PERCEPTIONS OF SUBSISTENCE AND PUBLIC POLICY FORMATION IN ALASKA

by

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Prior to European contact, Alaska's aboriginal populations had achieved functional adaptations to their respective environments that were central to economic, social, and valuative systems of these various groups. The economic practices of such hunter/gatherer/fishers are commonly referred to as "subsistence" by researchers today. "Subsistence" in this context refers to an often vaguely defined complex of behaviors distinct from "cash economies," "market economies," and "wage labor"; however, to Alaska policy makers, "subsistence" is perceived to be "primitive," nonmodern, a dying lifestyle, anachronistic, a welfare system, applicable only to basic sustenance, incompatible with market systems, inefficient, etc. Such perceptions of "subsistence" have been intrinsic to public policy from the earliest periods of governance. Policy making and policy-derived decisions regarding land and sea control, resource utilization, economic development, and other spheres of influence on Alaska's rural populations have reflected such perceptions.

This paper will explore processes by which these perceptions have given rise to public policy governing the subsistence patterns of communities in rural Alaska. In addition, this paper will suggest that a more research-based understanding of subsistence systems as being relatively self-contained, independent of imported energy, labor intensive, socioculturally consistent, designed for relatively immediate consumption, compatible with external market systems, and adaptive in the
modern setting, should have provided more appropriate direction to public policy. The role of the researcher in policy formation will also be examined.

The natural physical environment in Alaska is populated by large aggregations of wildlife which occur for very short periods in any one locale. While these large aggregations, whether of fish, mammals, or waterfowl, appear immense by any measure, their density is very low compared to the size of the land mass and length of shoreline and rivers in Alaska. Nonetheless, the Indians, Aleuts and Eskimos of Alaska have relied on these renewable resources successfully for thousands of years and developed functional and successful adaptations to this reliance. As a consequence, some of these resources may be considered to have been fully committed to, if not fully utilized by, the material economy underlying these indigenous societies.

The State of Alaska is a political entity created 20 years ago; previously it was a territory of the United States. From the outset of Euroamerican contact with the lands and waters of Alaska, Alaska was used as a frontier, a colony containing vast amounts of renewable and nonrenewable resources. Its vast spaces were considered, from an ethnocentric and colonial perspective, to be empty, its resources underutilized, and impervious to damage. This colonial, extractive perspective overlooked, essentially, the rights and needs of Alaska's Native people, whose claims to lands and resources remained unaddressed by federal and state authorities; upon the discovery of the huge oil field in Prudhoe Bay, the United States accelerated the passage of Native land claims settlement, ending a potential challenge to the extraction and transportation of oil. "Land claims" is somewhat misleading since
neither party to the settlement was interested in land per se. The purchasing party was interested primarily in obtaining clear title to extract resources from the land, not settle on the land; the compensated party was relinquishing rights to the rewards of that extraction but did not intend to relinquish rights to the wild resources which inhabited or traversed all the lands. While a provision in the Settlement Act extinguished aboriginal hunting and fishing rights, it did not exclude continuing economic access to or priority use over these wild resources.

Language in the land claims settlement act itself and in the state constitution strongly suggested that it was the responsibility of the state to allocate the severance of these common property resources, subject to preferences among beneficial uses of these resources. No mention is made in the constitution of legal protection of either extant traditional economies or Native peoples.

Prior to 1978, state fish and game regulatory boards regarded subsistence as all those uses of the wild resources of the state which were not identified as either recreational or commercial forms of severance or consumption. Subsistence use was most commonly thought of as the individual taking of fish and game by an unemployed, probably impoverished person living in a rural area of the state. Subsistence living was viewed as an unfortunate way of life, happily dying out as modernization proceeded. In fact, members of the fish and game regulatory boards have suggested that one function of the boards is to modernize rural residents, even if these residents had no ambition to be modernized. Many board members cannot conceive why rural residents would prefer harvesting crabs by fishing with lines through the ice, when they could be commercially profiting by owning and operating
sizeable crab-fishing vessels, or why they should harvest salmon for personal consumption when they could be operating lodges catering to sport fishermen pursuing these same salmon.

