

Writer details problems of Natives

by June I. Degnan
for the Tundra Times

UNALAKLEET — Today we are breaking new ground, exploring other approaches and sailing in frigid and uncharted waters.

In the early days we were in cold storage, beyond the mainstream of the politics of the national economy and the halls of justice. In a cold and dark land, of little value and off the beaten path.

Alaska held no challenge for the masses, except for the missionaries who trekked to this frontier as the emissaries of the federal government, to carve up and settle the land. The missionaries' purpose, they said, was to save the souls of the savage Natives by preaching the gospel of salvation. They came into this country with a Bible in one hand and a treasure map concealed within their hearts.

The American government stresses the separation of church and state. It makes excellent rhetoric. The truth of the matter, in reference to Alaska's history, is that there never was a separation of church and state in matters that pertained to land settlement.

In the late 1800s, when the missionaries sailed into the Norton Sound, they came with the blessings of the federal government to seize the land for themselves. The gospel they preached was hell, fire and brimstone to a group of silent hunters and fishermen. This nation of nomadic gatherers of food lived under a tribal form of government.

Their Native way of life can be best described as a struggle to survive in weather conditions that commanded each, universally, to be physically fit and mentally alert. Anything less could not endure the first winter whiteout.

For a millennium the Yupik Eskimo have lived in harmony with God and Mother Nature in a lifestyle that gave credence to the ecology of the land. Their lifestyle took into consideration those harsh weather conditions and extreme changes in temperature.

Other factors such as the amount of light and darkness and the availability of food shaped the quality of their lives. It was a lifestyle that contained a structure, function and purpose based on the elements that surrounded them.

Theirs was a nature-oriented culture that has survived to the present day. The continuity of their surviving within this century is being questioned due to the great strain placed on them from the pressures of change. The greatest pressure appears to be an economic one.

The dominant culture holds a cash-based economy as sacred, while the Natives are accustomed to one that is subsistence-based. Time has proven that a cash-based economy will override any subsistence-based economy, according to the history textbooks.

This rural subsistence-based lifestyle is now under attack, leaving no section of it sacred or exempt. Years ago, that lifestyle was one that was totally dependent on subsistence, namely hunting, fishing and the gathering of food. Within that lifestyle, the people were self-reliant. They worked together in hunting and fishing. Difficult and concerted effort provided the food, shelter and clothing for them.

There was no need for cash in the early days, but times have changed. There has been an intervention by the dominant culture in the form of missionaries and school teachers. That change came about in the late 1800s, with the entry of missionaries.

This intervention has altered the way

of life for the people living in this region. No longer is their life in isolation. The world has crept into the frozen tundra in search for gold, minerals, oil and natural resources that are hidden deep within the earth's frosty crust, the frigid blue waters of the Bering Sea and those crystal clear streams of this golden North country.

Those scavenger hunting missionaries led the pack of exploiters when they descended upon the naive and stunned Natives like a swarm of gnats descending on a herd of calving caribou on the shores of the Porcupine River in the spring.

The sting from that encounter spread like an infectious disease that has contributed to the undermining of the ways of a once proud nation of hunters and fishermen. The remnants of that first attack and seige still reverberate within their spirit. The negative impact of that encounter has raised havoc beyond repair and is now moving to

and Energy Assistance.

Due to the remoteness of the area, any product such as food, clothing or fuel must be imported, adding those shipping charges to the price of the product. The escalated price for these products may range up to three times that of the same thing in Anchorage, some 400 miles to the southeast.

Life for the present-day Alaska Native living within a subsistence-based economy below the poverty level is part of the reason contributing to the high rate of alcohol and drug abuse, followed by suicide and the gambler's bingo syndrome of child neglect. Coupled with living within the hopelessness of a cold and drafty hovel in abject poverty, it is no wonder the people resort to the escape and euphoria of alcohol, drugs and bingo.

If those missionaries could be resurrected from their graves to observe the Natives they came to save, they would cringe in horror to the "Pandora's box

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erase any trace of their existence within their own homeland. Their lifestyle has changed.

So have their ceremonial dances and the worship to their great spirit. Furthermore, the Native language is rarely spoken. Due to those changes and the shift from a pure subsistence-based economy, it is no wonder the Native culture is on the down swing. In rural Alaska, the opportunity to advance within a cash-based economy is almost impossible, due to location, climate, education and economics. Those factors govern who may hold the few positions of employment within this sanctuary for ducks, geese and salmon.

