

# Bering Straits elders seek to retain culture

By Laura Kosell  
Bering Straits AGLUKTUK  
for the Tundra Times

Some 200 Elders from the Bering Straits region gathered together in Nome recently and let it be known that they want a say over education, oil exploration, alcohol abuse, cultural heritage, and just about everything else of importance to their people.

The Elders, representing the 20 villages of the region, were participating in the Fifth Annual Bering Straits Elders' Conference, sponsored by Kawerak, Inc.

The conference was coordinated by Ernestine Mokiyuk of Savoonga, with active direction and input from the Kawerak Elders' Advisory Committee.

Its theme was Cultural Heritage: Past, Present and Future. This was selected by the Kawerak Elders' Advisory Committee which includes: Myrtle Booshu, St. Lawrence Island; Pete Curran, Solomon; Frank and Ursula Ellanna, King Island; Minnie Fagerstrom, Golovin; Clarence Irrigoo, St. Lawrence Island; Job Kokochuruk, White Mountain; Alfred Mazzonna, Wales; Aloysius Pikon-ganna, King Island; Margaret Seeganna, King Island and Willie Senungetuk, Wales.

The objective of the conference, according to Eskimo Heritage Program Director Mary Alexander, was "for the Elders to take a look at the future as the leaders see it, then decide what information from the past should be selected and relayed to the people in today's terms in order to help them meet their future goals."

In the evenings, the Elders were entertained with Eskimo dancing. The Savoonga Comedy Players performed in addition to the dancers from Diomedes, Stebbins, King Island, Gambell and Nome/St. Lawrence Island. A potluck of Eskimo food was held to conclude the conference on Friday evening.

Several Native leaders and area professionals spoke to the Elders on a variety of important and timely issues during the daily sessions.

Clarence Irrigoo translated the majority of the speeches into the Siberian Yupik, while Job Kokochuruk translated into Central Yupik and Inupiaq.

Janie Leask, President of the Alaska Federation of Natives, discussed the three major 1991 issues of protection of land, continued Native control of stock, and the problem of recognizing those Natives born after December 18, 1971 who were left out of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Leask stressed the important role of the Elders in the issue. "To make our decisions wisely, we must be reminded constantly of our cultural heritage. There is no better group to do that than you — our Elders."

The AFN president concluded that the Elders "play an important role in keeping our leaders focused and balanced in walking the line between our past, the present and our future."

In continuing the discussion of 1991, Kawerak, Inc. President Caleb Pungowiyi emphasized that, "we are facing an issue that is not only complex, but is also beneficial to our future generations. We must maintain control of our corporations and lands after 1991."

"The IRA Councils may play a big role after 1991," Pungowiyi commented further, "they are the closest, most formal relationship we have with the federal government."

Eighty-three-year-old Dora Titus of Council stated she was "proud to be a part of the conference. I really enjoy seeing all of my good friends. My mind works good even though my body does not."

"However, I want to tell the children one important thing," Dora concluded. "Mind your parents."

Education was a major con-



Photos by Laura Kosell

Dora and Jerry Kaloke of Brevig Mission at the Bering Straits Elders Conference.

cern of the Elders who see it as a way to preserve the Eskimo culture and at the same time provide children with the skills to cope with the future.

For several years Joe Lomax has been instrumental in the organization of three Eskimorun schools in the lower Kuskokwim area. He stressed that "we must teach our young ones. I would like to see more children learn our traditional ways."

John Auliye of Unalakleet offered a constructive solution to the potential loss of Native culture. "Each village school should have one male Native who would teach our children hunting, fishing, trapping and snowshoe making. The school teachers are very important."

"We must train our children to speak our language," urged Reila Okpowruk of Shishmaref.

Karen Nyugen, Administrative Assistant with the Eskimo

Heritage Program, spoke on education from the younger generation's point of view. Karen emphasized the value of a traditional Eskimo education in that "the Native survival skills taught are important in order to control the harsh environment in which we live."

