

# If Ross gets his way, it's over for villages

by Julie Kitka

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If you really want to know what's at stake in the current battle over subsistence, read Wayne Anthony Ross. He and his political allies in the National Rifle Association and the Alaska Outdoor Council are not kidding.

Behind a soft rhetorical curtain of

take what, where, when, how and for what purposes. There is no way out of difficult politics, and it is less than responsible to suggest otherwise.

In making allocations of limited resources, the state must choose between two alternatives. Either it can open up fish stocks and game populations to all Alaska residents, with no

Despite their greater degree of economic *dependence* on the resources, their access to them was *equal* to that of every Alaskan. The economic deprivation resulting from such "equality" was inevitable.

That is the system to which Ross would have us return. It was his colleagues in the sport hunting and fishing community who challenged the state law which gave a subsistence preference to rural Alaskan residents.

They claimed that such an allocation preference violated the State Constitution.

The Alaska Supreme Court in *McDowell v. State*, agreed with them. So, the result they had long sought — a political crisis in which the State of Alaska is caught between federal law and its own constitution — has been engineered, and we are all paying the price.

The next political step, as Ross repeatedly states in public, is to change the federal law by removing the rural subsistence preference from the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. Then, the work will be done.

That is not likely to happen. I don't think the U.S. Congress will support efforts to destroy the economic and cultural foundations of village life.

Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, and other members of the Alaska Congressional Delegation have repeatedly warned all of us that Congress would be very reluctant to open up ANILCA for subsistence amendments. He has also warned that other huge land and resource issues might well be adversely affected in any such congressional action.

In such a situation, the only clear alternative to federal intervention is to change the State Constitution. That is what Gov. Steve Cowper has concluded, and AFN agrees with him.

Whatever differences of opinion may exist on the specific language which such a constitutional amendment should contain, we all know what is in store if we fail to do this: the secretary of the Interior has a non-discretionary obligation to come into Alaska and to manage fish and game, with the ANILCA subsistence preference for rural residents, on all public lands.

And, although everyone pays lip service to the principle of keeping the federal government's hands off Alaska, I have no doubt that the opponents of subsistence secretly relish the prospect of such an intervention.

They know full well how effectively it will poison Alaska politics for the foreseeable future. But their ultimate goal is to amend ANILCA, and if it is necessary to go through a long period of federal intervention and dual management in order to achieve that end, they figure it is worth it.

In the face of this long-term strategy, the Native community must join hands with sympathetic non-Native, urban Alaskans. Giving a subsistence priority in the taking of limited fish and game resources to those who most directly depend upon them and who have the least access to alternative resources is a justifiable public purpose. The people of Alaska have every right to change their constitution to accommodate such a humane goal.



"equal rights" and "common use" and "biological principles of fish and wildlife management," their real agenda is to dismantle the cultural and economic base of Native life in the Bush. If these people get their way, it's over for the villages.

The truth of the matter is that no "management principles" are going to get Alaska out of the *political* quandary in which it finds itself. At the heart of the subsistence issue is the fact that there are simply too many people who want to harvest Alaska's fish and game resources.

There are not enough animals available to allow everyone — commercial, sport and subsistence — to take everything he or she wants. Inevitably, the state and federal governments have been drawn into policies of allocation — deciding who gets to

preference for anyone ("first-come, first-served"), until all the surplus animals are taken; or it can allocate fish and game among *defined groups* of Alaskans, according to whatever public purposes it decides are justifiable — as long as it does not violate the Alaska Constitution in doing this.

Between 1960 and 1978, Alaska managed hunting and fishing on a "first-come, first-served" basis. There was no subsistence preference for any group, by residency or any other criterion.

Everyone in Alaska could take these resources until the surpluses were exhausted each year. Then, the season was closed. For many villages, heavily affected by urban, non-Native fishermen and hunters, this was a disaster.