

Lack of understanding

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Howard Rock Editor

We have, on occasions, listened to some Natives talking about the non-Native's lack of understanding of them. This lack has been frustrating to the point of despair. It has caused misunderstanding on both sides. It is also a blossoming point of disruptive regulations by those who have the power to make them. Many regulations are fashioned by "experts" who live thousands of miles away. They are often disruptive because other "experts" on the field often don't bother to try to understand the Natives about whom they gather information. This, inevitably, leads to erroneous impressions.

There is another thing that is disturbing to Natives and that is, that some people tend to question their thinking power. Some of us might think that this is a childish thing to say, but it no longer becomes one when some people remark, "Why, they're like children." And this after living with the Natives for many years—a good portion of a lifetime if one thinks 20 years or more applies as such.

A little soul-searching brought us to the conclusion that such an attitude can only be regarded as a gross refusal toward understanding the Natives. Could such an idea be attributable to some remarks we have heard that the Natives have not been allowed to think for themselves for some hundred years?

Also, for about that length of time, education of Natives has been below par. It had a bad beginning with the Nelson Act passed back in 1905. The Act was meant to provide schools outside of incorporated towns for "white children and children of mixed blood who lead a civilized life."

So for these many years, the inherent thinking power of the Native children has never been channeled adequately for modern education until comparatively recent times when schools were improved. There is still room for improvement.

From time to time, one hears of some intelligence quotient tests made of Native children by some universities and that the findings have shown a remarkable percentage of them have inherited from their forefathers the ability to think.

The Native people of the past have had to do some keen thinking in order to survive, and in doing so, have solved some of the greatest challenges any human beings had ever been subjected to. This accomplishment cannot be credited to people who "are like children." This ability to "think" should be guided carefully through education so it may be applied to better the lot of the Natives.

The lack of understanding and insight of the Eskimos and Indian by non-Natives is, at present time, deplorable. This very lack is creating problems that should never be. Those who seem to want to think for them are woefully lacking in knowledge. And the fruits of their labors, however well-intentioned, have often proved to be totally unapplicable and disrupting. This points out the need for non-Natives to educate themselves of the ways of Natives and vice-versa. If this should come into reality, it would be a fine springboard for cooperation.

We have mentioned from time to time that give and take of the two cultures would probably be a good solution. This is going on to an appreciable extent at the present time, and it is not unpleasant, which shows that it can be done. The wide acceptance of the Native parka by white people is a good example.

The White civilization has contributed many fine things the Natives have taken to with a will. Many types of food have been accepted. They have taken to guns, outboard motors, spring beds, washing machines, and many other conveniences.

One thing that tends to hurt this "give and take" procedure is that non-Natives culture has the tendency of going "all the way." This endangers the eradication of some fine old Native customs. It would be most commendable if the Natives were allowed to retain some of their fine old traditions. This will not prevent them from becoming engineers, educators, doctors, lawyers, and other positions of higher learning. They already have the thinking power to tap from to attain these positions, and if this is steered properly, honestly, and without prejudice, they can acquire for themselves the good living education can give them.

In the meantime, let us all work toward a better understanding between Natives and non-Natives. The present lack of it is hampering the progress of the Native people in their efforts to work toward a more orderly transition.

We should also remember that there is inherent power of thinking among the Natives, the process of which was developed through constant battle of wits with treachery of the Arctic and its many-sided dangers. With proper education, this thought power can be channeled toward fruitful productions that will help to enhance a better Alaska.