

# Point Hope: Village at the center or on the remote edge?

*(Editor's note: The following article is excerpted from the introduction to "Some aspects of sea ice subsistence hunting in Point Hope, Alaska," a report prepared for the North Slope Borough's Coastal Zone Management Plan by Tom Lowenstein. It is reprinted with permission from the North Slope Borough Planning Department. Elsewhere in this issue is reprinted another section from the report concerning hunting, from the traditional to the modern, by the people of Point Hope.)*

By TOM LOWENSTEIN

The point I want to make in this Introduction is that it is important to try to avoid the too easy view that "Point Hope is an isolated village, way up somewhere on the northwest coast of Alaska," (I quote a BLM official I met in Fairbanks a few years back). The community that appears to be 'isolated' or 'remote' from an outsider's perspective was once, and in many ways still is, one of the great centers of one of the

oldest cultures on the American continent. One might go further and remind ourselves that the most venerable of white settlements in 'mainstream' America, such as Philadelphia, are younger than Tikigaq by a thousand years or more.

Today, Point Hope people, having seen so many changes in the past hundred years of Euro-American contact, are deeply aware of both attitudes toward themselves, in relation to the 'outside world.' Among many Point Hopers, however, in another part of the mind, there is a sense that they live on the edge of a dominant yet alien culture, which having taken them over, has, in relation to the mainstream of economic life, made them 'remote', whereas when they, the Tikigaq people, had no such contact, they were, to themselves, central. "We are such an isolated community", a woman umialik (whale boat owner) remarked to me in 1976, as she was waiting for supplies for her husband's whale crew to come in on the plane from Kotzebue and Anchorage. The question of Point Hope as its own center is, I suppose, the major concern of this report. And in that the report takes a

look at the present and the relationship of today's practices to past patterns, future issues which may confront the community are also touched on.

Much is being said and written these days about impending economic disaster, energy shortages and the unmanageable scale of global relationships on which the stability of industrialized nations depends. In relation to this, there are those on the one hand who see a solution to our shared ills in greater, more efficient industrial and technological development; on the other hand there are those who argue that 'small is beautiful', and that it is the self-sufficient smaller communities which are likely to survive our era most effectively. The present writer is neither an economist nor a futurologist, not does he pretend to have any solution to the world's problems. Nonetheless, in connection with the present situation of the village of Point Hope, I tend to side with the 'small is beautiful' faction, whose ideology is perhaps echoed by those elders of Point Hope who lament the passing of the old days and old ways: not because those times were better on account of their being most 'purely Eskimo'

but because the Point Hope society as it was before white contact was energy-efficient, worked in balance with the given environment, and survived as a self-sufficient system for over a thousand years without depleting natural resources.

This is nonetheless not a call for a return to a pre-contact lifestyle. To accomplish such a revolution would be impossible in present circumstances, and a proposal from me that it should be tried, quite out of place. What I should like the reader to bear in mind, however, is the fact that a community such as Point Hope, in spite of the many changes it has seen, is still in an excellent position to be as self-sufficient as it chooses to be. Few, if any, other individual peoples in the world let alone in the USA are still so ideally situated to gather their own fuel (in the form of seal oil or driftwood or coal from northeast of Cape Lisbourne, if they so choose), and their own food, which in almost every respect is as abundant today as it was in the aboriginal period. It is perhaps worth remembering this as the price of stove oil and imported foods from the 'remote' lower 48 continues to rise.