

Between Worlds - Shareholders' Lives

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ANCSA was supposed to improve Natives' quality of life. The results are mixed.

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Children in Kotzebue enjoy watching a watermelon-eating contest during a picnic put on by the Maniilaq Association. These children of NANA shareholders were automatically enrolled with the corporation, but most regional Native corporations don't automatically enroll those born after 1971.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

Selawik villagers have a few ways to make money: work at the world's largest zinc mine, fight fires, for sell whiskey for \$150 a bottle.

Mine work, however, takes employees away from home for weeks, fire fighting is sporadic and bootlegging in this town is illegal.

Almost 30 years after the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed, Natives still have a tough time finding ways to earn money in their villages. In northwest Alaska's Selawik, about 750 people survive on about 50 to 110 jobs, many of which are seasonal.

"When somebody loses their job in this office, we have about 20 people apply," said Tommy Ballot Sr., general manager for the Selawik tribal council. After ANCSA was passed, expectations were high about how the corporations would change Natives' lives. In 1973, Cook Inlet Region Inc.'s President Ralph Johnson said in an annual report that within 20 years, after careful corporate planning, "every Native shareholder should have a job."

Instead, in some Bush villages, as much as 80 to 90 percent of the adults are still without paid work.

Tommy Frank delivers drinking water in the village of Venetie. Like many villages in Alaska, the people here either must haul their own water or have it delivered.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

Native corporations have been more successful at bringing jobs to shareholders in cities. Most regional corporations have offices in Anchorage, and some have hotels, oil field service companies or other businesses that offer a career route for Natives, particularly those with an education. Corporations have also provided jobs to Natives in regions with a wealth of natural resources, such as Southeast and the North Slope.

Charlie Huntington, a 29-year-old laborer, might still be working two jobs if he hadn't found a position at Prudhoe Bay with Doyon Ltd., a regional corporation. Before coming to the oil fields, he worked at a 7-Eleven convenience store and held another job.

"I wouldn't have the house right now if I didn't have this job, and I wouldn't have the savings," said Huntington, who lives in Wasilla.

Alaska's indigenous people do earn higher incomes on average since ANCSA, in part due to Native corporations.

Ingram Clark, left and Wesley Mitchell work to install water and sewer pipes in the village of Selawik. About half the village was set to have indoor plumbing by this year.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

Yet poverty still grips most villages.

In 1990, 23 percent of Alaska Natives lived below the poverty level, compared with 41 percent in 1970, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, which has the most recent figures available. In 1990, the government set the poverty threshold for a family of four at \$12,575, although families with a much higher income would

still be considered poor by most standards.

Many villagers say making ends meet has actually become harder because of a greater reliance on cash.

Selawik's Vice Mayor Ethel Sampson, 33, grew up with gas lanterns and wood stoves in a cabin in the 1970s. Her father traveled by dog sled and she often walked with him to check snares for rabbits, as he fed the family by trapping, hunting and fishing.

Sampson, who works for the tribal council, now lives in a wood-frame house. Each month she must cover house payments, electricity, propane and the water she hauls home. Sewer and water pipes are being installed several feet above the marshy ground around her home, bringing running water and flush toilets to Selawik homes for the first time. However residents will have something else they never had before -- monthly sewer and water bills.

Michael Johnson, crew chief for Cook Inlet Housing Authority, works as part of his crew to rebuild a home for a CIRI elder, free of charge, in the Spenard district of Anchorage.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

"It's harder because there's so much to pay for," Sampson said. "When you have a big family, it's hard to get food on the table."

People now use snowmachines, outboards and high-powered rifles to hunt and fish, so subsistence requires money ˜ som sometimes thousands of dollars. Even if someone borrows a boat from a relative, gas sells for almost \$3 a gallon in some places in the Bush.

The real economic problem is that it's tough to develop businesses in most villages. Many Bush towns have few or no resources that can be sold, transportation in and out of town is expensive and often even basics, such as roads and running water, don't exist.

Verna Ward and Mary F. Kompkoff sort young oysters at Chenega Bay&Mac185;s oyster nursery. The village sells the young oysters to an oyster farm to raise once they've reached an appropriate size.

PHOTO BY M. SCOTT MOON

\ "How do you have time to work on economic development when you don't have flush toilets? They're trying to deal with that,\ " said Mitch Erickson, vice president of operations for Sitnasuak village corporation in Nome.

Despite their limitations, corporations have increased the number of Natives on payrolls. Arctic Slope Regional Corp. steers jobs in its region toward Natives. About 14 percent of its 3,800 in-state jobs are held by shareholders.

And in the village of Wales, about 100 miles northwest of Nome, Native corporation shareholder Vincent Okpealuk said even a few jobs make a difference for the 160 residents.

\ "It's a real tiny community,\ " Okpealuk said. \ "Three, four, five jobs do make an impact.\ "

John Shively, state commissioner of natural resources, said without ANCSA corporations, the Native hire rate would be much lower than it is.

\ "Native corporations have done by far the best job of anyone in terms of hiring their own people,\ " he said. \ "It's given people who are bright, aggressive individuals an opportunity.\ "

But Shively said ANCSA has not met its goals for rural Alaska: \ "You still have this sort of gnawing underlying problem in that most people do not have jobs.\ "