



Winfred Matuklook has spent most of his life on St. Lawrence Island.

Guardisman hopes Native youth learn traditional ways

by Barbara Crane

Tundra Times reporter

It's hard to think of any place in Alaska more remote than the village of Gambell, located on the northwestern tip of St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, 200 miles west of Nome.

While everyday life — traveling, finding food or just staying warm — requires more effort than most city folks can imagine, Winfred Matuklook is happy to call Gambell his home.

"It's a hard life, but I like it," Matuklook said.

"The weather is the most powerful force out there. When I leave Gambell, I'm never sure when the weather will be clear enough for the plane to get me back."

Matuklook recalls many times when he was supposed to be gone overnight, but ended up waiting many days for the weather to improve.

"There's nothing you can do but wait," he said. "Gambell is just like that."

While Matuklook, a Bering Straits Native Corp. shareholder, has lived all of his life in Gambell, he's currently on a year's assignment in Nome with the Alaska Army National Guard.

He accepted the job partially because of the limited opportunities to make money at home.

"There's not much business out on Gambell, other than some government jobs and the Guard," Matuklook said. "A lot of people are barely getting by."

But Matuklook is discovering that he needs a lot more cash now that he's unable to follow his traditional subsistence lifestyle in Nome.

"At home I didn't have to spend so much money, other than having to buy gasoline and stove oil," he said.

"But now I am spending too much money in Nome — apartment rent, telephone, water and sewer and lights. I get too many bills."

When he's home in Gambell, Matuklook says he loves to watch traditional dancing. He also enjoys doing some ivory carving, which is one

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of the few ways of earning money on St. Lawrence Island.

"I'm not as good as some people, but I do like to carve," he said. "Sometimes I watch those people who really know how to carve. They don't need any plans, they just carve what is up in their heads."

Matuklook also likes to fish and hunt for seals, and he enjoys teaching the young men how to hunt.

He believes it is important for all the young people of Gambell to learn about, understand and practice the traditional ways of their people, but he worries that those ways are being lost.

"I like to talk in our own tongue," he said, "but sometimes a young person will have to ask me, 'What do you mean?'"

"They are gradually losing our Native tongue and talking more in English. While they learn to read and write our language in school, they are still losing the meaning of what they are saying."

Matuklook's year in Nome will be up the end of March, and he is eager to return to his family and the life he enjoys the most.

"Everyone thinks of his birthplace as his home," he said, "and I'm anxious to get back to my home. I have a good life in Gambell."