

# Canada, Greenland offer lessons for Alaska

by June Degan  
for the Tundra Times

The moral fiber of a nation is not measured by degrees in Celsius or Fahrenheit, but by the responsiveness and treatment by its government. Having recently returned from the countries of Canada and Greenland, I can reflect on what I saw and experienced.

As a teacher, planner and journalist, I am deeply interested in the history of aboriginal people of the world — specifically those who live in the world's North. How those people are treated, what the living conditions are and what the future holds for them is a fascination to me. I am driven to examine their plight, for, as a Yupik from Northwestern Alaska, I am part of that group.

In Greenland, the children spoke Greenlandic, English and Danish. Those languages are supported by the government and reinforced within the home.

There is no stigma attached to the speaking of the Native language within the countries I visited. It is respected by all the citizens and spoken by all the aboriginal people, including the children.

Within the Baffin Island region of Canada, the first language of the Inuit is Inuktitut. It is taught as the primary language from kindergarten through the second grade, before

English is introduced within the schools.

Inuktitut as a language is similar to Yupik, if one can attempt to compare the two. I do not speak the language, but can understand it since it was spoken by my father and grandmother during my early childhood. Inuktitut is not only spoken, but also written in symbols that are unique.

Comparing what I have seen of those aboriginals in Canada and Greenland to those living here in Alaska, there seems to be a great disparity between them. I can say that the Canadian and Greenlandic Inuit have a far greater chance for successful survival, in that they are respected citizens within their homeland.

They have maintained their Native language because it has been taught within the schools.

The government and leaders respect the aboriginal status of subsistence hunting, fishing and the gathering of food, as historically practiced by their people. The laws take into consideration that uniqueness. The resources, both human and natural, have a wise use perspective in planning and implementation.

This is because the leadership of those countries takes a global perspective. They understand we do not live in a vacuum, but together within one

## OPINION

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world.

It was gratifying to be within countries that held mutual respect for differences of ideas and lifestyles. It is that type of respect that I find lacking here within Alaska. This state has the capability of becoming more humane in its treatment of Alaska Natives when it matures and gains decent leadership.

Currently there is very limited opportunity for Alaska Natives to successfully survive in Alaska.

Many times it is who you know that helps one land that ideal job, and Alaska Natives lack that solidarity to help each other out. The negativism of oppression, racism and poverty separates us as it slices away the ties that bind us together.

The poor treatment we receive in every aspect of our lives comes from the racism that is rampant within this state, beginning from the top government official to the man in the street.

That discrimination sets the tone for the self-destructive behavior along with alcohol and drug abuse.

Respect for us will come if we com-

mand it. It is up to us to pave the way for those changes. If we find the treatment deplorable, let us not condone it.

It is done to separate us from our land. Remember, we are the largest private-sector landowners in this state.

The Alaska commissioner of education is now demanding that Native languages be taught within the schools. This is a step in the right direction.

We must demand that Alaska Native teachers be hired within the system and not passed over by recruiting from the Lower 48, as is the practice currently.

Furthermore, Congress should not fund a two-year study on Alaska Natives. We are not microbes to be scrutinized. Common sense reveals we are products of child abuse within the classrooms.

Our parents were beaten and had their mouths washed with soap when they spoke their Native language in school.

Treatment filled with abuse, neglect and oppression lead to the behavior we are currently witnessing. It is time to stop that abusive treatment we have been forced to endure by the schools, government and the public. Alaska Natives need a fighting chance to survive through proper education, job opportunities and to be respected as human beings, starting here at home, in Alaska today.