

Looking towards a united future

In what may be an historic occasion, 37 tribes from across the state have banded together in an organization called the United Tribes of Alaska. They represent the Indian Reorganization Act governments of Alaska as well as the traditional tribal village governments as well. Although it is too early to judge what will happen with the UTA and to determine its ultimate effect upon the course of history in Alaska, we are hopeful that this organization will prove to be of great benefit.

The UTA was born out of a meeting sponsored by the Alaska Federation of Natives last fall. The meeting was not friction free, and there were those (mostly outside the Native community) who sought to paint a picture of the group that would come to be the UTA as a bunch of radicals ready to go to war with AFN.

This is not so, the leadership of the new organization tells us. "We're not a dissident group," explains spokesman Bill Brady. "We're just re-establishing our rights as tribes. We plan to work closely with the Alaska Federation of Natives."

We commend this approach. As Janie Leask, president of AFN recently stated, "we are all the same people." However anyone feels about the act which created the regional and village corporations, the fact is the people who now make up the shareholders of those corporations are the same people whose existence gives sovereignty to the tribes.

UTA was formed to re-establish tribal rights as tribal members saw 1991, with its potential to begin dismantling thousands of years of close relationship between the land and the aboriginal people of Alaska. AFN, too, is looking at the challenges of that year, and seeking methods to keep what has always been Native in Native control.

Perhaps as the two groups seek their goals, they will come up with both different and similar methods to get there. The more ideas, the better. As has been widely stated, the situation in every village is different, and each village must choose its own way to accomplish what it feels will be best for it.

The challenges will be great. One speaker at the founding convention of UTA said that if he were in control of a major American corporation, he would get in contact with his closest competitor. "Look," he would say, "come 1991, Arctic Slope is ours. Southeast is yours," and then they would plan the division of the spoils.

Doubtless, such scenarios have already taken place to some degree. Corporate America can hardly be expected to be caught up with the idea of preserving ancient lifestyles and rights when there is big money to be earned. And so it is that we wish UTA the best as it enters the fray to preserve what is Alaska Natives' for Alaska Natives.