

# Anthropologist: History affects villages' plight

by Steve Pilkington

*for the Tundra Times*

Cultural anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan believes that although Toksook Bay and Alakanuk are only about 150 miles apart, the different histories of the two Western Alaskan villages have affected the way they will weather Alaska's current economic troubles.

Riordan has been living and working with the Yup'ik Eskimos in the two villages off and on since 1974, and she talked about the changes in the two communities during the "Quality of Life Symposium" at the 38th Alaska Arctic Science Conference last month.

At the symposium, which compared both urban and rural areas, dramatic differences between urban and rural lifestyles were shown.

Riordan focused on rural Alaska. She said that for the last five or six years, there have been drastic federal cutbacks in funding for Alakanuk which have caused the employment levels to drop over the past five years.

She also said that after studying the subsistence harvest patterns, the difficulties for Alakanuk's village hunters have increased.

"The immediate vicinity is hunted out of small game," she said, and fishing on the Yukon River has been increasingly hampered by regulations imposed by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game.

As a result there was no chum season last year in Alakanuk where chum is a major source of household income, said Riordan.

These economic hardships are having social consequences in Alakanuk and other villages in rural Alaska.

"A real telling statistic is in the fact that over the last 20 years, the regional suicide rate has gone from 5.5 to 55.5 per every 100,000 people," she said.

Riordan said she did not begin studying the two villages in an attempt to compare them.

"I just began to describe these two places that I knew best."

The histories of these two villages are the keys to understanding why two similar villages like Alakanuk and Toksook Bay are faring so differently, she said.

One reason may be that the two villages have had different histories of contact with Western civilization.

Toksook Bay did not have the car-

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ly contact with Western civilization which Alakanuk had because Toksook Bay is geographically isolated on Nelson Island. This is a partial reason why the traditional values of Toksook Bay are still intact, she said.

The reason for this was that Toksook Bay did not have the resources which Alakanuk had to attract outside businesses. Alakanuk began fishing and trading much earlier than Toksook Bay.

Riordan also said that a major part of the traditional culture of many Yukon Delta villages was lost when epidemics of influenza, tuberculosis and measles decimated half of the area's population during the first half of this century.

During and after the epidemics, the children were removed to schools outside the villages and did not have the time to learn their Native language or the hunting skills needed make a subsistence living, she said.

"Many of the children in Alakanuk no longer speak the language. Some of the kids understand it, but they don't speak it," she said. As a result, the elders have trouble communicating with the younger people.

Toksook Bay residents, however, have not lost their language, which is

an important reason why the traditions are remaining intact.

As a result, when money from the oil boom began to flow into the two rural villages, the situations were handled differently.

She said more money during the oil boom affected all of rural Alaska.

"But both of these places reacted very differently," she said.

"Because of their strong traditions, Toksook Bay used that money to broaden their strengths. There still is a lot of sharing, fish and game are still a very important part of life and employment often takes second place. They are hunters first."

In Alakanuk, as in rural villages all over the state, the money was only a short-term solution.

"Money given for capital projects was a kind of band-aid, and permanent jobs were not created. Now that the short term capital projects are done, the rural economies are in trouble."

If the history of Alakanuk, taking into account its early contact with outside people, and its large epidemic disruptions, Riordan believes that some of the reasons for current problems become clear.

But Alakanuk's future is what is being faced by the village residents now, she said.

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*—Ann Fienup-Riordan*

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Alakanuk's village corporation has been trying to break into the fishing industry by purchasing a fish processing vessel, but the fishing industry is a difficult industry to break into, she said.

Riordan believes that the current economic trend in the villages has bottomed out. And she has hopes for the future of both villages.

Lee Gorsuch, a sociologist working with rural Alaskan villages, said recently that he believes rural villages



are resilient enough to survive a bad economy.

Riordan agrees with him, but said, "I don't think it's at all clear that individuals will make it though."

Riordan hopes that the cities throughout Alaska, such as Anchorage, will begin working with the rural villages which are facing hard economic times.

"Urban Alaska can't afford to ignore their problems," she said. "The people are going to be forced to move out, and where are they going to come? They're going to come here."