

Barrow recognizes alcohol problem

By WILLIAM DuBAY

The Interpretation of the Data

The Center for Research on the Acts of Man was engaged "to analyze social and cultural relationships among the population of Barrow, Alaska, in light of wider societal, economic and governmental organizations of Alaska," giving particular attention to "the distribution, consumption, and abuse of alcohol in and around this community." The validity of the interpretations, of course, depends much on the validity of the original research described above.

Much of the report is given to a description and analysis of the effectiveness of the detention program and offers suggestions for its improvements. Several other chapters are given to an analysis of the alcohol problem and its relationship to factors of rapid social change that has accompanied the industrialization of the North. Making reference to other relevant literature and their own findings, the authors present the position that today's alcohol problem is a direct result of the new social bureaucratic stratification of their society that has been caused by oil

and gas development on the North Slope.

The authors attempt to blame the drinking problem on the creation of a new local bureaucracy in the oil-funded organizations such as the North Slope Borough and Arctic Slope Regional Corporation. They theorize that the lack of experience in dealing with these bureaucracies causes anomie, a sense of helplessness which leads some to alcohol as a "remedy." This oversimplified and undocumented view of the social processes in Barrow ignores the fact that these local organizations offer not only the only political "handle" by which the Inupiat can control their destiny, but are the main sources of jobs and services that were entirely absent before the advent of the oil industry. In other words, the growth of the institutions the authors have chosen to attack may be, in fact, the very forces which have prevented a breakdown of the traditional social values in the face of rapid social change. The statement that the problem of heavy drinking in Barrow began in 1973 (page 25) with the opening of the liquor store is based on very weak data.

A Community Betrayed

The residents of Barrow were most offended that the research group, basing their conclusions on the samplings described above, would presume to hold a major press conference in New York to publicly characterize Barrow as an "alcoholic society" that is rapidly disintegrating and in danger of extinction due to its social organization—even before the report document was presented to the funding agencies. The day after the press conference, a 58-page synopsis version of the larger report was widely distributed in Barrow, described as "A Final Report on Alcohol Use in Barrow." The larger, 309-page, report was widely distributed among state offices but not to Borough officials or others in the community.

There is no question that the people of Barrow know they are faced with a severe alcohol problem and the impact of rapid social change. And they recognize the right and responsibility of researchers to publicize their findings. But the community also knows they have a right to fairness, competence in research tools

and techniques, sensitivity to cultural differences, recognition of social strengths and accomplishments of the community. Otherwise, the very purposes for which the research was instituted—solving the problems of alcohol abuse—will be undermined.

This report—and the sensational publicity promoted by its authors—is only the most recent example of the colonial uses of science in the North. Almost without exception in the Arctic, scientific research has been used to deny the people of the North the benefits they enjoy: their resources, culture, heritage, wildlife, and now their political and economic organization.

Through their organizations, the Inupiat in particular have called for the cooperation of science in the development of their community as well as of their resources. But they have also pointed out the colonial framework in which science has always been carried out in the Arctic. If science in the Arctic is to be objective and creative, it is not to be carried out against the Eskimos or for them, but with them. The people of the North Slope have yet to see that occur.