

# Subsistence is life for 'We' people

by Carol Paddock Jorgensen  
for the Tundra Times

My name is Carol Paddock Jorgensen. My Indian name is *Shuk-De-Hait*. I am Eagle, Killerwhale, *Lukaxadeeyadi*, *Kaagwaantaan*. I am 44 years old, a wife, mother of three grown sons and grandmother of two.

## Ut Kah neek Informing and Reporting **OPINION**

I have lived and worked in many different countries around the world — Europe, South America and the Middle East. I have great respect for our many cultures, languages, customs and diverse value systems, and I truly respect and appreciate my Asian, black and white brothers and sisters.

Then why am I sitting here with so much pain and sadness inside of me? A pain I really cannot articulate in words as I want to, a pain that I cannot seem to do much about, except to keep trying to assist people in understanding what we as Native people are feeling.

I cannot speak for black, Asian or white people. I cannot know their history. But I do care to learn and try as best as possible to hear what they are saying to me. I guess my greatest sadness is that in the name of progress, religion, education, science and technology, our Native way of life has been looked upon as backward, slow, pagan and obsolete.

People do not say that in words. Their non-verbal language says it loud and clear. And yet, our world is in great need of the indigenous peoples' wisdom, and now even many of our own Native people are in great need of this wisdom. We do not know where we fit anymore. We are feeling displaced in our own land. We are trying to jump through hoops of this regulation and that law, laws we did not create.

We lived as a "We" people. Everyone had their role. Clans had a very sophisticated system. Our art was as complex and beautiful as any Rembrandt or Bruegel.

We were taught to respect and live in harmony with nature, listen to the heartbeat of the earth, hear the blades of grass grow, take care of the land, respect the animals and fish and give thanks when they share their life with you and nourish you. If you do not, they will not come back. Leave the land just as you found it. Our village people used to always go out in the spring and clean the rivers and woods and make them ready for the fish and animals so they were happy.

Our carvers always gave great thanks to the tree that would become a beautiful canoe to carry us to one another. We worked very hard harvesting for one another, hunting and gathering and richly sharing. Our bounty was great, and our happiness was one you cannot put into words. As one of our elders said, "Life was hard, but very satisfying. Now life is not so hard. But it is no longer satisfying."

Our life was rich, healthy and very fulfilling. This is something we as Native people know: the blueprint is in all of us. At different times it comes strongly to the surface, and we cannot deny it or ignore it. And when we practice it we feel good and right, for we are Native and that gives us great fulfillment.

Money cannot undo the fact that our people cannot go to berry patches or hunting or fishing grounds because there is a "no trespassing sign," a "fence" or a national monument that reminds us this was once all ours. If you could read some of the history of the late 1800s and early 1900s, one would understand the constant pain that no land claims can take away or buy off.

People have cruelly said the Natives get everything. But how little do they really know or care to understand? You see, our way of life is so different from Western ways. We are trying to

cope, and, yes, we have learned greed and become "I" people instead of "We" people. But we all know deep down that it is not natural, and we are all feeling pain and anger.

Once I heard a quote that stuck with me: "The most unequal thing is to make all things equal." Why can't we celebrate our diversity and uniqueness and be proud of one another and yet share with joy what we have in common as human beings and as Alaskans?

Is it so hard for Western culture to be proud of their indigenous people or to say, "Maybe we were wrong long ago." Obviously, the pain and damage is there, so what can we do today to help rectify or heal the terrible wound or pain?

I also recognize this is, but should not be, an "Us" and "Them" problem that continues to polarize us. We need to accept our responsibility and be accountable. Many of us are angry, and that anger becomes unhealthy and destructive, more to ourselves in the end. Our jails are full because of cross-cultural differences.

Alcoholism, suicide and lack of identity are killing us faster than we can hope to rectify, but knowledge and action are the first ingredients to cor-

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rection for all of us.

How many geniuses are we missing in the school system due to inappropriate knowledge of our educational system to recognize that we are predominantly a kinesthetic culture and not visual or audio, as is the majority race. We learn information differently than most.

Or how many geniuses are on Fourth Avenue or South Franklin because of lack of self-esteem, love or encouragement that they are wonderful people? How many of our young boys have we lost because we have so rapidly come from a hunter/gatherer society into a society that does not validate or recognize with honor, as we did, a great hunter.

Instead, we pin medals on youth for great basketball or other sports, and many of our young people may not measure up to a great slam dunk.

