

Session Two

Table Talk: More Conversation about Alaska Subsistence Issues

Opening

Hymn *Touch the Earth Lightly* R254

Scripture Job 12: 7-12

Prayer God of all creation---we recognize that our ways are not always the route to true wisdom which encompasses all of life---humans, animals, and plants in their ecosystems. In the name of justice and love for your creation, may we seek the Spirit at work in different ways in different peoples. Let us listen. Let us learn from the variety of ways that You, O God, enfold and embrace us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen

Table Talk Let's have people volunteer to take the roles of persons at the table. Let's listen.

Alaskan Native: "The land that our ancestors walked on, they were the first ones to walk on it" (Bista, no name given for quote, p. 24).

Catholic pastoral letter: "More than 10,000 years ago Alaska Natives' ancestors, Alaska's first subsistence gatherers, arrived in Alaska. For thousands of years, the Alaska Native peoples lived in a subsistence economy, drawing their human and spiritual values from the heritage of the land, the water, and the wildlife."

Alaska Native: "When Russia claimed Alaska as its territory, the Yupik people were not involved. When the United States bought Alaska, the Yupik people were not involved. When Alaska became a state, the Yupik people were not involved. When large wildlife refuges were established on the Delta, the Yupik people were not involved. When fish and game regulations were formulated, the Yupik people were not involved. Even when the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed, the Yupik people were not involved; many villagers did not even know their land claims were being settled" (Bista, no name given for quote, p. 26).

Alaska Native Pat Petrivelli: "The Russians had recognized Alaska Natives' right to occupy and use land, and this right was thought to have been ensured through provisions in the treaty governing the Alaska Purchase, which required the U. S. government to negotiate with Alaska Natives as it had with other U. S. aboriginal tribes in cases where the government recognized tribes' title to the land. In question were 375 million acres of land in the new Alaska Territory. In fact these land issues were not resolved until 1971, ...meanwhile, Alaska Natives, watched their lands being homesteaded, mined, and drilled, and their resources taken with no legal recourse. The impetus for the settlement of the land was the discovery of rich oil deposits on Alaska's Arctic Slope" (Halliday, p. 266).

The Report of the Alaska Native Review Commission: With the passage of ANCSA in 1971, Congress extinguished by legislation the aboriginal title Alaska Natives held to their lands throughout Alaska, and it extinguished also their aboriginal right to hunt and fish on these lands. Congress through ANCSA legislation determined that Alaska Natives would hold title to forty-four million acres of land, about ten percent of Alaska's Territory. The federal government reserved for itself 197 million acres of land, about sixty percent of the state. The State of Alaska was allowed to select 124 million acres, about thirty percent of the state. In compensation for the 321 million acres of land that the federal and state government appropriated from Alaska Natives, ANCSA provided for the payment to Alaska Natives of \$962.5 million. This payment equaled about three dollars an acre.

There were complex requirements made of Alaska Native peoples through this legislation. “ANCSA required the establishment of twelve regional corporations and more than two hundred village corporations.” (p.24, Berger).

Alaska Native Mary Miller of Nome: “When you look through the corporate eye, our relationship to the land is altered. We draw our identity as a people from our relationship to the land and to the sea and to the resources. This is a spiritual relationship, a sacred relationship. It is in danger because, from a corporate standpoint, if we pursue profit and growth, and this is why profit organizations exist, we would have to assume a position of control over the land and resources and exploit these resources to achieve economic gain. This is in conflict with our traditional relationship to the land, we were stewards, we were caretakers, and where we had respect for the resources that sustained us (Berger, Subsistence illustrations/quotes, no page #).”

Alaska Native Federation: “Congress stated that it expected both the State and the Secretary of the Interior to ‘take any action necessary to protect the subsistence needs of Alaska Natives.’ When neither the State nor the Secretary of Interior fulfilled this obligation, Alaska Natives returned to Congress...asking that systematic and comprehensive protections for Native subsistence hunting and fishing be included in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA).

“ANILCA was finally enacted in December 1980...Congress recast the preference as a ‘rural residents’ preference to appease the State of Alaska who argued that a Native priority would violate the State’s Constitution. Thus, the current ‘rural preference’ in Title VIII of ANILCA represents a compromise between the State’s management interest and the Federal Government’s trust obligation to Alaska Natives.

