

Corporations should lay groundwork for future

A realistic look at what has happened around the world tells us that like it or not, Alaska is in for changes.

The question right now is whether or not a lot of our people are going to be shaping the future or victims of change.

What has occurred in human history is that in most parts of the world the way of life has changed from hunting and gathering to domestication and increased production. Here in Alaska, I'm afraid we are still thinking in terms of hunting and gathering while the rest of the world is passing us up and will soon be pushing for access to our potential.

If we just look at the salmon industry, we can see what has happened. Not too many years ago, salmon was a household item across much of America. Alaska's salmon pack was fantastic. But to compete in the modern world something had to change.

We could increase the efficiency by the use of seines and fish traps to keep production costs down. But when this was tried we were not increasing the resource, and so many people rightfully complained that we were robbing the seas, destroying the fish stocks, and wiping out the small fisherman. So now we have a situation in which a lot of fishermen compete, and not too many of them make a lot of money.

Another option would have been to increase the resource

through aquaculture. We are just getting started with that. In the meantime, salmon has become a luxury item for most Americans. Efficiency has gone down, the stocks are small and the price is high.

If we take another example, we can see just the opposite effect. When the Europeans first came to the New World, turkeys were wild birds. Soon they were domesticated and production has gone up so high that today turkey is one of the cheaper foods on the market.

There are still wild turkeys for the sportsmen to hunt, but the domestic turkeys are the basis of a large industry and feed a lot of people. There might be a message here for the salmon industry. In the future, as world population goes up, and people look for more food, there will be increased pressure for food from the sea.

Here in Alaska, we are still thinking in terms of hunting down the wild salmon on the high seas when we should be working on aquaculture and a form of domestication of salmon to increase the stocks.

What is true of the salmon resource is true of many other things. Sure it is important to protect the wild herds of caribou, but that doesn't mean we have to give up on the possibility of domesticating them as reindeer and developing a limited industry

to help feed the world and provide a long-lasting economic base for our people.

There is a lot of talk about logging our trees, but where is the push for reforestation and management so that it is really a renewable resource and not just something that is ripped off. People find a lot of wild berries in Alaska. But if they grow so well, is it possible to develop a berry farm and grow more of them, even bigger and better?

The real problem is that the skills of hunting, gathering and fishing are different from those of agriculture, animal husbandry or forestry. People simply have to learn new skills. The Chinese, Japanese, Norwegians, Europeans and nearly all the rest of the world learned this a long time ago.

It seems like we are still thinking in terms of simply taking what is there in the wild without planning for the future.

As the corporations look to the future are they really looking at what is inevitable or simply dreaming of what used to be or just the here and now? If they really want to be successful then they need to promote the training of their shareholders in areas that hold the most potential.

Thirty or 40 years from now, we may be out of oil, but we don't have to be out of timber, fish, and other resources. If we learn how to

develop these potentials properly and have people skilled in good management, conservation, domestication of resources then there is a great future for our young people.

The Delta Barley Project, the aquaculture programs, reforestation project and even Knotts Berry Farm show us what can be done. They also give us a clue to what the future will probably be. If Alaskans don't develop Alaska and manage it properly, it won't be long before midwestern farmers, Japanese seaweed growers and the timber industry begin to take over our State.

The University of Alaska began as an agricultural and mining school. For a long time the whole agricultural aspect has had to take a back seat to many other interests. It may be time to get back to some of the original ideas and start to reach out to help more of the rural people develop the skills they will need as the world crowds in and a life based entirely on hunting and fishing becomes a thing of the past.

If nothing is done, we are just laying the groundwork for a culture of poverty for our rural areas in the coming century.

Wally Olson
Juneau