

Natives attempt to revive languages

by Vernajeau Kolyaha
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PEDRO BAY — Today, Alaska Natives are attempting to revive their Native languages and cultures, which were discouraged from the early 1900s through the early 1970s.

In most regions statewide, the local Native language is taught in the school. But this is not enough. Parents also must speak it in the home to keep the language alive.

Den Nena Henash Our Land Speaks **OPINION**

In 1972, the Alaska Legislature passed a bill on bilingual/bicultural education, giving Native children the right to use and cultivate their Native language and heritage in the school.

In the early 1970s, Natives brought the need for bilingual/bicultural education to the attention of many Alaskans.

In the book *Bilingual-Bicultural Education in Alaska*, E. Dean Coon offers a history and guidelines for bilingual/bicultural programs in elementary and secondary schools in Alaska.

Before the passing of the bilingual/bicultural education bill, three phases evolved, according to Coon.

Phase one was more individualized in that a couple of areas in the state started programs without funding of any sort. In phase two, the state was pressured by the federal government to follow the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In phase three, the state again was pressured, but this time by both the federal government and Alaskans interested in bilingual/bicultural education.

From 1970 until the early 1980s, numerous programs emerged to assist the Native people in bringing the language back to young people. During this time, bilingual/bicultural education was taught in all state schools.

In Pedro Bay, located on the shores of Lake Iliamna in Southcentral Alaska, Athabascan Natives no longer speak their language. The culture has largely been forgotten, a process that began in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

With more of the modern ways of life coming into the village, making it easier to hunt, fish and store food, the Native culture has faded away. Of a population of about 50, only four residents today still speak Dena'ina, the local Native language. The last time local people taught the Native language and culture in the school was in 1986.

The white man came to Alaska, forbade the use of Native languages in the schools, then passed laws and funded programs to encourage the use of the Native language and culture. The regulations of the *Alaska Administrative Code* stated that they are designed "to meet the special needs of students with limited English-speaking ability. The program affords those students a better opportunity to succeed in school."

Unfortunately, it may be too late. Many of Alaska's Native languages and cultures are gone. This is not only the white man's fault, but also the fault of Alaska Natives themselves, for the parents and grandparents no longer speak the language in the home.

Responsibility for the survival of the Native language is more clearly seen to be where it has always been: with the parents who must speak it to their children. Neither bilingual education, nor even bilingual television can

themselves keep Alaska Native languages alive.

Only the parents speaking the language to their child can do that. It always has been this way.

For example, communities can do several things to keep their Native language alive to revive it to become a first, natural, fluent language of the younger generations.

Parents must overcome the initial difficulties of speaking the Native language to their children where they have not recently been doing so.

Another example would be establishing day-care centers or nurseries staffed by Native-speaking instructors. In this way, these care givers would be able to speak only the local Native language to the small children in their area. Similarly, seasonal but completely Native-speaking situations could spring up, such as summer camps.

In cases where the local language is strong, such as the Native languages spoken in northern areas of Canada and Greenland or Central Yupik on the Kuskokwim River in Southwest

Alaska, children can visit these areas to immerse themselves in the local Native environment, and, of course, not to undermine the existing Native language in those areas.

With determination and commitment, local people can still save their Native languages, and even where children no longer speak it. In regions or villages where children still know or at least understand some of their Native tongue, the potential for survival is stronger.

Alaska Natives cannot expect the schools alone to save their languages

or even to bring about any true revival of them. Parents and elders within each community must work together with the schools and the community as a unit.

Vernajeau Kolyaha is an Athabascan Native living in Pedro Bay. She wrote this piece in an English composition class she took via audioconference from Chukchi College, a branch campus in Kotzebue of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College.