

U.N. organ reviews circumpolar Native concerns

Note—Previous issues of this newspaper discussed the trip by the Tundra Times editor to northern Norway for a conference on arctic cultural development and preservation sponsored by an arm of the United Nations. In a more serious note, the following is a summary of comments presented by the editor to

representatives of arctic nations and United Nations officials assembled at the Sami Institute in Kautokeino last month. While our editor was the sole participant invited from the United States, the views expressed are entirely our own.

I am pleased to have been designated as the participant from

the United States to this conference. It is an honor to be able to meet with such distinguished representatives of arctic cultures from the circumpolar nations. My name is Thomas Richards, Jr. I am an Inupiaq (northern Alaska Inuit) Eskimo born in the village of Kotzebue, Alaska. Although both of my parents are Kikiktrgrumuit (Kotzebue area Inupiaq), my ancestry includes Inupiaq from the MacKenzie Delta of Canada and Bering Straits of Alaska.

I am the editor and publisher of the Tundra Times newspaper of Alaska, and chairman of the board and president of the Eskimo, Indian, Aleut Publishing Company, Inc. of Alaska, owners of Tundra Times. Our Alaska Native newspaper is the oldest statewide newspaper in Alaska, and the oldest independent Native American newspaper in the U.S. I am also a writer of

books and texts about Alaska Native peoples.

It is significant that these deliberations are proceeding under authority of Unesco. Some recent efforts by Native peoples of the arctic, in some areas, have allowed Natives to achieve a measure of self-control over their lives. The obstacles to this objective are great, and successes are limited to date. Accordingly, it is encouraging that efforts toward cultural survival of arctic peoples have received the attention of such an internationally-recognized entity as Unesco.

Every northern Native group is subject to overwhelming external pressures which threaten the survival of their cultures and chosen lifestyles. Traditional economies are threatened, as are the options for our peoples to develop and control new economies based upon their cultural

preferences, and principles of political and economic self-determination. The interest of Unesco in the survival and development of indigenous arctic peoples offers a measure of hope.

There are a number of concrete examples of external pressures on arctic peoples in Alaska. The attempts to destroy the Inupiaq whaling culture and tradition are widely known. Other such pressures include efforts to halt the annual Aleut harvest of the northern fur seal. Powerful interests, seeking to rapidly develop on-shore and off-shore reserves of oil and natural gas also cause concern about social impact on Native groups and disruption of traditional subsistence resource use patterns.

International economic interests, and state policy, encourage the massive development of bottom fish and herring stocks. Na-

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tive groups, particularly at the village level, are being encouraged to support such activity and to participate in such development. Little time, however, is allowed the villages to consider whether participation in such activity is compatible with traditional culture and lifestyle, and whether such development may threaten the availability of traditional subsistence resources.

Other examples of such pressures and conflicts include state policy toward management of fish and game resources. Harvesting of local food resources for personal use, barter or trade, is recognized as a priority use of the resource by official state policy. Native peoples, however, are not recognized as the primary users of this resource. Nor is their expertise as managers of this resource, with powers of regulation of subsistence activity, recognized.

Increasingly, competition for a limited supply of local food resources places strong pressures on the original users of the resource. Concern also is mounting over international treaties to provide for the management of such species as caribou. Inadequate attention is given to subsistence use of the caribou resource by Natives, as well as attention to the expertise of Native peoples in the management of the resource.

Subsistence rights are a great concern in the efforts for cultural survival. It is appropriate to consider the subsistence issue when considering the broader area of arctic "culture."

Subsistence lifestyles contribute in a significant way to the arctic cultures, in a manner in which the resource is harvested (contributing to development of social order, tribal and family relationships), and in the development of art forms of the culture from use of materials gathered from subsistence based upon the subsistence resources, in seasonal activities (including festival and celebrations based upon the subsistence lifestyles), and in literature and folklore and songs and dances, and in contributions to many various forms of cultural expression.

Apart from the question of subsistence, other matters present challenges to cultural preservation and development in

Native cultures. After many years of effort, primary and secondary educational programs in Alaska are finally under local, or regional, administration. Available funds are being applied to the construction or renovation of facilities to an acceptable level in the rural communities.

Financial resources which may then be applied to development of culturally-relevant programs in the education systems are very limited. Without the funds and expertise for development of an educational program which is relevant to the cultures, it becomes extremely difficult to ensure the continuation of such cultures. Native peoples, knowledgeable in their cultures, are not being educated as instructors or education administrators to any acceptable extent.

Natives who are qualified to function as "culture bearers" or "heritage bearers" in the education system are routinely denied the proper credentials to attain their rightful place as instructors in Native culture and tradition. In order for culturally-relevant education to take place, genuine educational materials of an acceptable quality are necessary.

At present, there exists no center nor institute for the development of Native cultural materials in Alaska. Support for Native artists and their development is also virtually non-existent. Unlike circumstances in many other northern nations, federal and state policy for the support and development of Native artistic and cultural expression is not a priority.

Apart from issues related to

continuation of Native subsistence lifestyles, pressures from economic development, opportunities for culturally-relevant education, and establishment of centers and institutes for the development and promotion of Native cultural and artistic expression, even more basic pressures exist in Alaska.

Alaska is a state which exports nearly two million barrels of oil each day. Yet, families in rural Native villages face a severe energy crisis. The availability (or limited availability) and extremely high cost of fuel, threaten the ability to maintain subsistence lifestyles, and threaten

to economically devastate Native families, and threaten the very existence of many small, rural Native communities.

