

# Caribou concerns

It is a far and welcome cry from the late 1970s. Then, a biologist from the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game said that Natives in villages around Kotzebue had been shooting caribou indiscriminately and leaving the carcasses on the tundra. Thus, he laid the blame for a dramatic crash in the Western Arctic caribou herd squarely on the shoulders of the people most dependent on sustaining viable game populations. Indefensible as this bigoted logic might have been, it was only one of the more blatant expressions of prejudice emanating from the department in those days.

Now, as biologists and village residents alike contemplate a considerably smaller die-off of Western Arctic caribou, it is refreshing indeed to see biologists adding a healthy dose of local expertise to other tools of biological sleuthing and surveillance. Most significantly, Dept. of Fish and Game's Jim Dau notes that while political leaders still wrestle over jurisdictional issues surrounding co-management of natural resources by indigenous, state and federal agencies, there are areas where resource conditions, and in some cases declining management dollars, have inevitably brought stewards into ever closer relationship.

Less encouraging is the abandonment by state and federal political leaders of firm and sufficient commitments to adequate wildlife research. As Dr. David Klein has said, caribou ecology is a complicated business, requiring long-term vision and investment, and many years of hard, systematic effort. As with so many other issues in the age of dwindling dollars, dealing with this one is going to require some innovation, and possibly some tough political maneuvering. Another answer may lie in the pursuit of resource management careers by Native youth.

Although business, education, social work and law have captured the imagination of many Native students, interest in natural resource management is growing. With programs like the inter-agency Resource Apprenticeship initiative described on page one, this cadre is likely to grow. Who better to integrate the best that western science and village elders have to offer than our own people, taking care of our own lands?

We appreciate the new spirit of cooperation that some state and federal agencies are bringing to resource stewardship. We may never know all there is to know fish and wildlife ecology, but we stand a far greater chance of protecting those resources, and thus our own survival, by nurturing the spirit of co-management wherever biologists and managers extend a hand.