

Subsistence — one non-Native point of view

By GARY H. HOLTHAUS

Editor's Note — The writer is the Executive Director of the Alaska Humanities Forum, a poet, and an educator who has taught school in rural Alaska.

As a non-Native looking at the question of subsistence, one is humbled and subdued. The issues are so complex, the problems so complicated, the cultural differences in our understanding of the land so great, that one is tempted to remain silent. Yet the discussions about subsistence so far have lacked some elements which seem

important to me. At risk of speaking out of place then, I would like to venture the following comments.

Certainly part of the problem in our discussion of subsistence is one of definition. At a conference in Juneau a few years ago it seemed to me that non-Native participants saw subsistence primarily as "hunting, fishing, and berry-picking." Native participants, on the other hand, consistently talked of subsistence as a "way of life." That way of living seemed to include far more than hunting, fishing and berry-picking. The gulf

between the two definitions is profound.

The non-Native sees subsistence as another economic system, a part of culture. The Native seems to see it as the base upon which an entire culture establishes its identity; philosophy, religious belief and practice, law-ways, and the development of a variety of technologies which ensure survival, all fall within the realm of subsistence. As long as each group continues to use definitions that they believe are accurate, but are in reality very different, there will be an effective collapse in communi-

cations about the issue.

The difficulty in thinking of subsistence as an economic system is that such systems are usually associated in our non-Native minds with so-called "primitive cultures." We often say of such systems that they must move into as "cash economy" which is more sophisticated and complex — like our own, of course.

What too often is unacknowledged is that we *all* live in a subsistence relationship to the land, and all other economies, regardless of cash, credit, stocks or other

(See SUBSISTENCE, Page Twelve)

• Subsistence — one non-Native view

(Continued from Page Three)

media for the exchange of values, are essentially subsistence economies, based upon what the land has to offer for energy and raw material.

Although underground resources are not as mobile as a caribou herd, nor renewable as fish, nor susceptible to domestication as reindeer, our non-native pursuit of natural resources for energy and material for the subsistence of our culture has been remarkably similar to that of an aboriginal hunter. The nomadic oil geologist and the peripetetic prospector are both part of a culture whose base is rooted directly in an ancient dependence upon the land.

Among other things which the energy crisis reveals about our non-Native culture, our economy, and ourselves, is this: we are hunters still, and when the land no longer provides for our desires, we will starve. In the old way, when the caribou failed to come, people literally went hungry and finally starved. In our new non-native way, when the non-renewable energy sources begin to fade, General Motors lays off 38,000 people — the contemporary equivalent of hunger pains — and our fear grows in direct proportion to our unemployment.

The question of whether to protect the subsistence use of large tracts of Alaskan land immediately involves us in an ethical dilemma, not just an economic one. It takes us directly back to the old human question of freedom and limits. How far can I go in my development without infringing upon your freedom to live a subsistence lifestyle or enjoy a healthy environment?

The question leads one to wonder what really changes. We face a new land use era asking a question 4,000,000 years old. How quickly our new dilemmas reveal themselves to be old ones! To develop the land — to what extent and by what means — and how to allow room for subsistence is clearly an ethical question; and ethical/political/technical question, the effects of which are very personal in their impact on our individual as well as our corporate lives.

The real question is then one of freedom and limits. What are the limits between you and me in our behavior toward one another? One obvious limit has to do with our freedom to do what hurts another. It's the old business about, "My freedom to swing my arms ends where your nose begins."

In out time the dilemma of land use is expressed in a variety of ways:

Industry says: "I need the land for development."

The Native villager says, "I need the land for subsistence."

The environmentalist says, "I need the land for aesthetic and spiritual reasons."

Government says, "I need the land for energy." (emphasis provided)

The discussion reminds us of a French philosopher who got at this same issue from a somewhat different perspective. He said, "There are two things to avoid — one is becoming a victim; the other is to avoid being the executioner." We can argue for a long time over who ought to suffer the imposition of limits — for the lim-



POINT HOPE UMIALIK (WHALING CAPTAIN)

Tundra Times Photograph

its do exist — and they animate the entire subsistence question.