Native peoples are responding to these pressures in a variety of ways. Politically, we are still in a position of exercise impact on

public policy decisions affecting the lives of Natives. Native leaders occupy key leadership positions in the state political structure. The Native lobby remains a respected voice among federal decision-makers.

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Yet, Native are increasingly becoming more of a minority in the population of Alaska, even though they are still the majority in the areas in which they live. Thus, the political strength to influence policy is constantly being eroded.

Consideration is being given to development of local political entities organized under Alaska law, with broad municipal, home-rule powers. The North Slope Borough on the arctic slope of Alaska is an excellent example of the application of state law to effect local political self-determination.

The Borough has made great progress in achieving local control over the educational system, and to provide for development of vital community services and facilities, and to exercise control over economic activity through utilization of zoning authority. It has been thwarted in some respects in its efforts to win self-determination for its citizens and improve the quality of life, and to exercise constitutionally guaranteed powers. The state legislation has imposed limitations on the Borough's ability to tax the oil industry, a restriction without similar precedent in

state governmental history.

In response to concerns from villagers about protection of local cultures and lifestyles (including preservation of subsistence resources), the Borough has developed a comprehensive arctic coastal zone management plan to govern development in the area. It faces strong opposition from the oil industry, and potential defusion by state authorities.

Other efforts to minimize or contain the threats against Native organization of resource management entities. The Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC) is such an example. Efforts to halt the Inupiaq whaling culture and tradition have been motivated largely by international political and economic interest, and to a great extent by emotional reaction from the fringes of environmental and animal protectionist groups (who fail to recognize the human element as a valid link in the arctic ecosystem).

The AEWC has countered such activity through development of original and significant data about the status of the resource, and through imposition of self-regulation based upon the expertise of the leaders of the Inupiaq whaling culture.

A similar approach is being utilized by the Alaska Eskimo Walrus Commission. The Walrus Commission is advocating for application of management expertise of Natives after it has become apparent that other management approaches have failed. (The Pacific walrus is severely over-populated, threatening the well-being of that species as well as the entire ecosystem of the region.)

The state legislature has provided some funds for the activities of both the whaling and walrus commissions. Other similar approaches, recognizing local expert knowledge of the resource, are being developed for such resources as Bering Sea fisheries.

This will provide a very brief summary of circumstances which present threats to cultural survival of Native peoples in Alaska, and a brief description of efforts which are being expended to counter such threats.

Now I wish to address the question, presented in the background paper for this conference, with regard to identification of peoples who belong to indigenous "arctic cultures" in the United States (Background Paper by Sami Instituuta for Unesco Expert Meeting on

Arctic Cultural Studies, Page 5, Section 3).

Clearly, the Inuit (Inupiaq, Yupik and Siberian Yupik) of Alaska may be considered an "arctic people." It is my recommendation that, for the purposes of any future deliberations, consultations, conference, and projects or programs related to Unesco's activity in arctic cultural studies, that the Alaska Inuit be considered as an arctic people.

It is my further recommendation that the rest of the Alaska Native population be considered as "culturally-related" with arctic peoples, and therefore eligible for inclusion in Unesco's activities related to arctic cultural studies. By the phrase, "the rest of the Alaska Native population," I mean to describe tribal groups other than Inuit to include Athabaskan and Tlingit and Haida and Tsimshian Indian tribal groups, Eyak Indians and Chugach Eskimos, and Aleuts, and any other tribal group of Alaska recognized as "Alaska Native" by the United States.

I believe the description provided above is within the intent as expressed by the chief participants of the Unesco Expert Meeting on Arctic Cultural Studies held in Paris, France in August, 1978. The Final Report for those proceedings, Page 3, Section 8, makes provision for recognition of arctic cultures. The Final Report also recognizes that "Some of the 'Arctic' people live in sub-Arctic regions without losing the main traits of Arctic cultures, and they identify themselves as related to Arctic people with similarities in the field of cultures, languages and social system."

My recommendation, I believe, falls within the intent of that statement. It is also made in the absence of any legal definition issued by the United States, to the best of my knowledge, for "arctic peoples."

Specific recommendations with regard to the future direction

of projects undertaken from this effort, and to the theme of any such projects, and to the conduct and structure of such projects or activities, will be presented during the course of our deliberations during the conference.

One specific recommendation is for the issuance of an invitation to the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) in the planning of future projects and activities which may be undertaken in the realm of arctic cultural studies by Unesco. There are several reasons why I believe the participation of this organization should be arranged.

First, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference is the first effort by arctic peoples themselves to organize to consider issues (including cultural development and preservation) which affect them. Secondly, the benefit of the expertise of the ICC would be valuable in contributing to any arctic cultural considerations undertaken under the Unesco "umbrella." Thirdly, the individuals and leaders who are among the recognized members of the ICC are principles in the circumpolar 'community' and would be able to greatly assist with informing their populations of the arctic cultural studies effort and arranging their involvement.

In conclusion, I am encouraged by this attention to the problems of the arctic cultures. The external pressures on arctic peoples are enormous. This activity, utilizing the offices of Unesco, offers an opportunity for closer cooperation and communication among arctic peoples about cultural development, as well as discussion of common issues and problems.

The international community has a moral responsibility, if not a legal one, to allow arctic cultures to pursue their own cultural, economic and political development at their own schedule and to be left undisturbed in the enjoyment of their lifestyles.