

## Between Worlds - Subsistence

### Subsistence

Hunting and fishing rights -- an essential part of life for many Native Alaskans - were put in peril with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

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Before there was cash, there were caribou. Before salaries, salmon.

Before the Russians and the Americans came, Alaska Natives worked long shifts catching, hunting and picking their next meal. The cycle of life was based on subsistence -- the non-commercial, non-sports taking of fish and game.

The carcass of a baby walrus, left, hangs to age outside a Savoonga home. Baby walrus is a delicacy for St. Lawrence Island residents.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

With the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Alaska Natives lost their aboriginal hunting and fishing rights in the state. Since then, the debate over regulating subsistence has raged throughout Alaska.

Matt Waskey, 51, of Mountain Village, counts subsistence hunting and fishing as a fundamental part of who he is.

"It's my whole lifestyle," he said. "I depend on it, you know, for living, to feed the children."

While rain from a summer storm slapped away at the surface of the Yukon River just down the hill from his home, Waskey explained how he made \$43, after expenses, as a commercial fisherman during the year's weak salmon fishery. That's less than the cost of a one-month cable subscription for his color TV.

He pulled out a bag of dried salmon strips to share with visitors as the two youngest of his seven children played in the next room.

He said he wasn't worried about getting food on the family's table despite his small profit. With the fish and berries and game he put away, and his wife's teacher's aide salary, his family will not go hungry this winter. They will, however, go without cable TV.

Oran Knox Sr., a whaling captain from Kivalina, sits with granddaughter Irene Carter, 12, and her puppy at their fish camp, one mile south of Kotzebue. Knox brings his family to the fish camp every summer.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

Subsistence hunting and fishing has been a continuing concern for Alaska's Natives for many thousands of years, said Steve Langdon, an anthropology professor at the University of Alaska Anchorage. The word "subsistence," however, connotes a "meager, poor, primitive society," which isn't what it was or is in Alaska, he said. Natives here developed knowledge and technologies that allowed them to have enough food year-round, and enough to trade with other groups, he said.

"It fueled substantial trade systems and ceremonial systems," Langdon said. "It enabled them to achieve a quality of life above mere survival."

Subsistence, in Alaska terms, also has significant religious and social importance for Natives. It's "who they are, what they do and what they believe," Langdon said. Harold Napoleon, of Hooper Bay, said subsistence hunting and fishing links today's skiffs and nylon nets with the willow fish traps of the past; the .30-06-caliber rifle with the bone-tipped harpoon.

"Well, our belief system - the way our creator spoke to us was through his own creation - through the animals and the fish," said the 49-year-old Yup'ik. "We

not only hunt and we eat. That's the way he spoke to us was through nature. So when we participate in subsistence it's like reaffirming who we are.

Coho salmon are pulled out of the net and tossed on the beach at Salt Lake where Gabriel John, left, Nathaniel Vickers, Alan Zuboff and Walter Jack, right, fish for subsistence. They are from Angoon, where unemployment is near 80 percent. PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

"Native people will defy the law to feed their families and to feed their cultures and to feed themselves," he said. "Subsistence is more than just hunting and fishing. It's not just physical food - it's spiritual food."

Subsistence also continues to support a sizable home economy.

The state Division of Subsistence estimates that to replace food taken from Alaska's wild at a rate of \$5 per pound would cost \$267 million.

In rural Alaska, jobs are scarce and the cost of groceries can be prohibitive.

Hunting and fishing are an essential means of getting food on the table.

"If people oppose subsistence, they should come to the Bush and try to live off the stores," said 66-year-old Mary Ann Haugen. "You'd owe your soul."

The retired Native language teacher in the coastal town of Unalakleet said her husband has paid more than \$5 for two tomatoes. That was with a discount. Paying for food for a family of four in villages can cost as much as 75 percent more than in Anchorage, according to a survey by the Alaska Cooperative Extension.

Mary Pete, head of the state's subsistence division, said a pound-for-pound comparison is just the "tip of the iceberg" of the value of subsistence.

"It's more than economics," she said. "There are parts of the system that's incalculable - the well-being of the community, the providing for your family. You can't calculate well-being."

The equation is made more complex when the federal and state governments can't

agree on how to protect and regulate subsistence hunting and fishing.

Albert Howard dresses a harbor seal he shot for subsistence in Angoon.  
PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

Despite eliminating aboriginal hunting and fishing rights with ANCSA, Congress made it clear that Native subsistence activities would continue.

When the state couldn't find a way to protect subsistence under the Alaska constitution, Congress included a subsistence preference for rural Alaskans in 1980 within the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act. A Native preference was discussed before ANILCA was passed, but was set aside at the urging of the state. Efforts to bring state law into line with ANILCA failed.

In 1989, the Alaska Supreme Court ruled that a state law granting a rural preference, giving people a priority for hunting and fishing based on where they live, was not allowed under the state's constitution.

The next year, the federal government took over regulation of subsistence hunting on federal land - about two-thirds of the state. A takeover of subsistence fishing management has been put off by Congress several times, including last year.

The Alaska Federation of Natives has opposed weakening the federal law. A task force made up of legislative leaders, the governor and agency heads determined the state should change the state's constitution to allow for a subsistence priority based on where people live.

