

Setting the Rules

In some ways, Natives in Alaska have fared well under U.S. administration. Their cultures are basically intact, although we can't tell how long they may stay this way, given the current course of events. Unlike many other arctic regions, where the means of peoples' livelihoods are preserved in museums and institutions, Alaska villages are the stronghold of some of the last active hunting cultures in the world. Given present policies, or the lack of such, neither can we tell how long this situation may persist.

In the absence of a clearly-stated national or international policy on the arctic, confusion and controversy and conflict reign supreme in Alaska. This is evident in the agony over land-use policies, including subsistence. There is an absence of coordinated planning and activity for resource development questions, such as development of off-shore oil reserves in the Beaufort and Bering Seas and in other Alaskan waters. Education policy is disjointed, adapted loosely from models from other regions of the world, with meek bilingual and bicultural programs tacked on as an afterthought. Severe external pressures weigh heavily on local and original populations, as demonstrated in such issues as bowhead whale and walrus traditions, in the fur seal harvest, and confused game management policies. Ignorance prevails of needs for economic self-sufficiency, as in lack of attention given to requirements of village corporations. There is also great ignorance of the need for political self-determination, with constant threats to home rule powers of such entities as the North Slope Borough.

Perhaps the most cruel evidence of the problem is the lack of pride in arctic cultures, and the lack of meaningful commitment to cultural development and preservation. Other northern nations take great pride in original peoples. In the United States, the northern Native cultures are more often considered a blight on the country. It is often a given assumption that the original cultures are to disappear in the transition which occurs during the meeting of cultures. How many times, and in how many issues, has the phrase "Native problem" appeared in this country?

Not only do other northern nations take pride in the existence and promotion of original cultures and peoples, a commitment is made in terms of policy and financial support. Concrete efforts of national programs, backed by substantial funding, and under local Native control and direction, are found in every other northern nation. Canada supports Native electronic and print media, and subsidizes artistic expression. Greenland has its Inuit Institute, Denmark supports an Institute of Eskimology, and the Scandinavian countries underwrite the Sami Institute. In the Soviet Union, government assuance is given that Native languages are officially-recognized and in primary use in the arctic republics. These countries, though, are as negligent as the United States in forcing economic development pressures to become sensitive to original cultures and peoples' desires.

In a more subtle, yet equally effective manner, northern Native cultures are being as ruthlessly destroyed as Indian tribes in America were in the last century by overt military action. Something must be done soon to recognize the right of these cultures to remain alive on this earth. A culture which persists only in museums and institutions is a dead culture, and a vanished treasure of humanity.

This country, and the international community, needs an arctic policy to govern all types of development, and a policy which recognizes human tradition and activity to be central. Pride in the cultures we have should be encouraged, not destroyed. A commitment should be made to promote, preserve and naturally develop the original cultures. Even basic observation of declarations of the United Nations of human rights and the rights of minorities would help.

Some will say it is too late for this effort to be made. Yet, we suspect that many in villages, wanting to remain close to the chosen ways of their people, would welcome relief from the awesome pressures of destruction.