

Group wants only 'genuine' Natives

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for the Tundra Times

Slide show and presentation on ANWR — the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska and oil development, environmental concerns, the view of Alaska Natives.

EAST LANSING, MICH. — The poster announcing all this was photocopied on brightly colored paper like so many plastered around Michigan State University.

Yet I read it again. It was announcing what I knew to be an unusual event for Alaska, for conservationists and for Alaska Natives. Environmentalists were, for the first time that I could recall, not only paying attention to the environment but also to the original inhabitants of it.

As a former tribal council member and an Alaska Native in Kotzebue I knew that environmentalists have not disagreed with Alaska Natives as much as they have simply ignored us. Now a presentation about Arctic land and sea that included us. I decided it was worth attending.

The Department of Natural Resources auditorium was set up like a classroom for a board of undergraduates. The chairs were cramped and had irritatingly small pivoting writing boards attached to the right side of the interlocking row of seats.

The audience was a wide range of people, infants to elders, with a balance of gender. Noticeably the audience was almost completely uniform in race. It reminded me once again that the environmental groups seem to be almost exclusively Caucasian.

How to account for this?

There was a lot of commotion as people filed and looked over all the brochures and information sheets. There were also petitions available to sign. The brochures included the Alaska Conservation Foundation: "to keep our last wilderness treasure as a blessing to the whole world." — Dr. Margaret E. Murie. "We encourage special gifts in honor of

presentation.

The room was filled to capacity with a number of people standing along the wall. There were perhaps 300 or more people.

Alexander then introduced Susan Grace Stoltz, who was dressed in plain folk dress and had an acoustic guitar. She opened with song lyrics that spoke of "the Arctic place I call home." I thought about this later when she said she lived in Fairbanks (well within the tree line and south of the Arctic).

She had moved to Fairbanks from Michigan in the '80s. The next song lyrics included "brothers and sisters, call of the wild, I feel it in my bones."

She played the acoustic guitar with skill and sang with clarity and power. The audience vigorously applauded, displaying obvious enthusiasm.

The next song had audience participation. The key word was *garbage*. Every time Stoltz sang "garbage," the listeners shouted "Garbage!" They were loud.

The lyrics were an indictment of consumerism and waste by Americans. Still, the applause was strong.

At the conclusion Stoltz spoke of traveling across the country, meeting people who were "bummed out" that the earth is dying. She countered, however, that earth is not dying, but is being killed by people.

At the end of her last song, which was the introduction for the actual message, she urged us to "... write and tell them to stop."

The center piece of the evening was the slide show and narration by Glen-don Brunk. Brunk described himself as a trained game biologist who had moved to Alaska when he was 18 years old. The slides opened with Arctic birds, animals and scenery and then moved to the Prudhoe oil fields, pipeline and facilities.

His central argument was that Prudhoe was not the clean, ecologically sensitive production field the oil companies portrayed it to be. Rather,

A third argument, and the most intriguing from my perspective, concerned the portrayal of Alaska Natives and development. In the portrayal of Prudhoe's operation, Brunk noted that while caribou bulls might stay in active operations areas, Prudhoe was no longer a calving area.

Females and young only went by the buildings and pipelines when driven by heavy mosquito infestation. This has bearing on ANWR and Alaska

Natives. What is to be done?

I would not argue in behalf of Kaktovik's leaders. They are capable of making their own defense, if they are aware they are being attacked. Instead, it seems more important to suggest that Brunk, Brunk's fellow environmentalists and perhaps many others need to acknowledge some realities in Alaska Native society.

Alaska Native politicians (and many Native leaders — not always the same)

I doubt many people would want to turn back the clock to pre-contact Native society. In Northwest Alaska, that would mean volunteering to a life where the average lifespan was perhaps less than 40 years.

Natives in that some locations targeted for exploration are just that — places where caribou bear their young.

During the presentation, Brunk stated that Kaktovik nevertheless approved of oil exploration because the leadership was motivated by greed and a short-sighted belief in the power of money to correct social problems.

In contrast, Arctic Village and Venetie were described as a part of the 7,000 people of the Athabaskan nation who had by an agreed document opposed opening ANWR to oil exploration and development.

According to the presentation, the Alaska Natives who were against oil exploration and development were acting on their heritage and tradition.

What to make of all this? Brunk asked people to sign a petition against ANWR exploration and development anywhere in the area including the coastal zone currently under consideration by Congress.

He argued oil exploration in ANWR is short-sighted.

As an Alaska Native and a citizen of the state, I felt as though I had visited an environmental church service, perhaps the church of Henry David Thoreau.

The participant songs, the call for a conversion from our consumer philosophy, the potent mixture of argument and emotional persuasion, combined with every appearance of sincere conviction by both Stoltz and Brunk was an experience in environmental evangelism.

The present road of America is dark, short-sighted, flawed, bound for destruction, but there is hope in individual conversion and commitment. Individual salvation and working together as a community of believers was a familiar chord. We have many missionaries in rural Alaska.

The portrayal of Alaska Natives was also familiar. There seems to be an assumption that if Alaska Natives realize and begin to act on our dependency on the cash economy we are no longer genuine Natives.

However, others argue our failure to address our dependency on cash is producing a social disaster for Alaska

face the same dilemmas all people in decision-making capacities face — there are rarely black and white reasons or choices.

Brunk portrayed Prudhoe only in negative terms. During the 1960s and '70s when Prudhoe was being constructed Alaska Natives had no veto power on the project. If by some turn of fate Alaska Natives could have had more say about development in their own backyards, many would have nevertheless allowed it.

Brunk would argue that is short-sighted and greedy (certainly that is the way Kaktovik's leaders, when doing so, are described).

