

Questions, Answers on Land

Q. 8: HOW DID WE ESKIMOS, ALEUTS AND INDIANS USE OUR LAND?

Long before the Caucasians came to Alaska, we Natives had conquered an Arctic semi-continent without using any modern technologies. We hunted, fished, trapped, and gathered vegetation from the land for food, and used our animal and forestry resources for clothes and shelter.

For the most part, we built and lived in permanent villages moved seasonally to our hunting and fishing sites, and traveled between these on old established trails. We used the rivers for travel and communication as well as for our food supply.

We passed along messages and items of trade from one to another, all up and down the river

systems of Alaska. Some of us traded with Asia, across the Ber-

As we still are today, our ancestors were deeply attached to the land by a feeling of reverence and awe for the earth, and all of nature; the land was their life, as it still is ours. Though individuals did not own land personally, all enjoyed free use of it within their groups, and some kinds of sites—fishing sites for instance—were handed down within families.

The various tribes, villages, and family groups strictly observed the traditional boundaries of their hunting and fishing areas. For the most part they made agreements and peacefully settled any disputes between tribes at gatherings like the yearly Nutch-la-waya, where the Tanana Ri-

ver meets the Yukon, near the present town of Tanana.

They enjoyed their lives; certainly they knew hunger and hardship at times, come a bad year, or a shift in game migration, but they adjusted their numbers to what each area would support. The land supported more Native people in those days than it does now—about 73,000, compared to 60,000 today, it is estimated.

The Federal Field Committee puts it more technically:

“The aboriginal Alaska Native completely used the biological resources of the land, interior and contiguous waters in general balance with their sustained human carrying capacity.” (Alaska Natives and the Land, 87, 1968)