

Natives View Science Confab With General Dissatisfaction

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The 20th Alaska Science Conference was a meeting for oil industry officials, politicians, bureaucrats, and professional conference-goers. It was not a conference for Alaskan and Northern native peoples, except for the role they played in being dissected.

This opinion was expressed by the few natives present, and the even fewer natives invited to participate in the meet, entitled: "Change in the North, People, Petroleum, and Environment."

The first subject discussed, the impact of petroleum development, was characterized by stinging verbal interchange during the symposium Monday afternoon. More tempered, and more thorough exploration of the topic was seen in the more obscure sessions held separate from the larger symposia.

Terming the oil industry the "first world government" continually seeking to amass tremendous power, Sarah Lawrence Professor Robert Engler, industry critic and author of "The Politics of Oil: Private Power and Demo-

cratic Change," painted a gloomy picture of Alaska's future in petroleum development.

"Santa Barbara is going to happen over and over again. . . and the federal government is not ignorant," Engler said. "The oil companies' primary interest is to the stockholders" and, secondly, to the community, he charged.

Urging caution in proceeding with petroleum development, Engler told Alaskans not to be intimidated by oil industry threats to move "if the climate is not healthy."

(Continued on page 6)

Science Conference . . .

(Continued from page 1)

These charges drew an angry response from British Petroleum's Alaska Manager F. Geoffrey Larminie, who said Engler presented a "simple, rather bias definition of man. Take out oil, and you have a view of man." In his words, Engler was "a cynic and a pessimist" and his presentation was "a catalogue of original sin."

Larminie had praise for Alaska's liberal petroleum regulations. "They have a great deal of virtue," he said. "A body of case law on which to base precedent just doesn't exist." He predicted the decade of the seventies to be "the decade of the economist."

State Representative Gene Guess, Chairman of the Legislative council, commented that legislators were aware of the history of exploitation in Alaska and stated "we will have to become educated, and more sophisticated."

Somewhat irked by the highly opinionated discussion, Guess warned, "Saying that something is all bad, or all good, is the wrong approach."

The opening symposium Tuesday shifted the focus of the conference to "Strategies for Social Change" in which the issues, problems, and needs of natives in the area of social change was discussed.

Chairman of the panel was Prof. George Rogers of the University of Alaska's Institute of Social, Economic, and Government Research. Panelists included Jack Conway, Center of Community Change, Washington, D.C. Prof. Norman Chance, Director of the University of Connecticut's Anthropology Department; and William H. Jacobs, Director of Alaska Legal Services.

Cast in the role of discussant, and the only native to participate in the conference, was Tlingit and Haida Council President John Borbridge.

"You cannot talk about one Alaska," Rogers stated. "You must talk about two Alaskas. The gap is growing and there is need for change."

"Most White Alaskans practice some form of race discrimination," said panelist Norman Chance. Pleading for restructur-

ing of the system in which "the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer."

Chance also said that the concept of the American melting pot must be adapted so that Alaskan natives can maintain the right to subscribe to their unique cultures and "be different."

Panelist William Jacobs sought to concern himself with the plight of the poor natives. "The situation in the bush is just drastic," Jacobs said.

Jacobs lacked the expertise of John Borbridge, who discussed the development of the regional concept as a solution to structuring rural natives into the Alaskan economy.

Where Jacobs discussed the failure of agencies to effectively provide relief to rural impoverished, Borbridge pointed out that regional development envisioned by native leaders in seeking a solution to land claims could effectively structure natives into both economic and political significance.

What was shamefully lacking throughout that portion of the conference which concerned itself with Alaskan natives was that non-native panelists could discuss what non-natives could offer to natives, not what the first Alaskans envision for themselves.

Non-natives discussed natives as if they were abstract and remote, so that the conference might well have been held in New York or Washington. The conference overlooked what could have been its most valuable resource: native expertise.

The most significant conclusions concerning that portion of the conference came from observers, rather than participants. Rep. Willie Hensley, of Kotzebue, was one native observer present.

