

WASHINGTON POST ASSAILED

Sen. Gravel Hits Wash. Paper for Downgrading Natives of the State

"I cannot help but be outraged at your suggestion that the native has neither the right to claim nor the wit to use the wealth of the land that he and only he has used and occupied from time immemorial."

Such was the way Sen. Mike Gravel of Alaska chastised the editor of The Washington Post concerning the editorial that appeared in that publication early this month.

In the opening lines of his letter to the editor, Sen. Gravel said that no economic dream is more embedded in American lore than that of the farmer or rancher or homeowner awakening some morning to find oil on his land.

"But your editorial of September 9 made no provision in that dream for the Alaska native," Gravel wrote. "You said that the award of mineral rights to the Alaska native was a 'dubious concept,' that the oil reservoirs now being developed 'have never been of value to the natives who have lacked the means both of discovering and of exploiting them.'"

Gravel said the lucky farmer or rancher in Oklahoma or California has had no particular expertise in oil development,

either.

"But he had something that made such expertise unnecessary—he had title to his land," Gravel declared.

He said that Congress said in 1884 that the Alaska native had rights to land he used and occupied. But Congress had never defined the right, made provision for title or compensated the native for land taken.

"Hopefully, these questions will be resolved in the present Congress," he said.

He said that Alaska natives, by almost any accepted standard, have established rights to the land that is now being developed by the oil companies; that the natives have lived on that land, hunted there, fished there, used and protected the resources.

"But the federal government

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has denied them title (title which non-natives readily would have been eligible to receive) you are arguing that the prior injustice justifies a future injustice," Sen. Gravel stated.

"If that land had been settled by white men they would have applied for and received patent to the land," he continued. "There would be no question about the distribution of the wealth."

"And I am appalled," he said, "at your contention that 'the transfer of vast sums of cash to natives in the form of royalties might well become a degenerating and corrupting influence.'

"There is absolutely no evidence that the Alaska native is any worse or any better at handling cash than the non-native. Alaska's natives do need better homes and health care and economic opportunity, as you correctly observed.

"But it would be far better for them to have the economic resources to pay for these necessities themselves, as you and I do, than for the Federal government to continue their position of economic dependency.

"The native is not the romantic figure of your editorial, idyllically hunting and fishing and leading a picture-postcard life. His life expectancy is 34 years and he lives in the deepest level of poverty statistics can record under the American flag.

"I cannot help but be outraged at your suggestion that the native has neither the right to claim nor the wit to use the wealth of the land that he and only he has used and occupied from time immemorial."