

Contaminants Have Found Us

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As a young boy growing up in Bethel I experienced heavy snows and cold temperatures in winter, but our summers were times of fun and lots of hard work in the fish camps. We did not worry about pollution as our lifestyles did not produce wastes dangerous to ourselves or to the plants and animals around us. Most of the things that we used were biodegradable or recyclable; we lived in harmony with nature. Now we have been thrust into an industrialized world with its extensive use of natural resources to manufacture tools and other items that are supposed to make life easier for us.

We, as indigenous people, were adapted to these climatic conditions and so were the plants and animals we depended on for food. Perhaps these special adaptations made us, the plants and animals more susceptible to certain anthropogenic contaminants. And now our own activities in using technological devices in our everyday activities are contributing to the physical, chemical and biological pollution of our Arctic ecosystems.

From what scientists have told us, you get the idea that there are two sources of contaminants—sources far from the Arctic and within the Arctic. The industrial complexes in Russia and other Eurasian countries contribute to the Arctic contamination. The main modes of transport for these contaminants are air currents, ocean currents and riverine systems. The meltwater in the spring carries the pollutants downriver to the deltas and into the oceans. Another way of transporting contaminants is through the migratory birds and mammals which winter in the warm climates and then migrate north in the summer. These are often at the top of the food web and are the most effected. But we, as a Native people, continue to eat these nutritious foods as well as maintain breast feeding for our young children. Because of contaminants contained in these foods that we eat, we may very well have a higher exposure to and accumulation of contaminant contents. Some of the major areas of concern for the effects that these contaminants can

have is “influencing the ability to conceive and carry children, reducing our defense against diseases, affecting children’s mental development or increasing the risk of cancer” (AMAP, 1997).

How do we as Alaska Native people and others begin to alleviate the situation? As long as we believe that science and technology is the answer to our problems, we will forever remain in the morass of the modern world. Unless we encourage our youngsters to go to the Elders and to pursue higher education to learn another way of making sense of this world, we will never get out of this trap. We must relearn our own Alaska Native languages and ways of making sense of this world. We have a way of looking at the universe that recognizes there are different perspectives—the outward and the inward. By using both viewpoints we can gain wisdom.

The Eurocentric way of knowing tends to rely on the physical and intellectual processes and pays less attention to the emotions and the spiritual dimensions. We must find a way of marrying the senses with the spiritual side for a more balanced perspective. Our Native languages are of wholeness and healing. They are languages of Native eco-philosophy, or “ecosophy”. We need to relearn how to live in harmony with nature. Our languages describe these thought worlds, these world-views. Our space-time concepts are cyclical according to the moon phases, seasons and the plant and animal cycles that determine the times of abundance and times of scarcity. The location and timing of these cycles give us scheduling and spacing tools. To relearn and revitalize our Alaska Native languages and cultures is to liberate ourselves from the industrial and materialistic prison into which we have been thrust.

To relearn our mythology that Raven created Mother Earth helps us realize that we cannot think of ourselves as being superior to anything of Mother Earth. Raven is a deity in this mythology but Raven can also be a buffoon, a comedian and a picaresque. The reason we do not worship the raven is because we are animists, not theists.

We must relearn our history but not from history books. We learn history particular to an individual, a family, a community from the quliraat and from the mythology, galumcit, stories, placenames, songs, dancing and drumming peculiar to that place. All these will give you a strong sense of who you are and where you are from. This beautiful concept of respect becomes clearer to us as it is connected to a belief system with high moral attitudes, rules and standards for personal character to become the best person one is capable of being. All of this is needed to begin to rebuild a new world based on what we

learned from our ancestors, coupled with selective adaptations from the contemporary world.

Here are a few suggestions that we can work on: Insist on sustainable development—perhaps projects that require we work closely with nature—regenerative or reclamation activities such as cleaning up wetlands and fish-spawning areas. We must demand that industries and manufacturers find ways to reduce the use of natural resources, reduce packaging and pay attention to effluent and emission laws. We must demand that manufacturers of such things as TVs, microwave ovens, snowmachines and other durable goods redeem and recycle those items when they become inoperable—perhaps they could establish a “lend-lease” program. We should begin to assess what technological tools are acceptable in the village instead of accepting whatever comes along. Let’s become more biologically literate, not just electronically literate; let us strive to live healthy.

I think that if we begin to pay attention to such matters, we will begin to live life with a strong sense of belonging, discipline, independence and generosity. After all, the ultimate standard is to live a life that is healthy and stable in a healthy and sustainable community.