

Voices unheard

In a room less than 100 yards from where the sea ice of Norton Sound meets the shore of the Seward Peninsula, a man pulls an orange from a box. Near the box, a group of elders from a region hundreds of miles wide sit. Some of them are eating oranges, too. The man peels the orange and eats it. It is very good; very juicy. Where did it come from? California? Texas? Arizona? Florida?

No matter. The only thing that counts now is that it tastes good. Funny thing, the man muses, he has spent stints in orange-growing country in the Southwest, and has sometimes had trouble finding an orange as good as this one. One thing, though, they were a lot cheaper, down there.

The old people sitting nearby have gathered to talk about oil. Maybe the folks who grew these oranges are driving around somewhere burning oil that came from Alaska.

The old people are enjoying the oranges. A rare treat for some of them who come from villages where oranges are seldom seen. Nice, but their lives do not depend upon those oranges. They do, however, depend upon what is out in that sea where all the ice is. The fish, the walrus, the seals, and the whales.

They depend upon them, their fathers depended upon them, and their fathers before that; long before even the Russians sailed these waters. Even with an increasingly modern society, most of their descendants depend upon these sea-animals as well. For thousands of years, the people have managed the hunt, the catch, and lived with the environment in such a way as to insure that this food they have depended upon would last forever.

In the room with the elders are oil people, and government people. Don't worry, they say, we've the best technology. Our oil operations will not endanger your hunt. The old people are skeptical. They may not be as educated in technological ways as that address them, but they know the sea, and the tremendous force of the ice once it begins to move. They know that extended oil operations have never taken place in conditions such as those here, and they fear what may happen when the forces they know overpower the technology known by the people addressing them.

Still, they do not ask for no oil operations ever. Just give it more time, they say. Be sure the technology is safe first. Let's work in some ways so that our people can benefit too, and have cheaper gas and jobs; jobs which now are more likely to go to people from orange producing country than from the North.

When the visitors leave, they compliment the old people for having been part of a public process, where different voices are aired and everybody participates.

Democracy in action.

But afterward, events work just the way they would have had these meetings never taken place. The Secretary of the Interior totally ignores the people of the area, and decides what will happen there. A judge who has never lived on seal or walrus, decides the sea is not part of their homeland and not subject to subsistence laws. Another oil lease sale is approved in equally sensitive waters a short distance away.

We know this nation's long-term need for oil, even if there is a short-term glut. Yet, it seems there is something wrong when people thousands of miles away who at best know little of the ancient lifestyles of this region and at worst nothing at all, refuse to listen to those whose domain of the area far precedes the exploitive forces so deaf to their voice.