

Subsistence as a bilingual and bicultural issue

By FRED BIGJIM

The relationship of the Native Alaskan peoples and their migratory food resources must be regarded as one of the great natural phenomena of our continent. Going beyond the economic function of providing food, shelter, and clothing, subsistence is the characteristic foundation of their culture.

Any endeavor to help students to explore and appreciate

their Native culture must focus on the phenomenon of subsistence. Subsistence should permeate and find expression in every phase of education in Alaska. This means that subsistence should be carefully taught not only to Native students as a part of their cultural birthright, but also to non-Native students as a part of their educational birthright. Subsistence must be integrated into the cur-

riculum at every level. Just as agriculture is integrated into western and European educational systems as the foundation of that culture, so both subsistence and agriculture must be given equal footing in the Alaskan classroom as the foundation of our bilingual and bicultural society.

The progress of bilingual-bicultural education in Alaska will remain stunted unless the reali-

ties of "Our Rainbow Heritage" are effectively presented to all students in all areas. This entails a commitment to bring our Native and subsistence lifestyles and our Native languages into all classrooms, both urban and rural, of whatever racial balance. Although it might be more urgent that bilingual and bicultural education be implemented in rural and Native schools, the importance of this approach is no less important in our urban communities. The economic, political, and social progress of the state would seem to call for access to this knowledge to be freely available to all students.

It would be expected that the university system would champion such an approach to education. But, unfortunately, in Alaska, this is not the case. There has been a noted absence of courses on Native languages, Native culture, and subsistence economies in the University cur-

riculum. The people of the state are now registering a strong protest against a curriculum that does not reflect Alaskan history of culture. It would seem that the establishment of a bilingual bicultural department in the university on a state-wide level is long overdue and we hope that plans are being considered for such an event.

The frequent bilingual-bicultural conferences held in the state in the past have been showcases for individual projects for specific areas without solid emphasis on development of a state-wide approach to these issues. The fifth annual Alaska Bilingual/Multicultural Educational Conference to be held in Anchorage at the Westward on February 7-9 could be a turning point in bilingual education in this state if the leadership of the conference could be convinced that bilingual education is not a stop-gap issue to be applied sporadically, but is a right of all students and has a place in every classroom in the state.

The current issues surrounding the "d-2" controversy, Inupiat bowhead whaling, fish and game management, the opening of the Haul Road, and the Alaska Native Land Claims point up the central position of subsistence in the bilingual-bicultural world. Subsistence will continue to be the "agriculture" of the North and the basis of the nutritional economy for many years to come. As we know from the experience of other countries, subsistence remains basic to the economy in spite of heavy industrialization.

This conference, with the theme of "Our Rainbow Heritage," will be yet another exercise in irrelevance if it does not seriously address Alaskan Native subsistence as a bilingual and bicultural reality in the cultural heritage of all Alaskans.