

Other Voices- English Bay

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The federal government, much maligned for its sometimes cursory treatment of what the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) oil and gas leasing program will do to Alaska, must be given credit for one statement.

In blunt terms, the draft environmental impact statement for a sale in Lower Cook Inlet points out that an oil spill in one area could destroy the subsistence food supply for two villages.

Perhaps equally damaging are the statements made about social changes that can be expected to follow OCS development in Lower Cook Inlet: the break-down of an Aleut culture, and an increase in a dramatic assortment of social ills, ranging from suicide to alcoholism.

What is absolutely astounding is that those statements might have made very little difference in federal plans to lease tracts in that area, had not one of the potential victims noticed that it could easily be sacrificed to Project Independence if nothing were done.

The people of English Bay have been watching a gradual build up in helicopter traffic in their neighborhood, on a bay of the Kenai Peninsula. One day they found a seismic marker on village corporation land.

Then they read parts of the impact statement, and became alarmed. They voiced their alarm at a public hearing in Anchorage this week.

Hopefully, the English Bay testimony will make a difference. At least one of the decision-makers on the hearing panel said afterwards that the issue of cultural integrity would be studied.

There are other questions to be explored as well:

—Will regional native organizations allow a village to be dragged unwillingly away from a traditional culture?

—Will the state government, with its concerns for the environment and the coastal impact of offshore oil development, allow a village lifestyle to be sacrificed?

The testimony at the Lower Cook Inlet hearings gave evidence of a strange combination of forces that pit the social and cultural welfare of people versus business investments in the native community.

Cook Inlet Region Inc., the profit-making Claims Act corporation whose territory encompasses much of the Kenai Peninsula, came out strongly in support of the sale, which may bring extensive development to its member villages.

Cook Inlet Native Association, the non-profit arm of the same corporation, sent representatives to the hearing to criticize the lack of depth in the study of impacts on native communities.

Port Graham, a more developed village near English Bay, indicated that it is willing to embrace oil development—but that its residents should be protected from unwanted community impacts.

Chugach Natives Inc., the regional parent corporation of both Port Graham and English Bay, did not commit itself either way, noting that two of its villages were at odds.

The statement of Ernst W. Mueller, commissioner of the State Department of Environmental Conservation, at hearings this week dealt generally with social matters that need to be addressed less superficially by the federal government.

But there was no mention of English Bay.

Our concern is that while the State responds to problems with individual sales, and while native regional leaders view development in terms of economic benefits, neither group should overlook the desires of the coastal people.