

Action is needed to ensure village survival

by Paul Swetzof

for the Tundra Times

Alaska's Native people are a diverse group of nations.

With few exceptions, the deep concerns which are common to all of us are the retention of our land base, our respective cultures, and the preservation of our subsistence rights.

These common concerns were made clear by the testimony which was presented to the Berger Commission by Alaska Natives from every region of Alaska and which is available for everyone to read in the book entitled *Village Journey*.

While we all know what we want, and must have, many villages are confused as to just how to keep their existence intact.

The first step in the process of assuring our survival is action. There is no way that the federal or state courts, our adversaries, our friends, or anyone else, is going to take the struggle for our survival seriously if Native villages don't act in their own interest.

In order to be free, to be sovereign, you must have your own institutions in place, and operating. This demonstrates that you have assumed control over your environment.

I believe that every Native village should consider taking the following

actions in order to be in a more advantageous position to defend the right to continue to exist and to help assure that your Native village will remain "Native."

- If you currently have a Federally recognized IRA government, make certain that you have a functional, working council in place. If you don't have an active council then set an election date and vote in your council members.

- If you don't have a federally recognized IRA in place, then apply to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for recognition. This will likely be a slow and frustrating process, which is why the application and supporting documents should be submitted as soon as is feasible. (You may obtain help in this process by contacting Native advocacy agencies such as Native American Rights Fund (NARF), Alaska Legal Services Corporation, and in some regions, your regional non-profits.)

- Have your councils (even if not yet recognized) put into place village ordinances, mechanisms, and boards, which are designed to maintain and expand control over Native village affairs. I suggest that, at a minimum, village councils set up the necessary mechanisms to define and enforce the following:

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- Village boundaries. Define your villages jurisdictional lands (village ANCSA lands, etc.) These are the lands which your village is asserting its control over.

- Membership. Define who can be a member of the village. In some villages this is especially crucial as they are in danger of absorbing so many non-Natives that these people could end up in the majority, which would effectively mean the loss of the resident culture.

- Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). It is imperative that villages take advantage of this federal act in order to insure that our children who are orphaned, deserted, etc., are not lost to us, but instead able to carry on their heritage.

- Education. An educational ordinance is often needed in order to make certain that the curriculum in our village schools includes the

teaching of our languages, skills, and culture. This helps to void an educational program, based in our villages, which acts to deprive our children of their heritage.

- Other ordinances which act to insure that the survival and will of the village is kept intact. These include ordinances and resolutions defining and controlling trespass, liquor and drug abuse, contracting authority (93-638, etc.), subsistence hunting and fishing, and the list goes on.

Whatever you do, make sure you do something.

It may not be wise to spend too much time and energy challenging others. Let's assert our rights as a people. Let others challenge us after we have something in place to be challenged. The longer a village has asserted its rights the more likely it is that that village will retain its rights to exist as a Native village.