By 1978, there were a great number of regulations which severely limited, in the law if not in reality, the ability of rural people to continue to take resources as they had in the past. These limitations were justified either on the grounds of biological necessity, management convenience, or increasing demands for the resources from other user groups. Not surprisingly, these limitations reflected power relationships not only among the competing economic interests but the political constituency supporting these interests. In essence, prior to 1978, regulations had been implemented which masked the usurpation by new user groups or industries of already committed resources.

In 1978, the rural legislative representatives in state government, assisted by a number of external pressures, succeeded in ensuring the passage of the state subsistence law which established subsistence use as the priority use of fish and game resources. While the language of the law appears fairly clear and straightforward, its beneficiaries were left unidentified, creating a problem for administrative agencies to solve. The law also mandated the creation of a new (and the only) socio-economic research arm within fish and game management; the task of this organization (of which the author of this paper was a principal member) was to investigate and report on all aspects of the role of subsistence in the lives of residents of the state. This was an extraordinarily difficult task given the lack of data and the complexity and range of subsistence economies and activities. It was my assumption (perceived now with hindsight to be quite romantically naive) that the
provision of information and explanation of subsistence economics and local resource requirements would be all that would be necessary to implement the new law. This innocence resulted from inadequate attention being paid to the origins of the conflict in the socio-economic history of the state as well as optimism based on the passage of a significant legislative act against powerful political opposition. It was not clear, during the infancy of the research arm, that the law ran counter to the major colonizing forces and ethnic attitudes within the state.

Three years later, the history of implementation of the law had recorded a series of very poor regulatory attempts, the most critical of which were reversed by the courts, and all favorable to the requests by subsistence users. In essence, the courts told the regulatory boards that they must not only take action to implement the law but that they must also take reasonable and immediate action. These court decisions, in turn, led to statements and actions by the boards and members of other user groups to pursue outright repeal of the law, either through legislative action or a vote by the electorate. These actions are occurring even as I am talking to you today.

What was difficult to understand was why is the subsistence priority, and even subsistence use, so consistently misunderstood, de-valued, and opposed? Had the law been used as a legal vehicle to extend the claim by subsistence users over more or other resources, the conflict would have been understandable; but this did not occur. Rural people, in the main, requested removal of existing regulations which ran counter to basic economic requirements of their hunting and fishing efforts or which had no biological basis. In order for many rural people to maintain themselves and their communities, they had
been compelled to ignore and thus violate many of the existing regulations. They were not asking for more resources but to be freed of the legal liability they ran when engaging in their normal economic pursuits.

Thus, while researchers could understand the interpenetration of subsistence and market economies and map the adaptations made in this interaction, the rural people considered the state management of resources on which they depended to be less and less relevant, thus insulating themselves from regulations. On the other hand, the boards viewed rural economic systems as basically welfare systems, supported by cash subsidies and special access to common property resources. In order to qualify for this special access, persons should be close to starvation. If this food problem were to be a chronic problem, the boards would prefer that rural people commercialize their use of resources and accept the costs and benefits of inevitable modernization. Since most the board members have a vested personal interest in the commercial utilization of resources, this viewpoint is understandable.

What was also not understandable was why subsistence hunting and fishing (along with a myriad of other subsistence activities) were not perceived as an important and legitimate economic system that had been and continues to be a bulwark against both worldwide inflation and boom-bust cycles in the Alaskan economy and that provides a sense of security, autonomy, and self-sufficiency to these populations. If, in Alaska as in other places in the world, many economic and energy solutions of the future are likely to resemble solutions of the past, we would have expected appreciation of local rural solutions. However, the view of Alaska as an unexploited treasure house does not yet recognize the issue of scarcity in the near future.
There is no doubt that the subsistence law redefined the balance among competing economies -- subsistence, commercial, and recreation-commercial. To successfully manage with subsistence as the priority, it is clear that managers must control not other users, but other economies or economic enterprises. In order to implement this law, the regulatory boards would have to first calculate the economic requirements for resources of rural people to determine what, if any, reductions in opportunity need to be made for other users. Thus, it is expected that regulatory boards would have the singularly difficult task of recognizing and measuring the conflicting economic stakes in resource harvest by different groups and allocate according to legislated priority.

