

The ocean is all-important to us

To the Editor:

Between Oct. 5 through 8, 1981, the BLM-OCS held public hearings in Nome, Savoonga, Emmongak, Unalakleet, Kotlik and Bethel then holding the final hearing in Anchorage. This hearing concerned the proposed sale of the Norton Basin for off-shore oil development.

As a citizen and resident of the area, I support the State of Alaska in delaying the sale of the proposed area. As an Eskimo, I support the alternative — NO SALE. With the recognized national need of oil, I see that the need dictates the situation. As a Native, I recognize the dependency of the people on the ocean for its traditional way of life.

In our Native dialect, Eskimo means "real people." We are proud to be Eskimo. Our way of life is mainly subsistence from the ocean. If the oil people damage the ocean, it will break the chain we live from.

In the Draft Statement, a number of chains are apparent but not necessarily drawn out to be apparent. As a person with a limited amount of education, I can recognize that should one link of that chain be affected dramatically, that the rest of the chain also would be dramatically affected. Each spring and fall, the migration habits of the many listed animals become very apparent as we watch the thousands of animals pass. The fact that this segment of the ocean is one of the major migration paths that salmon, herring, seals, birds, walrus, and whales use is a fact that the people have gotten used to and for granted. Any adverse effects by an oil spill certainly would change that.

Being a vital part of this chain, the ocean is the home of this chain that our culture stems from. If this chain were to be broken by a major oil spill, the government will find many of us dependent on it.

Being dependent on welfare would take the pride from our people. First, they would take the oil, then our subsistence life, and last would be

our pride. Our cultural heritage would die should this happen. Our future generations would never find out how enjoyable Eskimo foods are. Like poi is to Hawaiians, so is seal oil to us. We must prevent this chain from breaking.

We, as a Native people of Alaska, are concerned that this proposed sale carries the possibility of changing our traditional way of life. The ocean is our concern. It is more than our concern, it is our way of life. With this concern in mind, we question the oil companies ability to drill offshore without adversely affecting the environment.

We doubt that there is sufficient technology to drill offshore where ice up to six feet thick (our observation — two feet, statement's observation)

is being moved by winds and tides that oil companies have yet to drill in. As a Native of the area, we recognize that the ocean forces are not to be trusted. We tend to believe our eyes rather than the eyes of the satellite.

Until the oil companies can find a safe, effective way to drill without hurting the environment, we want this proposal filed for the future generations to decide. It is our option to educate our children and prepare them for the impact this project will bring.

We are the people a major oil spill will affect and for that reason, we must try to stop or delay this proposal. It will hurt our life-style in the worst possible way. The Eskimo's diet would decline rapidly, going from rich to poor. The ocean provides much of the food that a majority of the people cannot afford due to the high prices. We are a healthy breed as long as we keep our diet and prevent a demanding society from damaging the home of the animals that make up the environmental chain we so depend on.

With our concern for our traditional way of life, we are concerned that Interior Secretary James Watt has accelerated the oil and gas sale beyond our ability to oppose the sale democratically. With this accelerated pace, we recog-

nize that there is a need for the American public to become aware of this segment of ocean that the Native people of Alaska depend on so much. The publicity given this sale has been very poor due to the accelerated pace that the proposed sale has been given.

We, as a Native people are not familiar with the business of publicity so there is a recognized need of help from people who are professionals at it. It would be nice to have Walter Cronkite on the side of the Native people who are so dependent on the ocean for living. We feel as though we are a part of the ocean he speaks of.

If Walter Cronkite and the American public were to be aware of how important the ocean is to us and how our lives as a Native people have changed so dramatically perhaps he, himself would be a leading spokesman against any oil development in an area so important to so many species of animals.

The Native people 50 years ago did not have electricity, police, airplanes, telephones, snowmachines, "running" water, trucks, motors, etc. We were still in an age where we depended on physical labor to survive.

Our culture has changed with the introduction of all the above items plus we were not bothered by the problems of welfare, unemployment, alcoholism, drugs, crime, social competition and business corruption, since we were not a money-oriented society.

We are a people who are still learning the life style that has been introduced to us in the last 50 years. Your commercial about oceans prompted us to write about our need for publicity against the oil companies who have the money to tell the public differently.

If you can help us in any way, it will be greatly appreciated by all the Natives in "the last frontier" and the environmental conservationists in the United States.

Sincerely,
Jeanie Koutchak and
Isaiah Towarak