

Editorial—

The Main Motivating Reason - Ecology

“ ‘Use and occupancy’ has been a standard test in matters like this for some time. What it means, simply, is that a stranger walking over the land in question could see a smokehouse, or a dock piling, or some other indication that the land was in use and occupied,” so said Governor Walter J. Hickel in defining the land use generally accepted by non-natives.

The evidences of use of the lands by our native people are a far cry indeed from the idea of Governor Hickel. We can say, unequivocally, that the evidences of

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use in the frigid areas of Alaska are the villages themselves. The areas around them were their indisputable reasons for being and without those lands, the villages could not have been established because their inhabitants had figured out beyond a doubt that it took a given area of land to feed and clothe a village. There are other evidences of use, also, such as campsites, traditional fishing sites, squirreling areas, and other evidences, all of them necessary and greatly needed by the settlements. These are the necessities they, the people, are now seeking to protect by their claims.

One of the main motivating reasons, then, for the native people to claim lands are the ecological areas that support villages. The claims accelerated when our people became alarmed when the State was authorized to withdraw 103 million acres and the manner in which it began to proceed. One of the areas that sharply focused the State's intentions was when it attempted to withdraw lands in and around the claims area of the village of Minto. Minto became the first land rights assertion area when it protested because its ecological areas had been threatened.

Governor Hickel, in his speech, is trying to perpetuate the idea that land use in Alaska's remote settlements is the same as those established in other states. His contention is based on cultivation of corn and potatoes, a universal idea of "occupancy and use" of lands in areas outside of the Arctic and Subarctic. This is a fallacy that should be drawn out clearly and distinctly that the use and occupancy of lands in the Arctic and those in Iowa and elsewhere are poles apart.

Where the Lower 48 states base their occupancy and use on cultivated lands for agricultural purposes, and in warmer areas of Alaska, the use and occupancy of lands in the Arctic and Subarctic are very different indeed. There, villages have always depended on the ecological factors that surround the settlements and which kept those villages in supplies of food and materials they needed. Although it is, and was, different from harvesting of corn and potatoes in other areas, it is, and was, harvesting nevertheless and this harvest is, and was, the getting of animals and the side products there from.

The ecological factors that support villages were established beyond dispute because it took a given area to sustain them adequately. Anything less than that area would cause serious hardship in each village if the sustaining area should be reduced. These are dangers the native people of Alaska are guarding against to protect their settlements and to retain the ecological areas of land that support them. These are time-proven expanses of lands needed--lands that provide precious sustenance of life in our remote settlements.