

What Native people want is justice

by Will Mayo
for the Tundra Times

FAIRBANKS — The convoluted and labyrinthine development of the current subsistence issue effectively conceals the real issue as it affects Native American people and Alaska Natives in particular.

Den Nena Henash
Our Land Speaks

OPINION

I find myself unraveling the threads of a twisted logic in an elaborately draped garment of righteous indignation. This garment attempts to hide or ignore the 498-year history of Native American genocide. This genocide has been aimed at both the culture and the people and has been and continues to be an active part of American politics. Its history has found new vigor and meaning in the Alaska of 1990.

The cries of the injured and deprived rail against the greed and inequality of the Alaska Native people who are seeking a "license to steal." One does not need a highly developed sense of irony to appreciate the image this represents.

The "American Way" of the can-do pioneers has evolved into a massive political and bureaucratic apparatus which has completely overwhelmed Native Americans. Though not as blatant in its strategy as, say, the frontier vigilantes or the Seventh Cavalry, it nevertheless has accomplished much in maneuvering Natives into a position of disadvantage.

All the better to continue the "appropriation" of Native property and inherent rights to hunt and fish in a "customary and traditional" way. Nothing has really changed from the good old days of Andrew Jackson and Ulysses S. Grant, only the names.

Alaska Natives find themselves traveling their own "Trail of Tears" as their ways and customs are stripped in the name of equal rights and fairness. It's kind of funny the way it works: that what has belonged to Natives suddenly becomes "ours."

Then, through some kind of magic, it suddenly turns out that the Natives are the thieves! Am I the only one who has this perspective? Goodness knows you don't learn it out of American history books or John Wayne movies.

When the Pilgrims were starving we shared our advanced skills and technology for their survival. When the 13 colonies thumbed their noses at the might of England, Native American governments joined in the fight at the request of Gen. George Washington. Our alliance was desperately sought and gratefully acknowledged.

When the U.S. Constitution was passed, it recognized a special relationship between the aboriginal Native tribes and people and the new nation that was formed.

The early administrators of the Alaska possession recognized this for Alaska Native tribes, as the record clearly shows. It wasn't until much later that this changed. When the State

Constitution was drafted it simply ignored the tribal governments and their rights, hoping that they would disappear under the sheer mass of a dominant culture and population.

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This same constitution is now being used as the basis for the latest thrust to protect "our" resources from a Native "license to steal." Some wonder at the justice of such a document. Native people, however, have come to expect such "legal" justifications where it affects their lives, property and rights.

Lithuanians, East Germans, South American Indians, Poles and even the 13 colonies all knew they could expect this treatment from their dominant governments. Alaska Natives may have been laboring under the mistaken supposition that it was somehow different in these United States of America.

I guess that is just too much to hope for.

Our legislators have a chance to either show their support for the continuation of an unfortunate chapter of

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American history, or they can recognize the desire of the Native people for justice by voting for the constitutional amendment put forward by Rep. Kay Wallis, D-Fort Yukon, calling for a Native subsistence provision.

In doing so they would be a positive example for human rights before the

eyes of the world. Gorby would have nothing over them!

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