INDIGENOUS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NEW WORLD ORDER:
THE CASE OF ALASKA

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For the third time in as many years, the last session of the Alaska State Legislature was called upon to take up a proposed amendment to the Alaska Constitution submitted by the Governor, calling for the establishment of a "rural preference" for the use of subsistence resources (i.e., fish, game) in situations of scarcity. Imbedded in this proposed amendment were long-standing political, economic and cultural issues that have pitted Native against non-Native people, rural against urban residents, subsistence against commercial and sport users, state against federal governments, and naturally, Republicans against Democrats. Given the polarized political landscape in Alaska, the proposed amendment had little chance of being approved for submission to the voters, even though public opinion polls indicate the amendment had widespread support among the general public. So the debate continues, and this week, the Chambers of Commerce in Alaska joined the battle, weighing in on the side of Native people and calling once again on the legislature to put the issue before the voters.

Most salient in this debate continues to be several substantial underlying differences in perspective, some political, some ideological, but most fundamental and intractable are the differences in world views, between those of the newcomers to the area (i.e. the miners, loggers, oil field workers, seasonal fisherman, tourists, and even the occasional environmentalist), and the Native people with roots in the land that go back millennia. But no longer can these differences be cast in simplistic either/or terms, implying some kind of definable dichotomy between those who support subsistence vs. cash economies, or traditional vs. modern technologies, or anecdotal vs. scientific evidence, or indigenous vs. Western curricula. These lines have been blurred with the realities that Native cultures are not static, and Western structures are no longer dominant. Instead, we now have a much more fluid and dynamic situation in which once competing views of the world are having to seek reconciliation through new structures and frameworks that foster co-existence rather than domination and exploitation, one over the other.

The current state of affairs in the relationship between Native and non-Native people is still very tentative, however, and much of the work is on-going, with legislatures, commissions, task forces, working groups, conferences, workshops, symposia and seminars convening throughout the North, to craft new laws, principles, guidelines, strategies and structures to fit the much maligned "new world order." Since this is far too complex an arena for me to provide any more than a cursory introduction, I will focus the remainder of my remarks on a few features of the current landscape that illustrate some of the actions that have been taken and the contributions

that indigenous people are making to the institutional and cultural fabric of contemporary Alaska.

Eight months ago, on March 20-21, 1996, officials from the eight Arctic countries who were signatories to the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in Rovaniemi, Finland in 1991 (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the U.S.), held the Third Ministerial Conference on the Protection of the Arctic Environment in Inuvik, Canada. Out of this meeting emerged the "Inuvik Declaration on Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development in the Arctic," including a strong endorsement of the necessity for indigenous peoples participation in all aspects of the AEPS, as well as support for the continuation of the Indigenous Peoples Secretariat. The IPS is the latest effort by the three indigenous peoples representative organizations in the North (the Saami Council, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and the Russian Association of Indigenous Minorities of the North) to establish a presence in the decision-making arenas associated with environmental protection, sustainable development and human systems reserach in the Arctic. In addition to contributing to the various on-going programs sponsored by the AEPS (AMAP, CAFF, etc.), the IPS was instrumental in initiating the AEPS "Seminar on the Integration of Indigenous Peoples Knowledge," hosted by Iceland in Reykjavik in September, 1994.

One week prior to the seminar in Reykjavik, Native people in Alaska, through the Indigenous People's Council for Marine Mammals, had convened their own workshop in Anchorage on "Alaska Native Traditional Knowledge and Ways of Knowing," with a particular focus on the role of traditional ecological knowledge in subsistence resource management issues. The major focus of concern at this workshop was the multiple and often conflicting views on the meaning of some of the most fundamental terms in the debate on subsistence resource management - i.e., "subsistence" and "resource." After generating a list of over forty different interpretations of the word, "subsistence" alone, the workshop participants concluded that only with a concerted statewide, national and international political and educational effort in cooperation with the other indigenous people of the Arctic, would they be able to have their voices heard in policy-making and management arenas. Subsequently, they have received funding from the National Science Foundation, through the Alaska Federation of Natives, to establish the Alaska Native Science Commission to oversee scientific research impacting Alaska Native communities, as well as additional funding for a major education initiative to integrate indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing into the educational systems in the State. They have also become actively involved in examining issues related to the lingering effects of atomic testing in the Aleutians, radiation experiments in the Chukchi Peninsula, mercury contamination in the Yukon and Kuskokwim river drainages, Arctic haze and acid snow across the North, oil spill contamination, and the impact of deep sea fishing practices on the subsistence livelihood of coastal communities.

