

● Guest Editorial

Vaska speaks to culture and subsistence

Editor's Note: Following is the complete text of testimony presented by Tony Vaska of Bethel at marathon meetings of the Association of Village Council Presidents and the Department and Boards of Fish and Game in Bethel last week.

I would like to offer my assistance to you in trying to understand what it is that we have been saying to you for the last two days or so. I realize that you are trying to understand what we are saying, but I think that I'm in a better position to help you understand our feelings. I sense a lack of communications between you and us. I'm fairly educated on your terms, for whatever it's worth, and I'm from this area, having been born and raised here. How many of you can even claim that you were born in Alaska?

You have been listening to some very important concerns by us about subsistence, regulations, and the procedures for handling the regulations for subsistence. How often in the first day have you heard the words, "Time Immemorial?" These two concepts are a very important part of our discussions to you. I ask, do you really know what is meant by ours being "a way of life?" And it being since "time immemorial?" Let me explain some of these things to you.

Often, in the testimony of subsistence we have heard the words that there is a special relationship to the land, or that there is a direct relationship to the land. This means something to us who grew up living off of the land. In the simplest biological terms, a cycle of dependence can be drawn. The Board's knowledge of such a dependence cycle in biology is assumed, thus the use of this model. There are also many changes within this area that I will address.

The food chain of any biological species we use as food and other uses can easily be shown, and I think and hope, understood by you. Understand also that we are in direct line with that food chain. And because we are at the end, more or less, of that food chain, we are directly dependent upon all the intermediary species at whatever level. Our use of a specific species is largely dependent upon that species' availability. The example of the over harvesting of cod around Tooksook Bay, given by James Sipary yesterday, serves as an example. The use of cod was extensive for sustenance until commercial harvesting cleaned out the resource. I ask, how long were the cod living there while the coastal Yup'ik utilized them as food? Since TIME IMMEMORIAL? Perhaps, but even for recorded memory, so long as the Yup'ik managed the resource, there was much more available. It was only when outside interests came and harvested the resource that it began to decline, until finally, it no longer exists in that area. How many more other species can you point to showing that so long as the Natives were utilizing and managing the resource, things were just fine? It is only when outsiders come, be they from the East as the Russians are, or from the West as the Americans are, that there is a rapid decline in the animal resources as well as the Native human resources.

To say subsistence, is to say culture. Granted, our culture has been changing for quite some time, nevertheless, our culture is a subsistence-based culture. Before your arrival, our lifestyle was highly seasonal. At different times of the year, we utilized different species of animals and plants. The utilization of these animals and plants was based on their availability. The water fowl came home in the spring, and that is when we hunted them. The salmon came home in the summer in different runs, and that is when we fished for them. The walrus came home in the summer, and we hunted them then. Your regulations for harvest at specified times puts a curb on our lifestyle which affects our being able to get food and clothing. The hunting of migratory birds is a prime example. I needn't go into it very deeply suffice it to say that when the birds are here, we will hunt them.

Your actions of putting regulatory restrictions on animals is necessarily regulating our culture. Your regulations are exterminating our culture. In effect, you are committing genocide—the extinction of our culture. Too often, you consider us to be a "special interest." We are not a special interest, we are a cultural whole and must be considered as such. Don't feel alone in your oppression of our culture. Our food cycle is a very important aspect in our culture, but we are being pinched out in other arenas as well.

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● Vaska explains subsistence/culture connection

Because of the utilization of modern technological innovations in subsistence activities, there is a need for a certain amount of cash income for these innovations. If there is to be a maximum amount set for cash income to determine who the subsistence user will be, that determination will of course be difficult. If you analyze the concept, it would necessarily seem that to live in our culture, and to practice the activities inherent in it, one must be poor to do so. That is to say, to be Native, one must be poor.

Before I suggest a set figure, if I am to, let me explain some things to think about. When an outsider comes to our land and says that he wants to live like we do, and therefore must be given the same survival chances as us, he is forgetting some things. For instance, most people who come from the outside view Alaska as an adventure, a frontier, a place to get a new start. They usually disregard the fact that there are people already there who do not consider their home as an adventure like the outsider, much less a frontier. The frontier concept, so important to the development of the United States where eminent domain ruled, is no longer true. Our land is not a frontier. It has been occupied for a long time, and the utilization of the resources reached its maximum while we lived on it. Most of us have tied ourselves to the expressed utilization of the resources for our living here permanently. It is so culturally and racially.

Let me explain more using my experiences for example. When I attended the University of Alaska, I was part of a small minority as an Alaskan Native. Like everyone at the time, I dressed quite casually and comfortably. I wore jeans and usually a flannel shirt, but most importantly, my hair was fairly long. So were all my friends' hair fairly long. In the spring, when summer jobs were being passed

out, everyone got a haircut, including me. However, when the jobs were passed out, I didn't get one. I was simply the wrong color. It took a long time for me to understand what was going on. Regardless of how qualified I may have been, there were subtle ways for such activities, obviously illegal, to be done. Such legalities, however, are moot when public officials even as high as the lieutenant governor can get away with making statements about race relations as he did.

