

# Elders Conference tackles major issues facing Natives

by Louise Sagmoen

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Land, subsistence, education, along with alcohol and drug abuse were among the four major topics addressed at the 1985 Alaska Federation of Natives Statewide Elders Conference.

The theme of this year's gathering was "Togetherness, Youth and Elders." Wednesday, Oct. 23 was dedicated to a joint gathering of the young and old. But by Wednesday afternoon the elders gathered again as a single group to tackle issues focusing on land, subsistence, education and what has been termed SAD (Suicide, Alcohol and Drugs) by a corporate leader.

The five-year-old organization, Aboriginal Senior Citizens of Alaska, met and appointed Ross Schaeffer, Walter Meganack, Rachael Craig and Patrick Paul, Sr. to chair the subsistence, land, education, and alcohol and drug abuse committees.

By Wednesday 4 p.m. the Drug and Alcohol committee which was headed by Patrick Paul, Sr. completed their recommendation to be brought before the AFN.

In describing the recommendation Paul said, "In October, I introduced a resolution at the Tlingit/Haida conference at Craig in regards to state funds for



Elders are taking an active role in education and other issues.

photo by Steve Kakaruk

alcohol programs."

The final recommendation to come from the elders requested additional funding from the Alaska State Legislature for alcohol problems. "Alcoholism and other drug abuse are identified as the number one health problem of the Alaska Natives; Alaska has the highest ratio of alcoholism in the U.S.; funding from (the) Alaska Legislature has decreased from a high of approximately \$15 million in 1982 to \$12 million in 1985; the alcoholism and drug abuse problems have continued to increase; requests for funding for new alcohol programs are written every year namely from smaller communities; requests for funding far exceeds the funding available;" were some of the highlights of the elders' final recommendation.

Paul described some of the adverse effects of alcohol among Natives. "They realize not only is it affecting their homes but the young people. By using alcohol it is creating death in the family by suicide, drowning and car wrecks. The feeling is that it has taken the lives of too many young people. We should no longer be ashamed to admit that we do have the problem. We need help from state and federal and to employ from among our Native people to serve our Native alcoholics," Paul said.

Meganack from the Chugach region chaired the elders land committee. In an interview after the committee met Meganack said, "We didn't come up with recommendations. We came up with questions. Should the land be held collectively or individually? Should the corporation own the land or should some other group own the land? Are the kids born too late? ... do they have rights as all Natives? What about our kids who have less than one-quarter blood?"

Meganack said a trespassing

resolution had been approved by the elders. The elders recommended that no trespassing be allowed on Native-owned lands and the State of Alaska enforce such a law. Meganack is from the village of Port Graham, near Homer.

Ross Schaeffer of the NANA region chaired the subsistence committee. In describing their actions Schaeffer said, "The main resolution was to get support for subsistence in both state and federal law. They also asked for elders to be sent to Juneau and Washington to lobby for subsistence rights.

"Traditional foods are vital to the well-being of the health of all subsistence users. Subsistence fishing and hunting are a heritage that has been practiced by our forefathers and we intend for our children to enjoy those same rights. Federal and state statutes provide protection of our subsistence rights with special interests seeking to remove the subsistence priority from federal and state law. Be it resolved that immediate action by our elected representatives at all levels of federal and state government to support and protect the subsistence priority in law." The resolution also recommended that AFN provide financial assistance to elders when necessary.

The education committee was chaired by Rachel Craig of Kotzebue. The final recommendations recognized that school children had the inherent right to know "who he is." The elders also said the Native cultural information was stored in the Native languages and recommended that



Some of the participants in the Elders Conference are shown here discussing issues of importance to all Alaska Natives. photo by Steve Kakaruk

proper materials be provided to teach the youth their Native language.

In describing the elders committee meeting AFN accountant Marge Shelton said, "These are issues that came out of the elders conference that they want addressed."