So what is it that Native people bring to the examination of these issues that differs from the work and perspectives of other interested parties, besides an intrinsic dependence on the sustainability of the natural resources for their physical and cultural survival? I will touch on a few of the contributions that Native people are bringing to the table, all of which serve to complement and add to, rather than displace the knowledge base that continues to be generated by Western scientific means.

One of the most important contributions that Native people are bringing to the research, policy-making and educational arenas is an extended temporal dimension, that is a long-term perspective spanning many generations of observation and experimentation, which enriches the relatively short-term, time-bound observations of the itinerant scientists. As one Yup'ik observer put it, the Native perspective adds breadth to the scientists depth (Kawagley, 1995). As a result, patterns and cycles that are not evident in the scientists data base of detailed in-depth short-term observations can be factored into the equation for analytical and decision-making purposes. One Inuit Elder chided fish and game biologists who were proudly displaying charts showing 30 years of data on polar bear observations along a stretch of the Beaufort Sea, indicating that the Inupiaq record went back 300 years, and that just because it hadn't been written down didn't mean it was any less reliable. Another Yup'ik hunter triggered research linking industrial pollution from factories as far away as Central Europe and China to "acid snow" through his detection of changes in the coloration of tundra plants in Western Alaska, which he had observed over a period of 40 years. As a result, he was invited to participate in an international conference on "Arctic haze" at Cambridge University, to provide a dimension that was not readily available through conventional scientific observation.

Coupled closely with this long-term temporal dimension is another important contribution that Native ways of knowing provides, that of linking human interaction with the environment in ways that demonstrate and exemplify the interconnectedness of all the elements that make up an ecosystem. While Western scientists tend to specialize and conduct research in one component of an ecosystem at a time, the Native observer is immersed in the system in its totality and thus is more likely to recognize how the various components relate to and depend on one another over time and across species. An Aleut observer, Larry Merculieff, made this point forcefully at a Marine Mammal Conference in 1991, which he helped organize to deal with the consequences of the elimination of the fur seal harvest on the Pribilof Islands and the virtual elimination of yellow fin sole in the Bering Sea due to extensive bottom-trawl fisheries, both of which had been mainstays of the Aleut economy in his community. Let me quote his comments verbatim:

> Western scientific research systems are too specialized. Bird scientists study birds. Marine mammal scientists study marine mammals. Fishery scientists study fish. They specialize even within a single category. For example, bird scientists study reproductivity by counting breeding birds on cliffs, as one project. Another project may study just murres and kittiwakes, but not cormorants or puffins or least auklets, or fulmars or sea gulls. Another project may study cliff nesting birds at sea. Very few studies are done on how each species interacts with each other and under what environmental conditions.
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> Because of how different scientists are funded and because scientists do not want to step on another scientist's territory, there is little if any coordination between research on different species. Marine mammal scientists do not closely coordinate with oceanographers and climatologists. Everything is placed in specialized, separate boxes, even though we know that everything is connected. Some Soviet scientists researching the Bering Sea call American scientists "anti-ecologistic" because of American emphasis

> on studying single species. We will never understand the Bering Sea unless we understand the connections of all things affecting it. The Western scientific system is unable to do this.
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> We see everything in terms of connections. When we hunt, we know weather, temperature, wind direction, presence of sea ice, how the ice is packed, time of day, type of season, human activity - all affect the behavior and survival of wildlife. We observe all these things all our lives.
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> We must act to use our knowledge to re-direct how everything we depend on is being managed by over specialized scientific systems. Scientists wonder what is happening to seals, sea lions, and birds. In the Pribilofs, we watch sea lions eating seal pups with greater frequency then ever in memory. We see chicks on bird cliffs dropping to the rocks below because they are too weak. We notice how seal pelts are thinner than ever in memory. We notice how mature bull seals are smaller than just ten years ago. This tells us that all these species are having food problems. But no scientist or manager is interested in these observations. Every coastal village where there is strong dependency on the sea for a livelihood and way of life have their own observations. We should share this information among ourselves and then act on it (Merculieff, 1991).