Having had the occasion to meet, interview, talk with and listen to a number of prominent Alaska Native leaders, I would say that a few seem definitely short-sighted and greedy. Many, however, realize there is no turning back the clock and no easy answers.

I doubt many people would want to turn back the clock to pre-contact Native society. In Northwest Alaska, that would mean volunteering to a life where the average lifespan was perhaps less than 40 years.

Traditional life was richly intelligent and constructed by people to take advantage of seasonal abundance. Nevertheless, starvation times recurred when animals following the normal population cycles eventually busted and/or weather prevented hunting and gathering at crucial times.

With the resources present, traditional society made tremendous use of the opportunities available. Today, many aspects of modern society have been introduced.

Alaska Natives cannot hide or escape from the tide of modern society. If Alaska Natives have the cash, if we have the job opportunities, if we have the training and education, some benefits of all these changes may be within our grasp.

Too many Alaska Natives don't have the prerequisites. Too many Alaska Natives rather than being agents of change are simply becoming victims of it.

There is a "catch 22" in how en-

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memory of family and friends." The brochure has a stamped envelope attached for donations.

Another announced in bold print "You Can Help Save The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge," and at the bottom, also in bold print, "Spread The Word!" The handouts pictured four puffins, three brown and one polar bear, one wolf, one porcupine and 11 caribou.

The meeting began as Rosemary Alexander of the Mid-Michigan Sierra Club thanked the MSU Forestry Club, the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society for their active support of the

he displayed photographs of piles of rusted oil drums, miles of tundra scarred from exploration.

The implication was oil exploration and development of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would also be mismanaged and destructive.

Brunk's second argument centered on the need for Americans to reduce wasteful consumption of energy by using more efficient refrigerators and appliances, buying fuel efficient cars and embarking on a lifestyle that lowered U.S. energy demands.

The first argument is serious, the second obvious.

• Environmentalists push their agenda

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vironmentalists, and perhaps others, see Alaska Natives. The problem begins with the continued population growth in rural Alaska.

If Alaska Natives continue to subsist primarily on hunting and gathering, the impact on animal, plant and fish populations may become objectionable. Several Sierra Club members and many sport hunters have said this line has already been crossed.

However, if Alaska Natives attempt to enter the cash economy as producers, then resource development will also have a negative impact on animal, plant and fish population.

What is to be done? Reduce the population of Alaska Natives? That has not yet been suggested. If Alaska Natives rely too heavily on what surrounds their communities they are open to criticism.

If Alaska Natives become too committed to the cash economy they are also open to criticism by environmentalists for the inevitable consequences of such an economy.

Let me note that environmentalists are not the only non-Native Americans who have what can only be described as an odd (odd at least to many Alaska Natives) standard of what "Native" is. That is, we are less Native the more

we are successful in taking Western tools and organizations and using them for the benefit of Alaska Native society.

Alaska Natives are seen as thoughtless rubes if we fail in business and as "sold-out Brooks Brothers capitalists" if we succeed.

The only real Natives are pristine and pre-European, according to many Americans.

Environmentalists just seem more bitten by this bug than others. Few people, though, would argue Americans are less American because they don't drive huggies or have slaves, perform surgery with anesthesia and recognize the right of women to vote.

I've never heard people complain or consider the Japanese to be less Japanese because they are no longer politically divided into samurai, merchants, artisans, peasants and royalty. The Japanese are not seen as less Japanese because they now manufacture cars, stereos and use Western medicine.

Alaska Natives, however, are commonly viewed as no longer Native if we look any different from "Nanook of the North" or the photographs of Edward Curtis.

American and Japanese society can modernize and still be American or Japanese. By such a narrow view, Alaska Native society can only freeze

in time like the Amish or be considered less Native. It is time to consider why this is so.

I also find it strange on the part of environmentalists like Brunk that they will push their agenda about what should be done in rural Alaska in East Lansing, Mich., and across the "Lower 48," but admittedly do not go into rural Alaska to talk with the people who live in the "wilderness" they wish to "preserve."

I can only wonder for whom the environmentalists are trying to protect the wilderness. Is rural Alaska to be preserved for future relatively wealthy individuals?

If this meeting and the individuals in the environmental magazines are any reasonable reflection of general membership, it would appear Alaska is to be preserved for a largely white and relatively wealthy audience.

It would be interesting to compare the average income of the Sierra Club membership with Alaska Natives.

I believe Brunk would say no, rural Alaska should be preserved for everyone. If he really accepts that Alaska Natives are a legitimate part of rural Alaska then he and his colleagues need to begin a serious dialogue with us about the direction and plans environmentalists have for rural Alaska.

In this respect, the oil companies at least pretend to be more sensitive to Alaska Natives. They at least humor

us with the appearance of interest in our views.

A historical perspective may help the discussion. Most of the parks and preserves in rural Alaska were created out of a process which began with Section 17 (d) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Over a period of 10 years of tough negotiations, with few financial resources, Alaska Natives managed to hold on to about 40 million acres of our own land.

The conservationists and environmentalists had much greater lobbying power and a more sophisticated political structure. They eventually won over 100 million acres of rural Alaska as protected land.

What we describe as our Alaska Native settlement was title to only 40 million acres of our former lands. As a result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the oil companies also received a clear shot at the oil fields and lands for the pipeline.

The division of money, land and rights in Alaska had far more to do with economic power than anything so abstract as justice.

Brunk argued that he did not visit rural Alaska because there was no money in it, as there is apparently in East Lansing. He knows the lessons of economics. He should not fault Kaktoviks or other Alaska Native village leaders if they have also learned the same lesson.