I, for one, am in support of using racial lines for determining who should be defined as subsistence users. But that is not all. I support also the concept that there are some people who need the subsistence resources more than others. I realize that I will ruffle some feathers about this, but those people who have changed or chosen to exploit a cash economy for their livelihood should allow those not able to utilize such cash income to first have their needs met. And, I grant you, I practice what I preach. I am able to earn in excess of \$25,000 in a nine month period teaching for the Kusko-kwim Community College. Because of this alternative available to me, I have not gone hunting or fishing for quite some time. Yes, I do accompany my relatives and friends in hunting and fishing, but the need and use, is theirs. It is a difficult thing to do because I grew up hunting and fishing, and I love to do these kinds of things. It is a part of me.

I think that in much the same way the calculations for determining the amounts of resources to be harvested can be used to determine what income level individuals can subsist under the regulations you set. This determination should include cost factors such as maximum cost of fuel, cost of machinery, and other cost-effective materials used in subsistence activities throughout the year. Bear in mind that the subsistence activities are cyclical, and a year long calculation is necessary.

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The support of a subsistence lifestyle is the support of a culture, and therefore the utilization of subsistence resources on all public lands is absolutely necessary. For this reason, I support the first priority in harvesting renewable resources in fish and game be given to subsistence, and therefore a cultural system.

Briefly, in a subsistence economy with its cultural implications, cash resources are supplementary to the main economy. In a cash economy, subsistence is supplementary to the cash economy. I view sports hunting and sports fishing in this light; I totally oppose the use of our animals and fish for another culture's sport and recreation when we are in dire need of those same resources for food physically, and food culturally. In this light, and in the light of your conservation concepts, sports hunting and fishing are counter to the utilitarian and wise use of very scarce resources. Such obvious waste and conspicuous consumption practices should not even be tolerated by you who preach conservation of resources.

As each unique place from the East Coast to the West is drawn under by the American civilization, you have come to the end of the North American Continent. Like so many other places that were, there is no place like it here on this earth. It would indeed be tragic for you to destroy it in the development of cash income, or to change it into the playground for your sports hunters and sports fishermen.

In the regulations, to account for the diversity that exists in the different parts of Alaska, the best kind of policy to insure maximum utilization of resources, the power of decisions must be with the residents who live in that area. Just as important to this local control of resources is the necessity for the local residents to have first choice in the utilization of those resources. In two words, local use. In two other words, local control.

It is indeed interesting that the state of Alaska is screaming for more freedom from the grasp of federal controls on its resources and people, when the state of Alaska is not willing to give local control to the local people with real bite in their needs for establishing their priorities for use of subsistence resources. The state of Alaska has given little real support of its Native people. It has been up to the federal government to adequately support the Native people. It took an act of Congress to settle the land issue with the Land Claims Act when the Statehood Act ignored the Natives altogether. Thus, in its trust responsibilities to the Native people, I look to the federal government for continued support of our needs, and not the state of Alaska until it proves itself ultimately.

Sharing, bartering, and trading are important aspects of a subsistence culture. I think that a reiteration of James Sipary's testimony covers these aspects sufficiently.

Turning your head while your laws are being bent or broken, by your definition, is not sound policy for protecting natural resources which includes people. If a person is in need of food, and he kills migratory birds to meet this need, he must be able to do so. If the regulations say he cannot, but the presiding officer simply turns his head, that is not sound policy. There will come a time when the presiding officer will not turn his head. The regulation must be deleted or changed.

We have also heard of intimidation going on in villages. No, such intimidation will not reach the state boards, much less the enforcement agency board. To deal with this, look at some alternatives available to you. Directives from the law enforcement agency must state this issue to all its field officers. Unfortunately, there is little actual control over the individual enforcement officials in the field.

In addition, the field officers must go through extensive training periods to try to understand the cultural aspects of any given people in a given area about their use of the natural resources. This aspect of training is not in existence, to my knowledge. For example, how many of the people in the game management department throughout the state of Alaska even speak the language of one of the Native groups? On the other hand, most of us speak some English. All last fall I worked for adequate bilingual education regulations, but still English is mandatory and Yup'ik is not.

I mentioned earlier, much change has been going on for many years in our culture. We use modern technological innovations for hunting and fishing. This should not come as a surprise, nor should it be discouraged. When your missionaries and teachers said that our children must go to your schools, we had to settle into more permanent villages. Before this development, of settling into more permanent villages, most of us had to spread around the country with our families to sufficiently utilize the resources available. With the settling of the villages, and our children in classrooms for the better part of six hours a day, our family relations changed drastically. For nine months of the year now, our children are in school. In these schools they do not learn to hunt and fish like their fathers before them. They are not even taught their own language.

Nevertheless, the utilization of modern technological innovations for subsistence should be seen as being helpful to the survival of our families. The more efficient mode of transportation afforded us by the use of the snowmobile and the motored boat allows our families to spend more time together. Of course, there are limits to the use of more efficient and costly technological innovations. I am still in opposition to the use of aircraft for subsistence hunting and fishing.