

# Writer: Unity needed for self-determination

by Paul Swetzof  
for the Tundra Times

Unity is an important factor for Alaska Native survival when it can be achieved.

Unity can likewise be a means of destruction regarding our survival if we accept unity at all costs.

There are different types of unity. There is village unity, regional unity and statewide Native unity. From the perspective of village government, the most important unity needed to assure that a Native village remains self governing, and essentially Native, is village unity.

Fortunately, most — if not all — villages share a consensus regarding the need to maintain the culture, subsistence and the land — our heritage. Thus, when a Native village government speaks out about these issues it is doing so as the true voice of the village.

When a region speaks out about these issues, its voice often becomes clouded with the competing interests of the village governments, village

---

*Unity can likewise be a means of destruction regarding our survival if we accept unity at all costs.*

---

corporations, municipalities, regional nonprofits and regional profit corporations. Unfortunately, this lack of consensus seems to have weakened the voice of Native survival in some regions.

When we attempt unity on a statewide level, it appears that all of the conflicts associated with regional voices are magnified. This is because of the addition of the voices coming from 12 regional for-profit corporations, which are often at odds with each other and various urban associations and other organizations.

The solution to all of this seems at first glance to be amazingly simple. However, like everything that seems simple, it is not quite so.

Be that as it may, I believe that

villages should pursue their governing and other rights on a village level, first and foremost. This is done by exercising village governing power where it exists. Where no Native governments exist, it is done by creating the government and exercising the powers associated with Native governments. All of this is done through elected village councils acting on their powers as Native governments.

After a village government gets its act together, it may wish to seek support from nearby villages. They may wish to form a confederation of villages within the cultural region which will act to lobby and speak on behalf of the common village interests.

This confederation may then wish to associate itself with the regional in-

terests. The village or confederation of villages also may wish to join forces with other villages and associations, such as the Alaska Native Coalition for the purposes of promoting common interests.

I would also advocate strong attempts at influencing and working with the Alaska Federation of Natives and other Native groups.

This is obviously very important in the context of amending the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and other legislation. In fact, some factions within AFN should be commended for their efforts in attempting to assure Alaska Native self-determination.

However, a village should never, in my opinion, associate with any group, which in the opinion of the village, does not act to promote the interests of the village. This is not unity, but well intentioned attempts at unity, which can and probably would, be detrimental to a village's survival.

We need the type of unity which speaks to Alaska Native self-determination. Unity for unity's sake is meaningless.