The employment opportunities demand an education beyond the scope of that which is available locally. A formalized degree is necessary to teach or administer at the regional educational complex, to manage the village corporation, the airline terminal or the airlines. The other businesses such as the fisheries, the general store, the tribal office, the garage or post office all require a type of vocational education or work experience.

So it is the marketplace that determines who will be gainfully employed here. The people who hold the positions of employment that require a formal education are imported and members of the dominant culture, for the most part. The number of Alaska Natives within the work force is minuscule, considering the local population of 800 persons is 95 percent Alaska Native. Thus, the division lines are drawn, those who work and those who do not.

The members from the dominant culture are those who are gainfully employed, and all the rest attempt to survive on the subsistence-based economy of hunting and fishing. Those on subsistence fall below the poverty level economically. Because of that status, they qualify to be recipients of social welfare programs, such as Aid to Dependent Children

of evil" that has filtered into the area. Along with salvation came alcohol, drugs and bingo, a far cry from the intent of salvation.

Negativism, filth and a low-life attitude permeate the village and are best displayed at the close of the herring season each year in the spring. After the payoff for the catch, the village reverberates to the whir of the chartered airplanes of the local airline, carrying beer and whiskey by the caseload. The health clinic opens up to treat the overwhelming amount of vehicle and boating accidents, created by the abuse of alcohol or drugs. That climate exists until those who partake are satiated and exhausted. The vicious cycle of poverty continues, and the children are the losers. It is the parents who are the alcohol, drug and bingo abusers. The pain is felt by all who live here. No one is exempt.

Earlier, I described the local residents as those who could be labeled as "employed" and those "unemployed," all distinguished by gainful employment. Those two categories appear to suffice in separating the economic status of the present day resident here. That economic status will decide who will own and manage the land and natural resources of the area in the near future.

Currently it is the Alaska Natives who are the owners of the land and natural resources. They acquired a settlement to their claim of ownership to the land and resources within Alaska based on their ancestral and aboriginal land occupancy for the past millennium. Congress recognized their claim and ratified their settlement in 1971, within the scope of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The settlement encompassed nearly a billion dollars and 44 million acres of land.

The windfall reaped from the settlement through Congress was not given freely. It had strings attached and numerous stipulations preventing any immediate personal benefits to be reaped by those 70,000 Alaska Natives intended to be the recipients.

The stipulations were to create 12 regional business corporations, registered within the state as "for-profit" businesses. The money was converted to stock, and the land was titled. Together they were combined to form the corporation's assets, to be pledged as collateral or security in any business venture.

Furthermore, the stock could not be bought, sold, traded or taxed for 20 years after the settlement. After Jan. 1, 1992, those stipulations are to be removed.

Because Congress attached those strings to the settlement, it has created a monumental dilemma for the Alaska Natives. Their expertise is hunting and fishing in a subsistence-based economy. The business world is an alien function to them.

One of those regional corporations, Bering Straits Native Corp., is in Chapter 11 of the Federal Bankruptcy Court to prevent the loss of its assets, the stock and land.

If the Bering Straits Native Corp. cannot rally and reorganize because of their massive losses of money, the stock and land will have to be sold to pay the debts. The people will become displaced and homeless, thus creating a backlash politically and further dividing and segregating the Alaska Natives, placing them beneath their social strata of the present day. That social strata is located at the pits of the totem pole.

The Alaska Natives fall into a class at the bottom of the economic totem pole for a number of reasons, the first being they are the aboriginal owners of the land and natural resources, making them the target for international envy. Secondly, they are culturally different, and they are economically unstable within the dominant culture. They are cash poor and land rich. Numbering about 70,000 persons statewide, they are easily distinguished due to their lack of opportunity and an overall negative education factor, when placed within the masses of the dominant culture.

The life expectancy is low, infant mortality high, with alcohol, drug and bingo abuse massive and suicide rate escalating. All of this is due to the fact that the world has recognized they own, for a stated time, some valuable natural resources and minerals, plus some prime real estate, the hunting and fishing grounds they call home.

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They face a future because of that congressional settlement through ANCSA which is as bleak and hopeless as a convict's last walk down death row, headed for the gas chamber.

Their lives are in jeopardy, their credit overextended, their land pledged as collateral for their massive debt. But they still hope that one day soon, Congress will intervene by separating their stock from the land title and placing their land into a Land Bank Trust before 1991. This would be a miracle, and it is my prayer, as I manage their land today.

I firmly believe that there are always possibilities, and I expect miracles as I pray for deliverance from all of those factors that have created this pain that flows through the lives of all of our people today.

June I. Degnan was born in Unalakleet, and her family has lived there for centuries. She is a Yupik Eskimo — a teacher, planner, writer and poet.