Do people understand that we listen more than we talk? We are not being discourteous or stupid if we do not answer or we take great pauses to answer. We have been taught to listen carefully and show respect, think and choose words wisely and not jabber.

We've been told, say only what you mean and always show due respect. Make your words count. Take time and think about what another has said to you. If they ask a silly or embarrassing question, do not make it worse and answer.

Is it pointed out that many of us know two languages? Some of us know even more than just English or a Native tongue. Are most English people forced to learn more than one?

Do people know that we talk without words. When you listen and watch, you begin to feel with your heart and spirit. You see the great pain and confusion people are in and you can feel and know what they are thinking. You learn to forgive and love your brother and sister and walk in their shoes so that you can identify with them.

You learn how to defuse their anger or you put it aside and let it pass. Our elders are great at talking without talking. Our elders are our pearls of wisdom to be highly respected and appreciated.

We do not want to put them on a shelf or across country. We need them to help bridge the gap with our own children. As young parents we are too close to our emotions, but grandparents and grandchildren have a very special bond. Because of this fact, our elders do not suffer the diseases in great numbers because they are needed to the very end, and their minds stay clear and sharp.

Subsistence is not only our mainstay, it is our essence, our life force. It is what our culture is all about. If that is not clearly understood, we are on the path of destruction for our Native culture.

Right now we can make a decision. We can either continue on the path of destruction or we can turn and correct many past wrongs. We have that opportunity as human beings.

Please understand, when you log too many trees, the fish and the animals

either do not return due to ruin of habitat or the animals, such as bears, come out fighting because of being backed into a corner.

That is where we are. We have no choice. We cannot give up any more. We cannot start from the middle, already giving up the battle before it is started. We must start from our strongest point. In Western terms that is only good strategy, and we have learned to fight fire with fire. But why should we have to?

Canada not only recognizes indigenous people but is proud of them and makes sure subsistence is in place always for the Native people. What is wrong with that? Are we so afraid that someone might get something we don't?

Most people do not like our *muktuk*, hooligan oil, herring eggs, seal oil, seaweed, seagull eggs and gumbouts. It is now a scientific fact that our people are facing severe malnutrition due to incorrect diets. Western foods are causing many health problems. Most of us would gladly chomp on herring eggs rather than a hamburger anyway, but realize that we have been regulated and bag limited to death because of a greater population demand and use of resources.

One thing worth remembering is that subsistence is less than 1 percent of total catch. Our sport and commercial takes are key to regulating sound management and sustained yield.

Why subsistence has been made such a negative issue is curious. We have not as Native people made this a race issue, but if that is how people see it, then we certainly will never deny our rich heritage.

We have always been willing to share our bounty. Subsistence with a Native preference would not mean that other rural people could not subsist. It would just guarantee once and for all that subsistence would never be taken away from the Native. That could be done by Native exemption, such as the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

At first this may cause some discomfort, but in five years, it would not only be forgotten, but accepted as the way things are.

And if in the meantime there was some proper cross-cultural education going on, perhaps all Alaskans could actually get along, and we could move forward as leaders of our nation and perhaps the world in respecting human rights.

As people of this world, we are very concerned about saving the elephants and whales and many endangered species, as we should be. But can we do less for humankind?

Carol Paddock Jorgensen of Juneau is a former grand president of the Alaska Native Sisterhood and a former deputy director of the Subsistence Division of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. She also was recipient of the first Elizabeth Peratrovich award for cross-cultural education. Elizabeth Peratrovich was her cousin.

## SUBSISTENCE

Our history is such that in just a few decades Western culture has successfully "pioneered" this great land. Does that mean we as Native people are weak? No, I think not. Perhaps in Western terms of war, or a show of strength, it could, and, yes, there were battles at first. Wouldn't you fight to save your lands and family?

But in the Native way we recognized and wanted to learn new things, new ways of doing things. So we were open and receptive to newcomers. We did not know that the newcomers would assume we were stupid, pagan and must succumb their way of life.

Immediately my ancestors were given new names, such as Jimmy John, Tommy George and others. Our identity was stripped. Our children were sent off to schools. We were to learn a different way of life. Time, the moon, sun and tides were no longer correct. Summer fish camps and winter camps were not possible because of the many schedules and things the newcomers had in store for us.

This, of course, was not all bad. Our people wanted to learn. It is just that there was no validation that we, too, are smart and that we are good and that we have a strong spiritual relationship to our creator.