It must be noted here, parenthetically, that the allocation of resources among consumers is an essentially minor task in real economic terms when compared with the economic decisions which need to be made if there are to be resources which can be harvested and consumed; that is, the pace of habitat alteration in previously undisturbed wild lands and waters is proceeding far greater than the ability and desire of consumers to harvest. If wild resources are to be maintained and harvestable surpluses achieved for any consumer, economic decisions will have to be made which disallow continued high rates of mining, timbering, agriculture, and so on. This will surely pit the extractive, export, market, cash-generating economy against the subsistence economy.

What is of main interest here is why the public debate over subsistence does not occur in the arena of economics, but instead occurs with great fervor and invective in social, cultural and racial bifurcations. For example, various disputants claim the subsistence issue is
really one of urban versus rural interests, cities vying with villages for local resources. Others claim that the issue is primacy of culture, that longer-term residents (such as Natives) have a greater cultural need than newer residents (such as whites). Still others claim that it is a straightforward racial conflict, Natives against whites. And, finally, there is the debate of modern versus traditional perspectives and values.

The issue is always couched in terms of power, the power to control the harvest of wild resources or the direct power to take them. By removing the issue from the arena of competitive economics (obviously an arena where conflicting power needs can be explicated and analyzed) to urban versus rural, Native versus white terms, raw political power in terms of the size of the different electorates can be engaged. Since the urban and/or white electorate is roughly three times that of the village and/or Native population, the outcome of the issue is not really in question. It is not that the vital economic interests of the urban electorate are directly at stake; however, urban knowledge of rural concerns, as that knowledge is provided by the urban media, is negligible. Thus, the conflict is between vocal minorities with vested economic interests struggling for the support of the essentially disinterested, poorly informed majority.

Were the subsistence issue couched in terms of the critical economic interests of one group pitted against the critical economic interests of another, the heat generated by the debate would seem appropriate. However, in Alaska, significant economic interests are seldom engaged in the allocation of resources for subsistence users. Currently, very localized conflicts occur between subsistence users and
recreational hunters and fishermen; in reality, this conflict is between subsistence users and the industry derived from recreational use (e.g., lodges, guides, outfitters, taxidermists). It is clear, however, that commercial fishing interests, in order to increase their access to still-undepleted fish stocks, may be tempted to stem the growth and even remove the current protections of subsistence use of these resources. In addition, by making commercial fishermen of subsistence fishermen, special access to or commitment of these resources is forestalled.

However, the struggle for real economic gain and power is transmuted, in order to engage the sentiment and interest of the public, into the world of competing symbols, moral values, and constitutional principles. Two areas of basic conflict are most prominent in the debate. The first considers subsistence to be a dying way of life, a primitive, nonfunctional anachronism of rural villages which themselves are becoming increasingly marginal in modern times. Facts which are used to buttress this perspective include the increasing volume of Western goods and wage employment in villages, the state subsidization of rural life through social welfare payments and food stamps, improved mobility, and the increasing involvement of Native-owned enterprises in local industry. This position is based on many unwarrantable assumptions about rural economics, patterns of modernization, the relationship between market and non-market economies, and the nutritional, social, and cultural products (e.g., social interrelationships and networks) of subsistence activities. These assumptions are unwarrantable due to the dearth of information on rural economics (subsistence products and labor are not even computed into the gross product of the state, even though their value may be in the hundreds of millions of dollars); they
are also unwarrantable because they are based on perceptions of only the superficial image of villages, containing amenities such as stores, cars, and electricity. The assumption then is immediately made that these communities are no longer traditional places, nor are their economies traditional.

The second, and equally pervasive, area of conflict is over how title to sever wild resources is established. This position asserts that common property resources belong to all citizens equally. This position denies that any particular rights to sever common property resources accrue to any part of society by virtue of long-term custom, tradition, or practice; local residency; economy; nutritional need; or any other factor. Perhaps the most salient part of this position is that it is used only when someone else has access to resources denied to the complainant. The state has many examples of limited access to those resources of greatest value to the state -- land, water, gravel, oil and gas, fisheries, and so on. The use of the principle of equal access to common property resources can be read simply as a legal means to assert ownership over those resources one has learned to value but does not own; it would be staunchly opposed over any of those resources to which one had received paper title. Paper title, rather than hundreds or thousands of years of continuous use, becomes the validating tool of ownership.