"It is proper that the 20th Alaska Science Conference discuss change in the Arctic. It is proper that consideration be given to the effect of change on the Eskimo and Indian people," Hensley said.

"I am, however, perplexed and hurt by the obvious lack of Eskimo and Indian panelists and speakers. Who is more involved

with this change than the native people themselves? Who can speak more dramatically about change and hopes?" he queried. Hensley said that, in omitting native participation, the conference planners "do no good by aiding in promoting the idea that native people cannot speak for themselves."

A Tuesday evening meeting of the Fairbanks Native Association resulted in a resolution which chided conference planners for their "short-sightedness" in omitting natives.

Sole native participant John Borbridge stated, "Using any number of criteria, it was a stimulating, very provocative conference. In other evaluation, conspicuous by their absence, are two basic aspects that would have contributed to making the conference even more significant.

"In one area, natives, their conditions, their political institutions, and other facets of their lives were the subject of much discussion and study. This could have been significantly enhanced by native participation.

"Secondly, the time was most appropriate for a meaningful dialogue for those that study and for those being studied. There are a number of native spokesmen on various levels of native leadership who are very capable of speaking on a number of panels," Borbridge said.

This opinion was shared by not only the Alaskan native leadership present, but also Eskimos and Indians from Canada and the continental U.S. Sensing this, conference programmers defensively argued that participants must be expert in some discipline.

Natives responded by charging that panelists were as qualified to discuss contemporary native issues as turn of the century anthropologists who concerned themselves with measuring skulls.

Native observers suggested that, rather than a self-confession of non-native exploitation of Alaskan natives, more meaningful topics could have included the application of native expertise toward management of properties and monies derived from a land settlement.

Other topics could have included the role of Indian Title as a basic premise to the land claims; or, of special interest to non-natives, the impact of a land solution on the Alaskan economy.

There were papers presented in some of the rather obscure panels that were of greater significant than opinionated discussion in the larger symposia.

The paper presented by Jane Wallen, Director of the Alaska State Museum, deserved to spearhead a panel on ways in which the unique cultures of Alaska's native peoples could be taught and revitalized.

University of Chicago Graduate Student Grace Wolf's account of native efforts to seek a just land claims solution was hampered by the imposition of a 15 minute time limit.

It is worthy of being distributed for the education of the non-native population and could well serve to quiet their alarm at the prospects of a settlement.

Others, such as Laurel Bland's paper on adult education, are worthy of considerable consideration. The majority of presentations, however, if they did not dwell on non-native guilt for the native predicament, conformed to outdated anthropological methods.

State legislators are as much confused about the outcome of the conference as native observers. A paper, presented by ISEGR Economist Gregg Erickson warned that under current regulations, oil companies stand to make huge profits in Arctic Slope development and that next month's

lease sale will be disappointing in the amount of revenues which would result.

The Erickson presentation led to a petition requesting postponement of the lease sale and a reassessment of state policy. Most legislators present considered Erickson's paper as a reversal of advice to them from academic sources. Confused, they admit a postponement of the sale would be unlikely at this late date.

The most vocal, if not violent, confrontation in the conference came Wednesday with an attack on conservationists by Senator Ted Stevens. "I am up to here with people who tell us how to develop our country," he said. He termed proposed regulations on petroleum development as "stupid."

Stevens said that early activity on the North Slope at Navy Pet. 4 and Umiat did not damage the land but even "enhanced it."

Conservationists replied by stating the piles of oil drums, trash, and the torn up tundra still remains.

Sierra Club Vice President Dr. Edgar Wayburn of San Francisco said of Steven's speech, "Senator Stevens has made one of the most convincing speeches in favor of conservation that I have ever heard."

The most publicized presentations, spurred by opinionated commentary and vocal confrontation, left those who may have been empowered to act—legislators and state officials—bewildered. Those who were never consulted—the Alaskan natives were bewildered . . . and angered.