

Zilys: And a poignant, emphatic reply...

By Vernita J. Zilys

Katchatag

I am writing in answer to Arthur Hippler's column of April 11, "The Divisive Subsistence Issue," a very long composition in itself.

Mr. Hippler may have been too brief when he wrote, "Briefly, Alaska Natives are insisting that they want first call on Alaska fish and game by virtue of their subsistence need." A statement such as that, more than perhaps any other, would be enough, if true, to make the subsistence issue divisive indeed.

But printing of those words, and the use of that particular column headline, do not mean the truth is being served. From what source, written or spoken, did Mr. Hippler draw as a basis for that averral?

Alaska Natives are not now, nor have they to my knowledge ever been, in a position to insist upon anything, unless you count their pre-"civilized" era, when of course, there was no need for insistence. And even if the Alaska Native were in such a situation, I doubt they would deprive others of activities necessary for survival.

The subject of subsistence will no doubt draw as much fire during casual arguments as say, religion or politics. But it will be in the official arena where such arguments will be resolved, for which I give

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thanks, for there it will not be enough to cite overheard conversations or even "personal knowledge" of waste in the Bush, unless such references can be upheld by objective documentation.

The use of the aforementioned sources is a standard journalistic practice, but in the case of Mr. Hippler's column, I cannot understand why. There are many lazy readers, of all races, and when such readers are confronted with Mr. Hippler's unfortunate example, it is easy for them to think they now have "the whole story."

I do not deign to speak for my race (Mr. Hippler did not seem to hesitate - a pity), but I will write now as an angry Alaskan Eskimo individual.

I am tired of being placed on the defensive by people like Mr. Hippler, who question my lifestyle as though I live that way purely to aggravate them and who do not credit me with the intelligence to have clear-headedly chosen it.

Were I to take pen in hand to castigate them for their way of life, with its emphasis

on ever-increasing refinement of nature, and the gadgetry that seems aimed to insure they never have to leave an armchair or, conversely, makes of simple walking and running a "fitness program"; or if I harangued the Alaskan white culture for seeming to want to duplicate every mistake made in the Lower 48, I would be regarded as a bigot, an ingrate, or worse, listened to with a condescending, "let's humor the poor dear - she is using the education we gave her, after all."

Those of my white friends who know me better, however, will realize (I hope) that if, indeed, I was taught by whites (whatever happened to the concept of Native intelligence?) it was by those who cautioned me severely about the danger of generalization where the human race is concerned.

For Mr. Hippler to imply that all Natives (or even, softeningly, "most Natives") could live off the bounty of the local supermarket since they have been so beneficently showered with "federal and state money and in-kind ser-

vices . . . between \$180,000 and \$200,000 per capita"; and "receive free medical benefits, pay nothing for education, can get the federal government to provide them nearly free housing, can get grants of all kinds simply by virtue of being Native, have limitless programs directed toward helping them and want all these services so that they can live in the Bush and not work, they have become totally irresponsible"; and other such nonsense only shows that he cannot have had the same teachers I had.

Judging by the national budget in its present unbalanced state, we Eskimos are not the sole recipients of governmental bounty. While it is true that any Native is eligible to receive free medical attention, this is a situation that was mandated FOR us by well-intentioned whites - and it is also true that many Natives can and do seek private care to avoid having to sit for hours for that attention, often surrounded by non-Natives in the same waiting rooms.

I, like many Natives, took advantage of company insur-

ance plans wherever I worked - and I wondered how many as I did, could give an ironic laugh upon reading about "free medical care" - when everyone knows that insurance companies neither knew, nor cared, but charged me exactly the same premium as my /non-Native co-workers?

The fact is, any of Mr. Hippler's statements could be applied to non-Natives - and I do not here offer a paean of praise for the "poor, misunderstood Native" because we, being human (a biological fact that seems to escape many non-Natives) have our peccadilloes, we do have bums on Fourth Avenue, sitting side by side with white, Negro, and other unfortunate members of the alcoholic race.

So what of subsistence? Come up and live in Unalakleet sometimes.

Check out the prices for stove oil and propane (if you can afford the stoves these fuels feed), and you will not wonder why my neighbor hauls wood from the hills far away.

Case the meat section for pork chops at \$11 a package, and hamburger for \$4-6 a tiny package. When you get the urge to snack, check out the Fritos for \$3.10 a bag, and if, by chance your body, like

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mine, craves a vitamin or two every now and then, how about oranges for \$7.46 a dozen?

Move to the city, you say? Ah, but I read where unemployment is at an all-time high, there's a severe housing shortage that has forced even respectable non-Natives to wish for a sumptuous berth in Willow Park (for the uninitiated, that is the government housing that abuts the downtown graveyard), and who can afford a car? I must have frittered away MY share of that \$200,000.

My parents, both of retirement age, both working (my father, a respected carpenter, my mother an equally esteemed bi-lingual teacher) may now be engaged in teaching their grown-up children their most important lessons: how to "live off the land."

How to choose greens (higher in vitamins than any

green vegetable except kelp, which we still mostly leave to the Japanese); how to preserve berries (salmon berries contain, providentially it would seem, more Vitamin C than oranges by far); how to make seal oil (I recently learned that Eskimos owe their low incidence of heart trouble to the seal oil that accompanies much of the subsistence meal — very little cholesterol); and how to know when to come in out of the snow.

Mr. Hippler, I don't want first call on subsistence resources. I do not hate whites. I am not living in the Bush so I don't have to work — I tried working in the city, and was even successful — my credit was so good, I will probably regret it all my life. Besides, to live in the Bush with a reasonably full stomach, in a place heated comfortably, is synonymous with hard work. You should try it sometime.