Since 1991, through actions of people like Larry Merculieff, including the formation of the Indigenous People's Council for Marine Mammals, Aleut practitioners and Western scientists have become collaborators in looking at the Bering Sea as an ecosystem. As a result of the input of Aleut observers, many new hypotheses have been put forward to be tested with the arsenal of specialized techniques and technology provided by Western science. Of particular concern at the moment are questions that have been raised regarding potential radiation leaks from underground nuclear tests on the Aleutian island of Amchitka in the 1970's, which may be impacting the food chain in a critical area of migration and feeding of sea mammals and various species of birds and fish, with potential consequences for sea mammals and salmon runs all the way up the western and northern coast of Alaska to Canada, as well as the coastal regions of Russia, Korea and Japan. Needless to say, questions such as these are not always eagerly embraced by the government agencies called upon to fund the necessary research.

Another important contribution that Native people are making to our understanding of sustainable living is in recognition of the dynamic nature of cultural systems. Unlike the Western observers tendency to freeze indigenous cultural systems in time, as though they existed in some kind of idealized static state destined never to change, Native people themselves, as a matter of cultural survival have been quick to adapt new technologies and to grasp the "new world order." While retaining a keen sense of place and rootedness to the land they occupy, they have not hesitated to take advantage of new opportunities (as well as create a few of their own) to improve their quality of life and the efficiency of their lifestyle. This is done, however, within their own framework of values, priorities and world view, so that the development trajectory they choose is not always the same as what outsiders might anticipate, or even recognize.

The recognition of cultural systems as being dynamic and ever-changing in response to new conditions has enormous implications for sustainable resource management, especially where demographic changes and technological innovations have combined to put pressure on available resource populations beyond their carrying capacity. Nowhere has this been more contentious than in the regulation of the Bowhead whale stock available to Inuit hunters along the northern and northwest coasts of Alaska. For example, when Native people in northwest Alaska had to establish a priority between maximizing profits in their role as Native corporate shareholders and sustaining the subsistence whale hunt that would potentially be disrupted by ships bearing ore from their own world class lead/zinc mine passing through the migration route of the whales, they chose to place the hunting of the whales as the first priority, and established a panel of subsistence hunters from nearby villages who had the power to shut down the mine if necessary while the communities dependent on the whales conducted their hunt. Their multinational partners in the mining venture were not necessarily in agreement with this decision, but in this case, the resource and thus the decision, was in the hands of residents of the region.

Operating in the international arena is becoming familiar ground for indigenous people, with a growing political and scientific sophistication on the Native side of the table. In the on-going struggle between the scientists of the International Whaling Commission and those of the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, the disputes have been as much over the cultural basis of the technology employed in the boats, harpoons and spotting procedures as they have been over the conflicting estimates of the Bowhead population's size. Similar disputes over "traditional" vs. "modern" technology have been endemic to the efforts of the Eskimo Walrus Commission, the Alaska and Inuvialuit Beluga Whale Committee, the Alaska Sea Otter Commission, and the numerous other indigenous hunting and trapping organizations that have been established to deal with the national and international regulatory regimes that impact the lives of people dependent on subsistence resources for their livelihood.

Which brings me to the last dimension I would like to touch upon in illustrating the contribution that indigenous people are making to resource management issues in Alaska, and that is the qualitative dimension, particularly relating to the impact of resource management decisions on the sustainability of family, community and the cultural systems reflected therein. Whereas the Western-derived regulatory regimes for fish, game and marine mammals tends to rely on individually allocated mechanisms, such as quotas and licenses, for the management of harvests, Native people are more likely to seek a community oriented approach. For example, when the Arctic caribou herd in the Kobuk river drainage of northern Alaska went into a precipitous decline a decade ago, the local regional Native organization petitioned the Department of Fish and Game to allocate the reduced hunt by community rather than by individual, because local hunting practice designated expert hunters in each community to bring in the meat, so that everyone from the single mothers to the Elders would have ample food. Unable (or unwilling) to alter the regulatory regime to accommodate this request, Fish and Game enforcement officials chose instead to look the other way, so long as the total take of caribou didn't exceed the total of the individual allocations. This incident, along with several related events since, including a conference on Harvest Assessment and Monitoring last February that brought together over 200 Fish and Game officials and Native representatives from throughout the state, has led the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to place a renewed emphasis on its Subsistence Division, which

has been staffed as much by anthropologists as by the biologists who typically rule in that domain.

