

AVCP convention

A remarkable event happened last week in the Yupik village of Alakanuk, on the Yukon River delta. Leaders of village councils, corporations and municipalities met to talk about their concerns about offshore oil development in western Alaska coastal waters. They also discussed possible creation of home rule borough governments in the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) and Calista Region.

Although the delegates to the special AVCP convention were Yupik Eskimos, the issues which were raised are matters which concern Native people in villages throughout the state. There is tremendous pressure to develop Alaskan OCS oil reserves, but little is known about the impact of such development upon the chosen lifestyles and livelihood of Native people.

Indiscriminate OCS development "in the national interest" could destroy the old, rich coastal Yupik cultures overnight. On the other hand, there is a remote possibility such development may create a beneficial local economy which may co-exist along side the "subsistence" culture and economy.

Such pressure on the coastal Yupik people, who have been left largely undisturbed in the enjoyment of their lifestyle for thousands of generations, pointedly raises such questions as "Does one way of life have to die so that another may live?"

There is an element of cynical fatalism in some circles about OCS development. Increasingly, we see the attitude taken that offshore oil development - much like the trans-Alaska oil pipeline - is inevitable. Native villages must face that fact and make the best of a bad situation, we are told.

However, if we are to believe that citizens possess the right to have a voice in matters which directly affect their chosen way of living, we must ignore the fatalism. Native people, and their villages, have faced great challenges in the past and have survived to perpetuate the thread of their cultures over thousands of years.

The way we see it, after listening to the views of village leaders at the Alakanuk convention, two things must happen in order for villages to successfully face the OCS challenge.

First of all, the villages need time to consider how to deal with the threat to their livelihood and culture. This means that final OCS sale decisions for offshore oil leases near Native communities should be put off until the end of the "five-year OCS leasing schedule." It is unfair to ask village people to make instant decisions and instant recommendations about matters which will have so great an influence over the quality of life enjoyed by many future generations of Native people. That should be the first priority.

Secondly, we have learned that Native tribes can have an influence over national policy if they are united in persuading decision-makers of the logic of their arguments. The OCS program affects all coastal Native areas. Other regions need to join with AVCP in creating a coalition of coastal Native communities to deal with offshore oil development.

The Alakanuk convention was a good beginning. Given time and organization, we can adopt and execute a plan for which future generations will thank us.