Pete Kompkoff returns freshly dug clams to a bucket after cleaning them.  
They were dug from the beach in Chenega Bay. PHOTO BY M. SCOTT MOON

However, the Legislature hasn't voted to support allowing a ballot measure for such a constitutional amendment.

State Rep. Scott Ogan doesn't dispute the high value of subsistence in Alaska. The Palmer Republican became the most visible opponent of a plan to amend the Alaska constitution to allow for a rural subsistence preference last year.

He's opposed to changing the constitution, but respects the connection between Alaska Natives and subsistence. Morally, he said, Natives deserve a preference to fish and game.

"How you balance that against the law is the problem," Ogan said. "We need to recognize the spiritual and cultural significance for them, but we can't do that under our system of the law.

"We can't do it exclusively for them."

That the rural preference in ANILCA continues to fan fiery debate in the state shows that ANCSA had an important flaw, said Phil Guy, a former chairman of the non-profit Association of Village Council Presidents. He was also an original incorporator for Calista Corp., the regional Native corporation for western Alaska. A slight, confident man with short-cropped gray hair, Guy said agreeing to the part of the act that eliminated aboriginal hunting and fishing rights was, in hindsight, a mistake.

"That is sadly true," he said. "The state of Alaska, historically, has been notorious with its response to subsistence. We have sort of been neglected. If it were not for subsistence, many of us in the rural area would be more dependent on welfare programs. Historically, cash-earning jobs have been scarce in our region."

For Will Mayo, head of Tanana Chiefs Conference, the regional non-profit for the Doyon Ltd. region, the continued failure by the federal government to enforce ANILCA isn't something new to Natives. The laws that were supposed to protect customary and traditional subsistence rights are similar to broken treaties.

"It was a promise to Native people you will have the right to continue to use the land you lost to hunt and fish on. There was a deal that was made, but certain interests are really against it," Mayo said. "You get a deal, but hey, it's not really."

When non-Natives want more, they go back on their deals, he said, and Native Americans are familiar with the pattern.

"That kind of stuff has gone on for 500 years," he said. "I'm convinced they won't be happy until they eventually eliminate all our fishing and hunting rights."

Dick Bishop, spokesman for the state's largest hunting and fishing organization, the Alaska Outdoor Council, believes Natives are not the only ones who rely on the state's fish and game for their daily bread.

"If there continues to be a priority, then it should be based on how you live, not where you live," he said.

A small herd of reindeer inhabit St. Paul Island in the Pribilofs. The reindeer are used for subsistence. PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

ANILCA could lead to the elimination of all other uses; commercial fishing, sports hunting; to assure there was plenty for subsistence whether or not there is a shortage, Bishop said. If the state changes its constitution to match federal law, regulations would always have to prioritize subsistence. To give one Alaskan first shot at living resources over another would serve to divide the state's residents; Native and non-Native, rural and urban, he said.

For Jimmy Balluta, a 67-year-old from Nondalton, the people who visit his area to hunt and fish for sport don't understand that what they do for recreation is his work. It bothers him to see sportsmen killing caribou for trophies and catch-and-release fishing, which he said was disrespectful - "playing with food."

Subsistence hunting and fishing costs him as much as for anyone else. He said he doesn't feel as if he has a preference.

"I have to buy a license - everything that a white man must buy - to do subsistence," Balluta said.

"They say I have subsistence. I don't think so. It really burns me up when they try to take everything we grew up with.

"That's everyday hunting. It's everyday my business."

Subsistence menus differ based on where in Alaska people live, and include foods

ranging from many kinds of berries to sea gull eggs to moose to bowhead whales. According to statistics from the state's subsistence division, rural Alaskans rely on self-caught foods for more than a pound per day per person - 375 pounds per year. Catching food is a lot of work, said Thomas Tilden. The 45-year-old from Dillingham is the village representative for the Bristol Bay region with the Alaska Federation of Natives. The time subsistence takes has made it hard for people to work 40-hour-per-week jobs when the salmon run or moose season arrives, he said.

Schemes such as job-sharing have worked well, but the issue remains a problem for many.

While the divisive issue continues to be debated within the state, some people go about their business in the Bush without interference.

For many, hunting and fishing regulations don't make a difference.

Nellie Sheldon, right, watches Rosaline Stalker juggle stones one-handed while passing time subsistence fishing at their fish camp, a mile south of Kotzebue. PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

A young Stony River man, who didn't want to be identified because he doesn't want to get in trouble with authorities, takes as many as eight moose a year to feed his extended family and older people in his village. The official limit is one per person, but is practically unenforced in the town, which has 37 registered voters.

The hunter said state troopers rarely drop by Stony River, so there's no worry of being fined for taking what he needs.

Along with providing meat for his family, he gives moose meat to the older people in town.

Gabriel George lives in Angoon, in Southeast. He's a former board member of that village's Native corporation.

One of the problems he has with subsistence rules is that they're geared toward the individual and not toward the community.

State figures estimate that 70 percent of the subsistence take is performed by 30 percent of the people doing the subsistence hunting and fishing.

A few top deer hunters might take 50 or 60 deer and then distribute them to people who need them, George said.

"Your laws can't address that," George said. "When my mom was here by herself with Dad, there was no way she could get deer with my dad in his 90s. Somebody had to get their deer because that's what they lived on. That's what they liked and that's who they were."