

People impact statements needed

By WALLY OLSON

The idea was great, but it may not be working. The original plan was that private industry and the government agencies would submit "impact statements" before any major programs or constructions projects got underway. Ideally, these statements would include the possible effects that the project might have on people as far as their social conditions, lifestyles and culture.

Now, flip through some impact statements and see what is there. You'll find lots of engineering statements, a fantastic amount of economic predictions, generally optimistic dreams of how beneficial the project will be and all sorts of tables and charts. If you look closely, you might even find—hidden away somewhere—a little note on what effect the undertaking will have on human lives and the way people in the area live. What went wrong? What is still going wrong? It's simply that it is much easier to come up with near engineering schemes, economic statistics, mathematical projections than it is to try and understand people.

Watch the operations out in the bush of Alaska. The chartered plane lands, the well-dressed analyst steps out, goes over and talks to the school teacher, missionary, and the village council Chief or president. Two hours later, he or she is winging their way back to Anchorage, Fairbanks or Juneau to write their social-cultural impact predictions. Now the flight wasn't necessary for the amount of information obtained; they could probably do just as well with a phone call or form letter.

Well, even though the social sciences aren't that scientific, at least they can provide more than most agencies get — or want. The process of trying to predict social or cultural impacts takes much more time. First, there are some good studies and reports to be looked at. It's amazing what can be found if someone takes the time to look. Some social scientists have spent a great deal of time in Alaska, northern Canada, the Arctic and many other parts of the world actually observing social-cultural change. Their reports often lay it out in detail. They tell you what happened, who was affected, how the lives were changed, the problems and benefits that came about and where things went right or wrong. These studies are available, but evidently no one wants to plow through them; it's much easier to feed numbers into a computer and crank out statistics.

Secondly, good studies — like some good foods and wines — take time. They can't be done in a day or two or even a few weeks. Normally, a good anthropologist spends months or years studying a particular group of people to try and get an insight into their values, lifestyles, social systems and daily life. It may not always be so "scientific", but the researcher begins to get a feel for the people; for what they like and dislike, what they want to do, what they want to happen.

Finally, and perhaps, most importantly let the people in the local area know what the possible changes might be and let them decide. It looks as though the Yakutat people pretty well understood what would happen in their community if they simply allowed the oil industry to take over the town, lock-stock-and-barrel. Real, honest community development is not some sort of Machiavellian manipulation; rather it is honesty and openly telling the people what can happen and letting them make up their minds. In cases where changes will come whether the people there like it or not, at least they can know what to expect and plan to make some adjustments. Maybe the age of the computer and technology is destroying the whole human approach to planning. Apparently we are operating under the assumption that if something can be done it has to be done; if we can do it technologically, we must do it! Do we have to wipe out fishing streams, pollute the waters, drill in the ocean depths, erect new boom camps anywhere and everywhere just because we can do it?

The whole purpose of impact statements was to get away from this rampant spread of cities, industrialization, destruction of our natural resources at the expense of human lives and a human way of life. What happened? Well, the experts went right back to the technological hardware and cranked out statistics, economic predictions, and mathematical schemes, and at the tail end began to throw in a little tidbit about possible social-cultural changes. When the numbers looked so impressive, and the charts made everything look bright and wonderful, why worry about people? For the most part, the impact statements seem to be avoiding the real issue and the real reason for inclusion in planning, they are forgetting about people, Alaskans.