

## Between Worlds - In Conclusion ...

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THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Land, good jobs, the power to shape their own destiny. Those were some of the benefits Natives hoped the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act would deliver. More than a quarter century later, how much ANCSA has accomplished depends largely on your vantage point.v

From the gleaming Cook Inlet Region Inc. offices in mid-town Anchorage or a bustling Doyon drilling rig in Prudhoe Bay, ANCSA's results look good. The Native corporations it created provide hundreds of jobs and many of them pay well.

Venetie First Chief Walter John scans the horizon from the porch of the Venetie Community Center. Venetie and Arctic Village lost a major battle for Native sovereignty in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1998, a setback that embittered many Natives who seek greater self-determination for tribes across Alaska.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

However, in the remote villages that 60 percent of Alaska Natives call home, the view isn't as rosy. Jobs are scarce, and many villagers eke out a living below the poverty level. Indoor plumbing is still a luxury in many places.

City-dwellers gained the most from the act. They had little to lose because they were already minorities in an often hostile urban world and were already removed from the traditional Native lifestyle.

The corporations created jobs, and these urban residents were in the best position to get them. Corporate headquarters, and the office jobs that go along with them, are in the cities and regional hubs. Many of the subsidiary businesses - the hotels, oil refineries and engineering firms - are there too.

In contrast, rural residents, have seen few benefits from corporations and had more to lose. ANCSA took away their aboriginal hunting and fishing rights, the key to a lifestyle that sustained them physically and spiritually for centuries.

They are still fighting for assurance their subsistence way of life will be protected as Congress promised them it would when ANCSA passed.

They also lost the right to govern their land with tribal governments - a power some villagers say is critical to solving crippling social and economic problems in their communities.

A few villages, mainly those blessed with rich natural resources, have seen great benefits. In those cases, ANCSA allowed Natives to reap wealth that would otherwise have gone to non-Native businesses.

At times, however, that's created another problem. Timber harvests have damaged streams and hillsides that villagers depended on to support subsistence fish and game, leading to divisions within the Native community.

Even those who fought for ANCSA admit now it's not perfect.

While corporations contribute money to preserve Native dancing, music and language, they also eroded some of the fundamental values of indigenous cultures. Native children are no longer automatic heirs to the land so essential to their people's sustenance and identity. Elders are no longer the ultimate authority, as younger people with Western educations rise to prominence in Native corporations. Wealth has created conflicts at times as shareholders argued over how corporation money should be spent.

ANCSA did deliver some clear benefits.

Although Natives claimed much more land than they received, the act gave them clear title to 44 million acres of the land some still depend on to put food on their tables.

They've also gained pathways to Western careers and middle-class lifestyles, especially if they're willing to leave their villages. Collectively, Natives have more political clout through Native corporations and their growing economic power. It's unrealistic to expect ANCSA could be a solution to all Alaska Natives' problems.

In the decades leading up to the settlement, Natives suffered discrimination, attempts to eradicate their culture and even slavery. Disease brought by non-Natives killed thousands. Forty-four million acres of land and a billion dollars in compensation for lost land couldn't erase that sad legacy.

For Alaska's Natives, ANCSA is, like it or not, the framework for the system that controls the fate of the state's Native land.

ANCSA has been changed scores of times over the last quarter century. As the first post-ANCSA generations begin moving into leadership positions, more changes will follow. Efforts to win back tribal powers signed away in ANCSA will continue.

Many Native leaders have wisely insisted on melding the new corporate model with the traditional values that served them well for centuries. They will continue to look for the right balance to give their people the best of both worlds.