

Cultural equality should be addressed

By Bill Hess
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There is a freedom which exists only in Alaska, says Sheldon Katchatag, but that freedom is in danger of being destroyed. "This is the only place left where a man can get out all alone and make a living off of the wild land for himself and his family," says Katchatag, the new vice-chairman of the United Tribes of Alaska.

Ironically, Katchatag sees narrow interpretations of the concepts of freedom and equality upon which the United States is built upon as posing the greatest threat to the liberty about which he speaks.

"I would hope that the people, especially those of the western culture, can understand that what we are striving for is the preservation and perpetuation of our culture," he explains.

"A lot of misunderstanding comes from the concept of individual equality, as opposed to cultural equality," Katchatag adds, explaining that many Americans believe that their citizenship entitles them to an equal shot at the resources of the traditional homeland of Alaska Natives, whether those resources be moose, caribou, fish, gold or oil.

The only trouble is, as more and more individuals come into the country, determined to get their fair share, the resource is depleted, controlled, and regulated. That freedom to live off the land and to be alone in the wilderness is gone, for everyone.

"We believe in individual equality," says Katchatag, "but we also believe in something higher; cultural equality. And cultural equality is not being addressed by anybody."

"One of the things the U.S. is founded on is that variety is the spice of life. We do not all want to be one culture. People have to realize that the Native cultures of Alaska are the products of thousands and thousands of years; years spent living on the land and the sea, learning the ways of the animals, the fish and the birds."

"It would be a shame to have all this die out now, because some people insist on proving that their individual right to these resources is equal to ours. They forget that our cultural rights are equal to theirs."

Katchatag says that the desire "to preserve and perpetuate" the culture was the driving force that has so far brought 61 village and other tribal organizations together within UTA. A major goal of the organization will be to let people know what is behind the growing interest in tribal governments, says Katchatag.

"Hopefully, in the coming year we will do an educational campaign for the public," he explains. "A lot of people seem to think that we are asking for things to be given to

us. But sovereignty is not a thing that can be given by anybody. Rather, it exists with us by the will of the people."

The leadership of UTA, which is chaired by Willie Goodwin, has gone on the record as desiring to work in "a spirit of cooperation" with the Alaska Federation of Natives.

Katchatag, who was authorized by Goodwin to speak for UTA in his absence, notes that there are some vital differences in the purposes of UTA and AFN.

He stresses that AFN represents the 12 regional corporations formed under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. "We feel that the corporations are a business enterprise, and they must be respected as such. We, on the other hand, are an organization of tribal governments. The AFN and their rules as an organization of corporations must look out for the business interests of those corporations."

"We must look out for the best interests of tribal governments." Yet Katchatag feels that cooperation between the two groups is vital. "The members of the tribal governments and the shareholders, on the village level, are one and the same people! We're seeking to have the long inherent rights of our tribal sovereignty recognized."

Many of the new leaders of UTA met informally with Charlie Johnson shortly after he was elected chairman of AFN.

"Hopefully, it will be a relationship of cooperation," says Katchatag. "We have different, but complementary areas of interest. We share ultimately the same goals."

In a move which surprised some observers, AFN at its recent convention passed a "tribalization" resolution which supported a concept many of the tribal governments have been pushing. The resolution encouraged corporations to consider turning their lands over to tribal governments as one method to protect them from the alienation and taxation which now faces them after 1991.

"We have not as a body had a chance to discuss that resolution," says Katchatag. "Speaking strictly as an observer, it gives me a measure of satisfaction to see AFN seeking an answer with the tribes. We see the tribal governments as one of the best ways to save the remarkable resources and lifestyle which we have."

"It will go a long way toward easing those tensions or hard feelings which some of us may feel."

Still, many questions remain with the tribal people about the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

"One of the things I have heard talking to people from across the state is that they

Sheldon Katchatag, vice chairman of the United Tribes of Alaska says Alaska's many special freedoms may be lost to massive development and expansion of people.

believe the settlement was negotiated by people who were not elected by them."

"One of the things the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 says is that the Secretary of the Interior can do nothing with any Native lands or water without the consent of the tribes. This presents some very serious questions about the legality of ANCSA. One of the concerns people have with the passage of ANCSA is they feel they had not been asked."

U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens has said that the State of Alaska should have a strong say in determining the sovereign status of tribal governments in Alaska. This stance has angered many proponents of tribal government who argue that is a matter between the tribes and the federal government, and led to a UTA boycott of a fundraiser for the senator which was thrown by Ice Block, a political action committee.

Katchatag claims that Stevens has referred to UTA as "a group of dissidents," and says this characterization surprises him. "I hope the senator realizes that we are working in the spirit of cooperation."

"We do not feel that confrontation is the solution to any problem dealing with our

culture and heritage. At this point in time, we are looking to cooperate with all involved to arrive at a mutually agreeable solution."

"Everybody is entitled to a different opinion. We would hope that the senator would not have any hard feelings, but that he would be willing to work with us. It will be a lot of hard work, but nothing good comes easy."

Andy Hope, manager of the Sitka Community Association, the IRA tribal government in Sitka, is also disturbed by Stevens' remarks, as well as by accounts of UTA in the media.

