

Anchorage-Based Conservationists Back Natives on Sea Mammals

This Anchorage-based group of Alaskan conservationists strongly supports amendments to the proposed legislation which would allow the Native Peoples of Alaska to continue their taking of sea mammals for subsistence and handicrafts. Our support is based on two major considerations: (1) economic necessity; (2) cultural respect and admiration.

As to the matter of economic necessity, all of the relevant factors have been thoroughly expressed and documented by others, and we believe the case to be an irrefutable one: the taking of sea mammals is absolutely essential to the economic well-being of many Alaskan natives, especially the Eskimos and Aleuts. We do not believe the numbers of animals to be taken would seriously affect the population levels of the sea mammals concerned.

In regard to the merits — we would also say the necessity — of preserving the native cultures which still depend to a significant degree on subsistence hunting and handicrafts, we believe the case to be an equally compelling one, perhaps more so. The protection of what remains of the traditional culture of these people is essential not only to them but to all Americans, and indeed to all peoples of the world.

This is so because we are all benefitted by the continued existence of cultures different from our own; we are all enriched by the presence of different lifestyles — by the successful reality of alternative ways-of-life which may provide standards by which to measure our own. More hopefully, such alternatives may help to show us where we might find ways to improve our own culture in those areas where we have failed. The preservation, then, of Alaskan native culture is as important to us as it is to them.

If it seems a bit strange for conservationists to be so strongly in support of such a measure, the answer is that it is not strange at all but, rather, entirely consistent with what is central to the conservationist concern: DIVERSITY. This plea for the preservation of cultures based on subsistence hunting and handicrafts is based on the same fundamental concern underlying our plea for wilderness preservation, for parks, for open-space, etc.: on DIVERSITY. The animal species that man has need of alternatives in human cultures as in physical environments — in either case he is the less healthy without them. Indeed it would be self-destructive to have a world without such diversity of cultures and physical environments.

In the present case it would be more than tragic to allow the cultures of the Alaskan natives to pass from the scene, not only because they incorporate ways different from our own, but because their ways-of-life still have much to tell us about how to re-learn to live in harmony with our natural environments — a desperate need throughout our world.

For all these reasons we are in support of the amendments to allow continued taking by Alaskan natives of sea mammals for subsistence and handicrafts.

And we can only hope that those who are united on behalf of this cause of the Alaskan native will also apply the same concern to the inevitable impact on Native culture by the current mania for economic development that pervades our state administration and business interests, including elements within the native population itself. If the culture of the Alaskan native is worth preserving — as it most certainly is — it is worth preserving against all forces, not matter their source. — CHARLES KONIGSBERG