

Chugach Natives still fight for promised lands

It's been 10 years since the 1971 Native Claims Settlement Act was passed and the Chugach Native corporations are still battling for land which was once given them in a treaty.

This time, it has been "recommended" that Chugach look outside its traditional living area to claim lands which it was supposed to own already. The recommendation came at a hearing of the Chugach Region Study group, of which Chugach Native Inc. is a member and participant.

The problem with granting CNI the land that it was promised, say some study members, is that the federal government has part of the pie tucked away in the Chugach National Forest and the state of Alaska, which once belonged only to Natives, wants a lot of the rest.

The issue of the Chugach lands is a two-edged sword with everyone trying to do good for a segment of society. The Chugach Natives were granted the land year ago in treaties that were broken repeatedly. They still have to fight to get what is theirs.

But they are fighting in a land that has changed. Special interest groups now are raising the specter of private groups using and abusing the land and mention that the Natives have no claim to protecting the environment.

CNI defenders justifiably claim that they were caretakers of the land for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years and turned pristine land over to the non-Native population only to have that land sullied. A trip through many neighborhoods in Anchorage attests to the fact that the white man also has no special claim to protect the land.

So, CNI is going back to the drawing board to determine what it is going to do. The alternatives include a court battle to get land which is due the corporation; looking outside the Chugach region for lands compatible with corporation needs, or accepting monetary compensation.

The problem with a court fight for the lands is that it eats up too many of the corporation's resources and too much time. The problem with accepting a cash or other settlement is that the essence of what all regional corporations have been fighting for seems to be violated.

CNI president Edgar Blatchford is being understandably quiet about which way he leans in this matter. It is as sure as rain that if he says CNI is looking at one tiny island in the middle of the ocean, someone else will immediately put up a commotion about protecting that island or wanting to do something else with it.

In the meantime, the study group continues its hearings on the matter and CNI continues to study the matter. The next meeting of the CNI will be May 18 at the corporation's Northern Lights Boulevard offices in Anchorage. Anyone interested in the future of the Chugach claims should attend and make recommendations.