and bowhead whale. In addition, it is possible we need a zoo of Native peoples.

This may sound ridiculous but a way of life is being threatened and we must survive any way we can. We say you must listen to us before you push for more parks and recreation sites. You must consult us before you ask for legislation that will exploit, destroy and neglect a people whose way of life depends on the land we own and the animals, birds and fish that are under our dominion.

We will conserve a way of life that will still be around when all the oil has been stolen. If we are left to conserve as we have done before there was a United States, we will have forever the way of life that is held so dear by those who have never lived like an Aleut, Eskimo or Indian. We can plan for proper use of our resources to prevent exploitation, destruction and neglect of our people and our land.