"It is equally important to learn the Western culture," Ms. Nyugen reasoned further, "It has to do with another kind of survival. We need the Western education to be able to control our lands and money."

On Friday, the final day of the Fifth Annual Bering Straits Elders' Conference, the issues and feelings were put into action. A teleconference was held at the Legislative Affairs Office in Nome. The Elders passed a series of resolutions which were transmitted to Alaska State Legislature.

In summary, they are as follows:

• The Elders strongly support

the strict enforcement of the banning of alcohol and illegal drugs and adequate funding for programs to ensure strict enforcement of village ordinances relating to the banning of alcohol locally.

- The Elders recognize the value of their land and insist that the Bering Straits Native Corporation and the village corporations amend their articles to ensure that village corporation stock and lands remain forever in the hands of the people and their descendants.
- The Elders strongly urge the Alaska State Legislature and Congress to provide funding for large-scale housing construction to address the concern of sub-standard housing in Northwest Alaska.
- The Elders, realizing the influence of outside forces and pressures, insist that "our traditions and heritage be considered of primary importance to all of our people" and that an Elders' Spirit Committee be formed similar to NANA's with the first meeting be scheduled for the Fall of 1983 and that people of the NANA, NSB, and BSNC write, develop and work on issues pertinent to our people's survival.
- The Elders demand that the Alaska State Legislature enact legislation making enrollment in Alaska Native language programs and culturally relevant programs mandatory for our students and that the instructors for these programs be Eskimos from the region and that the Alaska State Legislature provide adequate funding to accomplish these goals.
- The Elders of the Bering Straits region request that

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Women from the villages of White Mountain, Shishmaref, Brevig Mission and Candle sing "to honor the people among us who have passed on."

# Resolutions passed by Bering Straits elders

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they be reinstated as *traditional instructors*, teachers and leaders of today and that we work actively to restore our traditional spiritual relationship with Inua.

- The Elders of the Bering Straits region demand that the U.S. Congress and the State of Alaska ban forever any attempts by oil and gas companies and others to develop or establish oil rigs

in the Norton Sound.

- The Elders pray that the Alaska State Legislature and the U.S. Congress enact legislation recognizing and acknowledging our special relationship and dependence

upon our land and its resources and in recognizing this special relationship, require that all developers abide by and respect our concerns and provide maximum protection of our lands and its resources.

- The Elders of Bering Straits request that Kawerak, Inc. authorize the commitment of funding for a plaque in honor of Mary Alexander and her contributions to the people of the Bering Straits Region.

- The Elders request that the Alaska State Legislature and our elected representatives work together to retain the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend Program.

- The Elders request a public apology by Ron Hohman to the people of this region for his failure to meet with us and should he refuse to provide a public apology that the BSREAA Board immediately demand his resignation and should they fail to immediately demand the resignation of Mr. Hohman that we, the registered voters of this region, begin immediate action to recall the BSREAA Board.

- The Elders are seeking support and funding for an Inter-Regional Conference of

Aboriginal Elders.

The Elders demand that the Alaska State Legislature, our elected officials, the regional and village profit and non-profit corporations work together to provide adequate funding for Elders of the Bering Straits region to attend the ICC Elders Conference to be held in July, 1983 at Frobisher Bay, Canada.

The invaluable knowledge which every Elder possesses cannot be ignored. "We need a return to the values which have carried us through the ages," urged Bering Straits Native Corporation President Charlie Johnson.

"Every year we lose some of our Elders," reflected Kawerak Inc. President Caleb Pungowiyi. "As a result, every year a little more special historical knowledge and skills disappear from our culture and heritage. It is our hope that we can record and preserve some of this knowledge and skill before it fades from memory and the spirit of the people."

Perhaps the best evaluation of the Bering Straits Elders' Conference was relayed in a statement made by 74-year-old Martha Nanouk of Unalakleet to her fellow Elders, "Let us not forget what we know."