

Anaktuvuk Pass, Kaktovik explain village problems

by Bill Hess

for the Tundra Times

ANAKTUVUK PASS — A small group of people traveling under a warm sun and blue sky drove a little caravan of eight-wheeled, all-terrain vehicles into a spectacular Brooks Range valley just outside of this village recently.

They stopped near a small pile of sun-bleached caribou antlers, took in the view and were left with deep feeling of both awe and frustration.

Along with a number of villagers, such as Roosevelt Penek and Mayor Riley Morry, the group included Sen. Ted Stevens, who had come at the request of North Slope Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak.

"I wanted the senator to be able to see for himself the problems the people of Anaktuvuk Pass face when they go out in their homeland here, which is now a national park, to earn a subsistence living," Ahmaogak said.

Alaska State Sen. Willie Hensley and Rep. Al Adams also came along at the mayor's request.

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Gathering just outside of Anaktuvuk Pass were, from left, Gilbert Lincoln, Rep. Al Adams, Maggie Ahmaogak, Dan Fauske, North Slope Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak, Steve Wells and Sen. Ted Stevens. Stevens was told how important Argos are to the villagers.

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• Stevens learns of villagers' concerns

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Traditionally, the people of Anaktuvuk Pass moved all about the country during the year — camping, hunting, trapping and fishing at different places during different times of the year as wildlife populations demanded.

A new world meant that children had to go to school, and in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Nunamiut people began to settle in the village of Anaktuvuk Pass. In the years since, many changes have come into their lives.

Thanks largely to North Slope Borough projects, they have a school, a medical clinic and fire protection, as well as modern homes. The village corporation runs a small store, and a museum sits atop a hill.

Inside the homes, there are color televisions and other amenities which almost any American living anywhere else would also expect to have.

One thing has not changed, however. "Our food today is the same animals and fish that our parents lived on all those centuries," said Harry Hugo. Only now, the children must go to school and there are other tasks people must attend to to keep the village functioning in a modern world. So the

people can no longer wander about and live in the different places that game gathers at different times of year.

They must be able to reach their hunting, trapping and fishing spots, take what they need and get back to the village in a reasonable time. Villagers found that the eight-wheeled Argo all-terrain vehicles were excellent for helping them do just that.

Then, the Gates of the Arctic National Park was formed around their village as a result of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

Villagers were shocked when National Park Service officials told them they could not drive their ATVs on park land — land which their believed would always be Nunamiut land. The ATVs were not in keeping with the character of a national park, they were told.

"We can still use our Argos on village corporation land, but there are a lot of places we can never get to if we stay just on village corporation land," Mayor Morry explained. "We need to be able to travel all over this country just to feed our families."

After Ahmaogak took office, the villagers turned to him for help, and he took the problem to Stevens.

"This whole situation is really a shame," Stevens said. "Especially because I remember how the people of Anaktuvuk Pass supported the efforts to establish a park here. They were told that a park would preserve their subsistence hunting and fishing, and they believed it."

Stevens went on to say that although park service officials may think of ATVs as recreational vehicles, in Anaktuvuk Pass, they are essential to the people making their living.

Stevens told Ahmaogak and the villagers he would speak with park officials on their part as they negotiate with Anaktuvuk Pass in an effort to reach a settlement.

In honor of Ahmaogak, Stevens, Hensley and Adams, the people of Anaktuvuk Pass put on a performance of traditional dance and presented each of them with larger-than-life Nunamiut masks.

After leaving Anaktuvuk, the group traveled on to Kaktovik. There, the senator heard of the frustration the villagers felt in dealing with the U.S. Air Force at the Dewline station there. The airstrip at Kaktovik is separated from the community by some distance.

There is only one building there with a restroom and warm place to

take shelter on a cold day. Air Force personnel at the Dewline site have refused to allow villagers access to the room.

Stevens promised Kaktovik Mayor Loren Ahlers that he would speak to Dewline personnel to see if the situation could be set right.

Two weeks earlier, members of the U.S. Senate Energy Committee looking into the possibility of opening the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge up to oil and gas development had held a short community meeting in Kaktovik. Some members of that group had attacked village desires for local impact funds to help them meet the influx of growth and social problems they expect if Congress decides to go ahead with the development.

Stevens, on the other hand, assured the villagers of his support and backing for their concerns.

He also cautioned that even if Congress opens ANWR, they and all Alaskans should still expect a long period of declining oil revenues in Alaska.

Prudhoe Bay is already entering its decline, and it will take 10 to 15 years to produce anything from ANWR, once it is opened, Stevens said.