As a result, there is a serious question in the minds of subsistence users about the relevancy of government to their direct access to the harvest and use of wild renewable resources. In particular, the users do not feel that the resources are "being held in common" or, given their negative view of wildlife managers, "being held" at all.
They do not believe that the legal system of the colonizing society creates an appropriate set of rules for their ongoing economic system which operates according to different principles and often unseen human and material relationships.

Given this heated polemic, you may easily recognize that there is little neutrality or value-free thinking in the subsistence policy in Alaska. If one begins to think about the problem, drawing from a basis in the discipline of economic anthropology, as modified by the particulars of Alaska regions, wild resources, and peoples, one cannot avoid some attachment to the ability of rural economies to continue as long as they are functional for their participants and as long as these participants have no desired or real alternatives. Data on the complexity, utility, and centrality of such economic activities are then relatively easy to organize into coherent depictions for use by decision-makers. If, however, the depiction of reality drawn from economic anthropology and local data is not shared by decision-makers (that is, if they believe in and desire the termination of this way of life), both the depiction and the data will be either rejected or distorted.

Social research, in support of informed decision-making, is seriously limited if decision-makers cannot be convinced to broaden their world views; without a shared world view (that is, what is really out there), the ability of findings to stand for themselves or even to be considered plausible, persuasive, and able to be acted upon is severely attenuated. It has been my experience that findings of fact, if not attached to a sympathetic world view, will be rejected if they run counter to more general values and vested interests. Social research findings appear so deviant from the world view of decision-makers that
they are received as romantic mythology provided by advocates, rather than as data from scientists. While research occasionally led to accepted solutions, these solutions were often adopted for the wrong reasons; these reasons included public pressure, legal pressure, attempts to repeal the law, or, from time to time, no other user group expressing an interest in that resource.

Part of the difficulty in changing world views in order to better implement the law is that the considerable debate establishing the law occurred far in advance of the insertion of social research findings and theory, to better inform the law writers of the social phenomenon which they were attempting to protect. Applying the methods, standards, data, findings, and theory of social research after the law has been enacted can be very difficult; it results in the lawmakers, the policy makers, and the social researchers all taking different directions on a single issue.

What is missing in the Alaska social-political environment is a collective and coherent understanding of the special forms of social, cultural, and economic organization as they appear in non-urban areas and their value to local and larger societies. Without such an understanding, the value of social data in modifying public policy is very small.

Supporters of subsistence economics often suggest that, as the regulatory board continues to make the incorrect decisions based on an unalterable world view, the true audience for research findings becomes the courts who tend to read more carefully, particularly when the research reports follow the logic and language of the law.
In other words, the law creates a set of empty data cells in a particular order and logic; research then seeks to fill the cells with adequate and verifiable data. If the regulatory boards ignore the logic or the law, ignore the data or distort them, or do not replace the data or the logic with equally well-grounded data and logic, the court will not sustain their decision. While this system works well on paper, a series of court reversals of regulatory board decisions results only in significant attempts to repeal the law.

Finally, social researchers have tended to take it upon themselves to articulate to regulatory boards what the subsistence users need, rather than have the users represent themselves. This is due, in part, to the foreignness to rural users of the entire wildlife management and allocation system, particularly as it becomes more legalistic. However, a greater part of the explanation is that rural people, like most of the rest of us, do not think of themselves as Economic Man; that is, they have no reason to explain their rationales to themselves or each other; they might not even view their actions as "economic." These matters remain the basic, unarticulated ingredients of daily life. Repeated family practice, group affiliation, and constant socialization carry the value and the meaning, without resort to economic explanation. Thus, when they approach the regulatory boards, they say, "We need two more moose. We have always taken that many moose. Change the regulation that says we can't have those moose. It is our subsistence." In making this request, rural users understand that what they are pursuing is legal access to an entire set of arrangements and activities ensuring a continuous flow of goods, services, and other social products. They are untroubled by the
problem of defining or explaining subsistence. Since it is the Western 
legal system which attempts to regulate the taking of wild resources, it 
is Western social research which bears the burden of explaining subsist-
tence; unfortunately, to this point in the history of Alaska social history 
and policy development, the regulators neither understand, have much 
interest in, nor agree with the world view presented by social 
researchers. To the degree that the regulators can enforce their regu-
lations on rural people, rural subsistence economies are in jeopardy.