Finally, along with the emphasis on sustainability of community, Native world views are more inclined to see humans as a subset of the natural world in which they are precariously situated, rather than to see nature as a repository of resources for human exploitation. Though this orientation to the natural world is often misunderstood and misrepresented in non-Native contexts, its spiritual and tangible connotations are very much a continuing aspect of Alaska Native subsistence livelihood, and thus underlie indigenous perspectives on the sustainability of all resources. The significance of this perspective is reflected in the following Preamble to a statement on Indigenous Peoples and Conservation, prepared by Indigenous Survival International in 1991:

> The Earth is the foundation of Indigenous peoples. It is the well of their spirituality, knowledge, languages and cultures. It is not a commodity to be bartered to maximize profit; nor should it be damaged by scientific experimentation.
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> The Earth is their historian, the cradle of their ancestors' bones. It provides them with nourishment, medicine and comfort. It is the source of their independence; it is their Mother. They do not dominate Her; but harmonize with Her (ISI, 1991).

Summary

When examining resource utilization issues in Fourth World situations, we must consider the historical context, particularly in terms of who is determining what the rules of engagement are to be, and how those rules are to be implemented. In the colonial era, resources were viewed as subject to the wishes and imperatives of a nation-state form of government and a market-oriented economic system, with little thought given to the implications for the traditional knowledge, beliefs, skills and practices of the colonized indigenous societies. Resource management regimes were originally introduced by colonial administrators to serve the needs of the colonial powers, be they England, Canada, Denmark, Russia or the U.S.

As indigenous people have begun to assert their "aboriginal rights" to self-determination and self-government and assume control over various aspects of their lives (including the subsistence resources), one of the first tasks they have faced has been to reconstruct the institutional infrastructures and practices that were established by the colonial bureaucrats, to make them more suitable to their needs as a people with their own world view, identity and history. In some instances, the initial tendency has been to accept the inherited structures without question and perpetuate the systems that were in place before, including their implicit forms of decision making, social stratification and control. In most cases, however, there have been deliberate efforts to modify the colonial institutions, or create new institutional and political structures (e.g., Tribal Colleges, Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, the Eskimo Walrus Commission, along with various "co-management" systems), such that indigenous cultural forms and values are taken into account wherever possible. The inherent tensions involved in these undertakings are

illustrated repeatedly by the often conflicting events and actions surrounding environmental and resource management issues that impact all aspects of the societies involved.

The incongruities between Western institutional structures and practices and traditional cultural forms have not been easy to reconcile. Even when all the resources of a national government are turned to the task, the complexities that come into play when two different cultural systems converge present a formidable challenge. The specialization, standardization, compartmentalization, and systematicity that are inherent features of Western bureaucratic forms of organization are often in direct conflict with practices in indigenous societies, which tend toward collective decision-making, extended kinship structures, ascribed authority vested in elders, flexible notions of time, and traditions of informality in everyday affairs. It is little wonder then that resource management structures, which often epitomize Western bureaucratic forms, have been found wanting in addressing the subsistence needs of traditional societies.

This picture is not as bleak as it once was, however, as indigenous people themselves have begun to rethink their role and seek to blend old and new practices in ways that are more likely to fit the contemporary conditions of the people being served, and the resource being utilized. Regardless of whether the development goals of a community are directed toward internal quality of life issues or external economic considerations, the steps being taken to improve cultural, community and resource sustainability point toward greater involvement of indigenous people in everything from policy making to monitoring, from research to management practices. The actions currently being taken by indigenous people themselves in communities throughout the circumpolar region clearly demonstrate that a significant "paradigm shift" toward the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing is already well underway, with the resource management orientation shifting consistently toward an emphasis on the utilization of local knowledge and people in the decision-making processes.

The concluding paragraph of the position statement prepared by Indigenous Survival International best summarizes the current position of indigenous people throughout the Fourth World:

> The development and protection of traditional aboriginal economies based on their harvested resources is crucial for economic self-reliance of indigenous peoples. Some aboriginal peoples have taken steps to protect and promote their subsistence-based economies. This effort should be expanded into a cooperative relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, to undertake an extended campaign to promote the sustainable use of natural resources, and in particular the use of products traded by indigenous peoples. Use of these products should be seen as a way of expressing solidarity with aboriginal peoples, contributing to their future, and supporting sustainable relationships between all people and natural resources (ISI, 1991).

References

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