"I'm concerned about all these efforts by various people to pigeonhole UTA," explains Hope. Hope has been very active organizing the organization but has declined all nominations for office. He stresses that he is speaking for himself, and not as a spokesman for UTA.

"You have the inflammatory remarks of Don Young when he said that dissension is a code word for tribal government. None of these people have bothered to talk to us. I don't know how we can overcome this type of characterization and these false images."

One image of UTA which

bothers Hope is that the organization is sometimes depicted to be solely concerned with the 1991 issue. "We are dealing with many important day-to-day matters, like the structure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the financial cuts to the tribes from the federal bureaucracy."

Hope also objects to portrayals that AFN represents all of the more than 200 villages in Alaska, while UTA represents only 61. His contention is that AFN represents the Native regional corporations, while UTA represents the member villages. He also expects many more villages to join.

Like Katchatag, Hope also is pleased by the AFN tribalization resolution, and hopes for a cooperative relationship with AFN.

"It's going to be difficult working out the relationship between organizations such as AFN and UTA," he still cautions.

Hope sees the call for a joint federal/state and "tribal organization" fact-finding and advisory body made during UTA by Alaska House Representative Al Adams of Kotzebue as a positive step.

"I think that's what is needed," he explains. "Something that's broadbased."

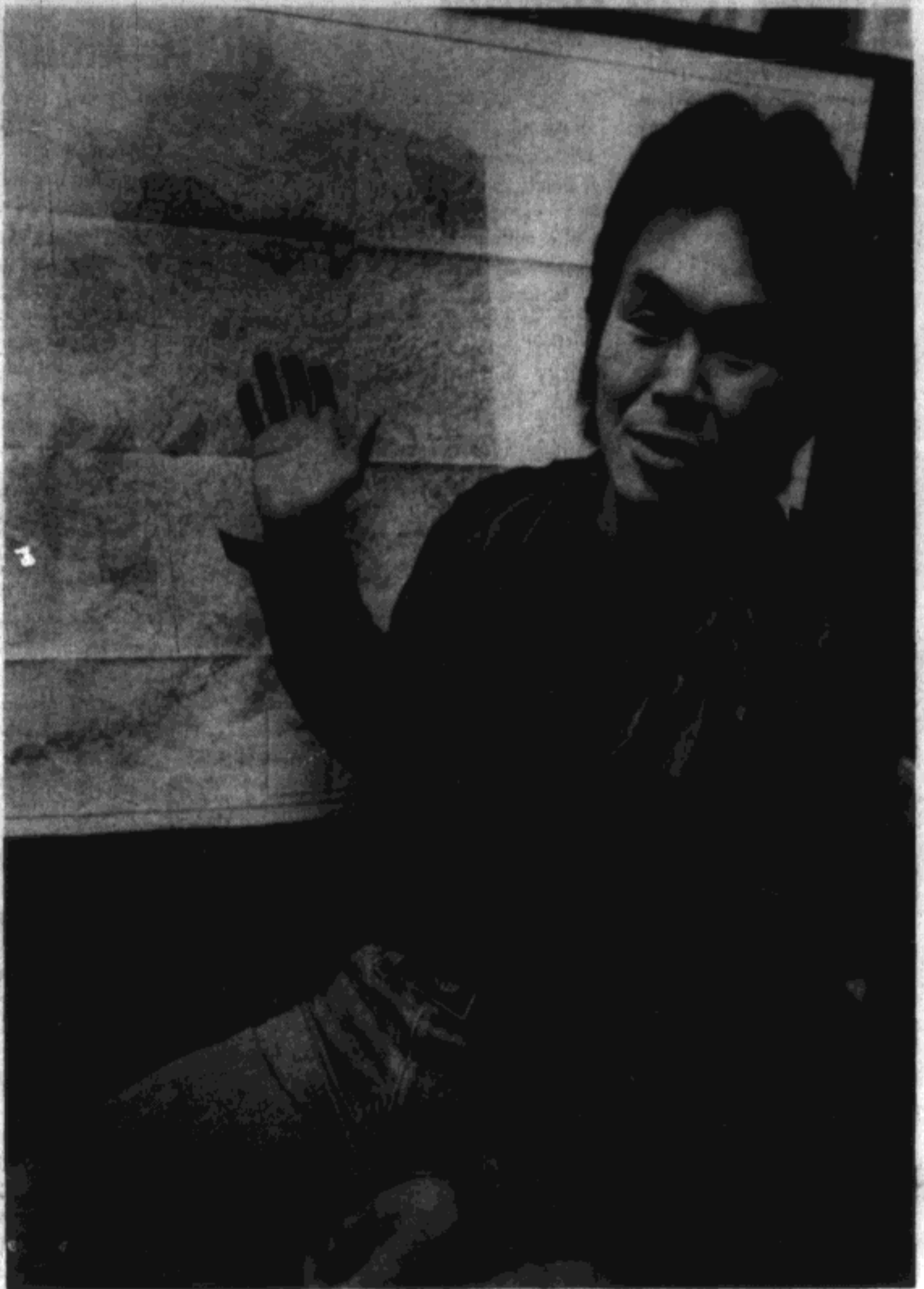


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