

Let's Clear the Air

In the last couple of weeks, several readers have expressed displeasure with our coverage of the proposed ban on bowhead whale hunting by Alaska Natives. They indicated we had unfairly accused conservationists of supporting the whaling ban when in fact these interests are all for subsistence hunting by Natives.

We regret any misunderstanding that may have been created by the article. As we indicated in a lengthy story on conservationists last month, some are indisputably supportive of Native interests, others, just as clearly, are not.

We must stand by our original assertion in the whaling story that highly placed environmentalists in the Carter administration, and the Friends of the Earth, are working to keep the United States from protesting the ban on whaling handed down by the International Whaling Commission; we stick by the story because in weighing the information we have, and the sources of that information, we find the source that said there were conservationist forces working to support the ban most reliable.

We are most willing, however, to clarify other statements in the story which may have caused distress or confusion. First, we acknowledge that several Alaskan and national environmental groups are actively seeking to revoke the whaling ban. Four of these groups signed a letter to this effect which was published in this paper. They are: Trustees for Alaska, the Wilderness Society, Alaska Center for the Environment and the Fairbanks Environmental Center.

Before the land claims act was passed, many conservationists opposed Native groups because they felt the act would be detrimental to the National interest in preserving large amounts of land in Alaska for their scenic, scientific and recreational values. Since passage of the act, some groups have not stopped grumbling. Others have become far more reasonable about traditional Native uses of the land and have even come around to the idea of Native people using snow-machines in the pursuit of game for subsistence purposes. The Friends of the Earth is one of these groups.

A memorandum to interested parties in Alaska by a Washington staffer of Friends of the Earth warning that the House Subcommittee on Wildlife Conservation and Fisheries was having trouble understanding what subsistence is all about illustrates this general concern.

"We made the point that our refuge proposals are closely intertwined with protection for subsistence. We made lots of other points as well, but we were not at all sure about how well they penetrated the staff's understanding of this critical issue. Now it's your turn. Good luck. I hope this helps. We are very concerned that the Subcommittee might mark up a bill which does not give subsistence the protection it needs. We cannot afford to let this happen."

This would seem to clear the Friends of the Earth of the charge made by our source that FOE is working to support the whaling ban. However, at the risk of drawing too fine a line, we would point out that the whaling issue, and the d-2 issue, which was the subject of the memorandum quoted above, are by no means the same.

Because environmental protection has become a highly political concern and has taken on all the trappings of the political world, we are simply fearful that some environmentalists may be saying one thing (don't stop the whaling) and doing another (lobbying Carter to accept the ban).

We must insist that we have not singled out Friends of the Earth for attack. We have stated that to the best of our knowledge, that organization appears to be playing political peek-a-boo. If true, this is regrettable, even though we are certainly aware that the political game makes strangers out of friends and requires sacrifices of pure integrity from anyone who expects to win.

Nonetheless, we would welcome assurances from any organization that they are truly and firmly behind Alaska Natives on the bowhead issue. By the same token, we would welcome any honest straightforward statement of disagreement with the Native position. In the interests of maintaining a good working relationship between Natives and conservationists of any stripe, we feel every effort should be made to keep the air clear of confusion and mistrust. That is our goal, and we hope others will consider making it their goal as well. We appreciate the help of our readers in achieving it.

Conservationists should not be afraid to acknowledge if and when they part ways with Natives on environmental issues. Alaska Natives have learned well that local or regional differences over some issues do not mean the end of other important alliances.

JRR