

Pressures and progress of the Native peoples

This informal travelogue is intended to give readers a between the lines view of a journalist's impressions of peoples and cultures, apart from standard news treatment of issues and events.

By **THOMAS RICHARDS, Jr.**

Six months later, after giving much thought to whether anything would ever come from the Kautokeino exercise, I receive a letter from the Sami Institute asking if they could send a delegation to Alaska this summer to compare notes on the "tremendous external pressures" on circumpolar Native peoples.

I set the letter down, remembering the feast of boiled rainbow trout hosted in the tents of the Sami reindeer herders' camp on the final day of the conference. I think of the diet of OCS, d-2, subsistence, ANCSA corporations, home rule government, and trust relationships they will be fed in Alaska. Then I think about the orders for various delicacies we can place

with our friends in Native villages for the feasts we will hold in honor of the Sami.

**St. Paul, Pribilof Islands,
November 20, 1979**

The Reeve Electra is full of Pribilofian Aleuts heading home this morning. The previous week's flight could not land because of a powerful winter storm. It was the same storm in which the fishing vessel M/V Ryuyu Maru No. 2 had run aground near the bird cliffs of Tolstoi Point, a mile away from the village. The storms run in three-day cycles here this time of year, I am told.

The crack oil spill response team, brought in to contain and recover 200,000 gallons of deisel fuel from the vessel, seems unaware of the storm patterns of which the Natives speak. The work proceeds slowly at first. A containment boom to protect the salt water lagoon near the village is in place two days after

the disaster. The boom fails against combined forces of wind and tides. The back-up plan is to recover the fuel directly from the vessel by lighterage.

The next storm arrives on schedule, halting the effort, as fuel continues to be discharged into St. Paul Harbor. None of the fuel is recovered. Fuel and fish cargo are discharged into the sea as the vessel is blown apart and set on fire with explosives. Small organisms, the basis for the food chain in the harbor and lagoon, die and wash ashore in huge quantities, forming thick berms along the shoreline. Environmental protection experts say it will be months, possibly years, before the impact of this relatively minor spill is known.

It is my third trip to the islands this year. We talk about it at the regular poker game at Larry and Phyllis' house. Each trip gave evidence to a different kind of external pressure on the lifestyle of the Aleut communities of the Pribilofs.

(See FAITH, Page Twelve)

(Continued from Page One)

In June, a group of actors and environmental activists set the stage for a confrontation involving the fur seal harvest. The Phiblof fur seal program brought the seals from the edge of extinction to the present population of 1.4 million seals, the world's largest herd. But it involves the killing of animals, and even though the affected animals are non-breeding males, the anger of the animal protection groups has been aroused. They had put a stop to the St. George harvest several years ago, and were now wishing to stop the St. Paul harvest.

The success of the conservation program, and the Aleut lifestyle and economy, are minor considerations. The animal protectionists are loud, ill-mannered, and well-financed. A national Save-the-Seal campaign is organized. Huge mailing lists are brought and fed into computers, stirring up national sentiment against the harvest. Removal of the Aleuts from their villages to the mainland is suggested. A congressional bill, led by misguided emotionalism, is strong external pressure which will be difficult to resist.

My second visit is in September of 1979, as a major bottomfisheries conference is organized for Aleut region villages. Industry is anxious to begin extraction of bottomfish from the Bering Sea. The State of Alaska is actively promoting the program. The Phiblofs are the logical base of operations for this industry. The Phiblovians say they want time to consider the idea. They want to minimize the impact of the industry on their way of life, and want to determine whether such development may be controlled to maximize benefits to local people.

Every Native community needs time to think about how it may deal with great external pressures on the lives of its members, they say. Industry and government are encouraging the Natives to move rapidly on bottomfish. Get in now on the ground floor of the economy, they say.

The third type of pressure on the villages is illustrated in real terms by the Ryuyu Maru II disaster. If government and industry failed to clean up a minor diesel fuel spill, what would the effect of a major crude oil spill be? An OCS lease sale is proposed for oil reserves of the St. George Basin in 1982.

The Aleuts see the benefit of comparing notes with others who face similar pressures. In mid-March, they travel to the Faro Islands of the North Atlantic to observe how the bottomfish industry has developed in that region.