“Ironically, in 1989 the Alaska Supreme Court found the State’s subsistence law, which restricted the subsistence priority to rural residents, violated the State’s Constitution. As a result, in 1990 the federal government took over management of subsistence hunting on all federal lands in Alaska, and in 1999, expanded its jurisdiction to cover all subsistence activities in navigable waters on or adjacent to those lands...

“Over the years, Alaska has attempted to amend its constitution to allow the State legislature to pass laws that would comply with Title VIII of ANILCA...Unfortunately, such a solution takes a 2/3-vote of the Legislature, and a small minority of the Alaska legislature has managed to block the vote of the people (Briefing, p. 2).”

Moderator: This is a brief summary of the legal issues related to subsistence. At this point, let us focus more specifically on the matter of why give priority to rural residents?

Alaska Native: “The amount of money needed for the replacement of subsistence foods is significant. The cost of commercial food in the village is high and subject to annual inflation. Transportation of food to villages is a problem involving cost. The quality of a subsistence diet is probably better than the commercial food would be for most Native villagers.”

Toni Lee from Delta Junction: “I think some information needs to be brought up from the non-Native people. There are many families living in the Interior-Delta, Chicken, Eagle, and others, that live a subsistence lifestyle. Some are gold miners, others are farmers. It seems that everything in this State revolves around Natives. That is good, but the non-Native people get lost in this shuffle. They are denied benefits because they are non-Native, even though they live a similar lifestyle. Their needs must be taken into consideration. The people that live on subsistence do not have the local grocery store to go to for food or do not use it via preference...When times get tough, we band together for survival. That is the way in the bush...

“The churches need to be sympathetic to those needs of the Native and non-Native communities. When you are hungry, the stomach pangs drown out the word of the Lord. When you are full of food, you can fill the soul with God. Maybe that is why Presbyterians and Lutherans have so many pot lucks!”

An economic developer: “Commercial efficiency means increased per capita food production for sale on anonymous markets...Commercial efficiency ends the risk of hunger that is inherent in the subsistence compromise” (Seavoy, 10).

Alaska Native: “Does one way of live have to die so another can live?” (Bista, title page).

Alaska Native: “Please try to fathom our great desire to survive in a way somewhat different from yours” (Bista, no name given for this quote and the one above, p. 4).

Arctic politician: “Overall, it seems fair to conclude that the problems besetting the mixed economies of many remote Alaskan communities are now reaching crisis proportions. A simple rededication to more traditional subsistence practices does not offer a way out of the present difficulties. What then are the options available to these communities as they seek to secure an adequate cash flow, reduce exposure to outside forces, and protect the integrity of their culture and ecosystems” (Young, p. 64).

An ecological voice: “A society’s survival is ultimately dependent on the finite capacity of ecosystems to support it with essential resources and ecological resources. Linked social-ecological systems...have developed the ability to respond to changes and to adapt to them in an active way, ...such adaptations were key to survival” (Folke and Berkes)

Moderator: Let’s listen to the conversation of several non-Native Alaska hunters on this issue. This is from *Sharing Ground Alaskans Listening to Alaskans about Subsistence*, a production of the American Friends Service Committee and the Alaska Humanities Forum 2004. (Disc One. Select from the DVD or VHS the section titled “Who You Are in the World.” In this section fast forward to the screen Who Gets What? and play to the end of this section.)

Moderator: Here is a chart of the Chronology of the United States and State of Alaska Actions and Alaska Natives that may be helpful.

Questions

1. Form pairs. Each person take a few minutes to discuss what ideas in the table conversation you (a) agree with and (b) disagree with?
2. How is subsistence more than a legal issue to be settled in courts of law?
3. Why listen to what each voice at the table has to say?

A verse of Scripture and question for the week Job 12: 7-12 *But now ask the beasts, and they will teach you. And the birds of the air, and they will teach you; Or speak to the earth and it will teach you; And the fish of the sea will explain to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this, In whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all humankind? Does not the ear test words and the mouth taste its food? Wisdom is with aged men, and with length of days understanding.* How do the various Alaska Native cultures reflect aspects of these verses like a mirror from which we may learn?