What we must do is settle that question without making anyone either a victim or an executioner . . . meet the world's need for energy, for agriculture, for wilderness, for sound economics, for continuation of appropriate lifestyles, for protection of minorities in our democracy, for peoples' right to live as they wish so far as that is possible, without being either victim or executioner. Often it seems that what we need to balance subsistence and development goals is a victim willing to have his head cut half off, and an executioner skilled enough to cut a head half off. The former is the ethical/political problem, the latter is the technical one.

The tension between villagers committed to maintenance of subsistence, and regional corporations facing the necessity for development may well be overshadowed by state, federal, industrial or military need for resources of all kinds.

What can be said then? And what does all this mean in terms of subsistence land use policy in Alaska? In any discussion of the subsistence issue at least the following must be kept in mind:

1. All of us, regardless of culture or economic style, depend upon the land.

2. Whatever public policy decisions about land use are made must be made in recognition that we are all subsistence economies, even though we may not all have subsistence cultures.

3. Whatever precedents we establish for Native subsistence may well apply to other cultures — especially our own — and may come back to haunt us if they are too forbidding or restrictive. When the oil becomes really short and our transportation systems are cut back, then all of us may be forced back upon the land, to a more traditional lifestyle. If the timing is wrong, that time may come just when our fish and game resources are exhausted because we have failed to protect them for the fu-

ture.

4. Great care and forbearance must be exercised, and all concession forewarned, in any discussion of who is a subsistence hunter and who is not.

5. The sustenance of life of which Native people speak includes far more than the harvest of fish, game and vegetation. They consistently speak of subsistence not as an economic system, but as a "way of life," in which the land which sustains the body also supports a systems of values, religion, mores, and life patterns which sustain the spirit. We may have something to learn from listening more closely to what village people have to say about this.

6. As long as non-Natives persist in believing subsistence is an economic system, Native people can only play into their hands and reinforce the misunderstanding when they base their arguments for subsistence upon the need for fish and game.

To say, "We need 1900 pounds of birds and game to keep us for a year," is an economic argument that leads to the non-Native "numbers game," balancing off one economic cost against another. It also reinforces the non-Native definition of subsistence as an economy, and deepens the difference in our separate ideas of what subsistence means.

7. The question of limits is crucial. The point of diminishing returns in resource exploitation is difficult to access, and even more difficult to establish and enforce.

One indication of the approaching death of our culture, or at least the establishment of some distant boundary to its survival, is the move from dependence upon the land for renewable resources such as game, grass, fur, or fish, to non-renewable resources such as oil and hard-rock materials. When our non-Native subsistence hunters shifted from buffalo and beaver to gold and oil, they also set the limits of our culture at the point when such resources disappear, unless we are able to find other substitutes for those re-

sources in time to prevent the collapse of culture.

We have all read accounts of the buffalo's important role in plains Indian life. How wonderfully adept they were at utilizing every part of the animal. Food, clothing, shelter, all were derived from the buffalo. It is not hard to imagine an anthropologist or historian 100 years from now describing the western culture represented by the Lower 48, and remarking on the skill with which we used all the parts of oil.

From some of it they manufactured clothing, from some shelter, elaborate transportation systems, warmth for their homes, incredibly elaborate industries, he will write, but alas, they were a one-resource culture, just like the plains Indians whom they despised for their simplicity.

When it became clear to the rest of the world how dependent they were upon that one commodity, they were at the mercy of foreign exploiters. Their lives were controlled by those who could cut off their oil supply just as the Indians were once at the mercy of General Sherman who understood that the quicker the buffalo were all killed off, the quicker the Indians could be controlled and contained.

Those people, the writer will say, knew history, but did not learn from it.

One final comment: We are one with the land — the chemical bonds between ourselves and the earth are clear. When land health declines human health declines, our economies decline, the quality of our lifestyle declines, even to the vanishing point.

The question of subsistence rights is an ethical one, not only a technological one.

We dare not believe that technology can let us off the hook of ethical and philosophical dilemmas. The dilemmas are ours forever, and we have to work at their resolution forever, considering the ethical aspects of the problem even before we consider the economic ones.