It is an interesting lesson I learned at Larry's poker game. It only cost \$60. It is a good thing I leave my checkbook at home when I play poker with Aleuts. Even if the deck is stacked in the maxi-stakes game

with the Interior Department, the bottomfish and industry and with the animal protectionists, the Phiblovians are quick to grasp such games.

In a system that professes due process, equal treatment in the eyes of law, and respect for human rights, such games ought not to be played.

I leave St. Paul Island on the afternoon of November 27, but not before I climb the hill behind the village overlooking the natural harbor. The sea state is rising again, and waves break over the deck of the Ryuyu Maru II. Another storm is coming. The storms come in predictable cycles here. Strong gale-force winds of change are predictable for all of our villages.

**Barrow, Alaska,
March 14, 1980**

I have enjoyed myself this week. There is a lot of excitement and anticipation on the north slope. The days are growing longer, beautiful sunny days, and the Inupiat are counting the few weeks remaining until the spring bowhead whaling season. I enjoyed an excellent meal of steak and lobster at Sam and Lee's Restaurant before my class, and at a lower price than I would have paid in Fairbanks or Anchorage.

The land claims class I am teaching at the Inupiat University of the Arctic is small, yet full of alert and inquisitive individuals. Tonight, we talked about why the arctic slope voted "no" on land claims, and about a lot of other things. We talk about the Sami organizations, and the way land claims are negotiated in Canada, about Federal Indian Trust Responsibility and tribal organization. We discuss the Beaufort OCS lease sale and the development of a fisheries industry on the north slope (yes, fisheries!).

Then we discuss the tremendous external pressures on Native people of the circumpolar region. And we wonder what subjects will be raised at the Inuit Circumpolar Conference meeting in Nuuk (Greenland) in June. We talk about arctic aviation and the influence of "overriding national interest" on arctic development. We talk about borough government and tribal government, and about

issues likely to be raised during the Alakanuk Convention on OCS and Home Rule government sponsored by the AVCP Yupik organization. These are the issues raised by the students, who provided much food for thought to their instructor.

The Inupiat University of the Arctic is a remarkable institution, the only Native-controlled institution of post-secondary education in Alaska. Given attention and support, it will provide leadership in academic research on these significant public issues affecting Native peoples of the circumpolar region. Strangely enough (if we are to believe the popular media these days), I am surprised to discover that all of my students are sober, and that none of them has traded polar bear hides for cocaine, nor have they trained missiles on bowhead whales lately.

The students are aware of the pressures. They talk of the need for unity in their community, and their region, and throughout the circumpolar area to deal with such pressures. Mostly, people on the north slope are excited that whaling season, and fresh muktuk, and whale meat are only several weeks away.

The class is done. I visit friends on the Browerville side before going to bed. Back at my room, I finish reading CHEYENNE AUTUMN by Mari Sandoz. It is the brilliant epic story of the Northern Cheyenne of 1877 and 1878 when the Indians decided to flee Indian Territory in Oklahoma to return to their homeland 1,500 miles to the north. The small band of 258 Cheyenne people escaped the massive forces of the United States Army throughout the fall and winter of 1877, surviving starvation and bitter cold, fighting

defensive military actions with few guns against vastly superior numbers and weapons. They returned home, 114 of the 258, to the Yellowstone in the spring of 1878.

The few that remained alive were close to their goal when it appeared that the Cheyenne would lose against the tremendous odds stacked against them. Their Chief, Little Wolf, climbed up to a sacred high place and made this song:

*"Great Powers, hear me,
The people are broken and
scattered.
Let the winds bring the few
seeds together.
To grow strong again,
in a good new place."*

The Northern Cheyenne were

given back a part of their home in the north. They are a strong people there, once again. The land which they were allowed to keep was discovered to be rich in resources of coal, natural gas and oil. They have a health tribal government. Four years ago, the Northern Cheyenne and 24 other American Indian Tribes formed a common bond for their future in creating the Council of Energy Resource Tribes (CERT).

The Native peoples of Alaska and the northern regions need to find the faith and determination of Little Wolf among themselves, and create their common bond for the future. They need to progress, grow strong, and come together in the space between the predictable storms.