

Ongtooguk's article raises serious questions

To the editor:

I would like to respond to Paul Ongtooguk's Oct. 22 article — "Group Wants Only 'Genuine' Natives."

The article raised some serious questions about the role environmentalists play in Alaska, and more personally it questioned my own intentions. It was a complex and earnestly written article, with some very good points as well as others that are questionable.

Certainly, his observation that some of us approach the issue of saving the planet with a bit of evangelistic zeal is an accurate one. No apologies for this.

I would agree with Ongtooguk that

It seems apparent to me that the issues that are important to many of us in the environmental community are essentially the same issues that are important to Native people.

Alaska Natives are caught in a bind between the past and the present. I'd even suggest that we all are in a bind — one way or another.

His contention, though, that some of us want to "turn back the clock to pre-contact Native society" and that the The Northern Alaska Environmental Center's slide show, "The Last Great Wilderness," advocates such, is a misrepresentation of fact.

It's a gross exaggeration for him to suggest that "environmentalists" see the issue as a choice between noble savages and greedy ones. I would encourage him to avoid the easy scapegoats and to let in enough information to know that the environmental community is not just the Sierra Club which he refers to at several points and which he implies represents the whole movement.

Ongtooguk says very accurately that, "Too many Alaska Natives, rather than being agents of change, are simply becoming victims of it."

I couldn't agree more. This again is the cause for all of us on the planet. And it's essentially the only point we're trying to make with the slide show on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The people on the North Slope are being overwhelmed by oil interests; they are victims of change, and the common man there is rapidly being forced to trade his cultural soul for the promise of the dollar.

We see the dilemma that the people there find themselves in. Their backs are against the wall. Yes, Ongtooguk's right, they're damned if they do and damned if they don't.

But this doesn't take away the fact that the push for oil development in ANWR is patently short-sighted for a

whole host of reasons, only one of which is the fact that it essentially ignores another group of Alaska Natives who oppose development.

The Qwich'in people, living in villages on the south side of the refuge, stand virtually alone in the Alaska Native community in their opposition to development. They're trying their best not to be victims. They're not looking for a new clock; they're just trying to hold on to the one they have.

The point should be made that the promise of the dollar being our salvation works no better for the Native than it does for the white man. From my own experience, I know that many people living on the North Slope or in Fairbanks or East Lansing — wherever people happen to be living — know this. They've given in to inevitability, though.

"If we can't control our future, then we might as well be rich," some say.

I opt for a more positive and long-term approach, though. And in the process I ask, how did we live here in Alaska before oil development? What was the quality of life? Were we better off then than we are now? I'm not talking pre-contact here, I'm talking pre-oil. Is there less suicide or alcoholism or drug abuse in the villages now than there was then? Are all of us, Native and non-Native alike really better off?

Ongtooguk is angry, and I don't blame him. Certainly when I see what's happening to Alaska Native communities and a thousand other social injustices I feel enough anger of my own. I would suggest, though, that Ongtooguk gets lost in his anger and that his approach focuses more on the problem than it does on the solutions.

So what is it that environmentalists want? I can't speak for everyone, but I can speak for some. Most of us want clean, open country and wild habitat for wild species as well as for humans. We want an end to the poisoning of the planet.

We want clean air and clean water. We want all countries to address the fact that human population numbers are exploding all over the earth. More of us all the time are calling for a spiritual approach to the earth, one which builds on the wisdom and experience of indigenous people.

We want change, real change, not just the same destructive solutions wrapped in the same old seductive packages. We want accountability by our leaders and a new direction that offers a future more sustainable than the present dead-end we're lost in.

It seems apparent to me that the issues that are important to many of us in the environmental community are essentially the same issues that are important to Native people.

To discount the environmental movement for its idealism and zeal and to see us as a bunch of middle class white people interested only in setting aside wilderness preserves for our own enjoyment, everyone else be damned, is a convenient way to deny who the real villains are.

No one's saying the solutions are easy ones. What we're saying is that we have no choice but to begin to look for the solutions. Because, like it or not, the issue has ultimately become one of survival for us all.

All of us, Native and non-Native alike, have to challenge the status quo. We have to begin to deal honestly with the realities. We can't give in to more false promises.

I'm not saying we must turn back time. I am saying that we have to start paying attention to what time it really is.

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