

The Alaska Native Marine Cultural Heritage Zone

“There has been very little attempt to preserve our marine heritage.”

The 1970's saw a reversal of public policy from the United States Government, and the Alaska State Government, in the way land ownership was to be defined for our Alaska Native People. Land ownership based upon historic use and cultural importance, together with possible commercial values was addressed in light of the huge oil fields found on Alaska's North Slope. The oil industry and therefore the federal and state governments needed a way of getting that oil to the markets and chose the route of building a pipeline across Alaska's vast wilderness with land ownership in question. Thus the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1973 was signed into law by then President Richard M. Nixon.

Today, a little over 30 years later, that Act still plays a very large role in the lives of all Alaska Natives. Several regional and village for profit corporations were incorporated to manage our cultural lands and a billion dollar settlement. Some hail this as a great success for the Alaska Natives, while others feel the jury is still out with very little change seen in the rural development of many of our villages. Poverty and economic hardships plague many of our people and many families are deciding to move to Alaska's larger urban communities rather than continue to live in conditions that seem to only grow worse: high cost of living; poor educational opportunities for our children; continuing declines in economic opportunities; and, a steady decline in availability of our customary and traditional foods. As this trend continues, many of our villages will begin to disappear, or the populations will be such that even keeping a local school open will no longer be an option. As our villages disappear, so shall our cultures, traditions and lifestyles.

Almost half of the total population of the United States now lives near the coast, putting enormous stress on wetlands and marine areas. Coastal and marine areas are among the most productive natural environments on earth, providing substantial socio-economic benefits to our people as well as habitat for numerous species of wildlife. There are many benefits to protecting our wetlands, including protecting our shorelines from erosion, flood controls, regulating nutrient transfer, and providing nursery areas for countless species. Our marine systems comprise nearly two thirds of the earth's surface and play a vital role in climate control. Every second breath we take comes from the oceans. The waters and seafloor of our oceans provide habitat for an abundance of marine species, including as many as ten million undescribed species in the deep sea. Island systems also provide habitat for numerous plant and animal species as well as for our people.

Despite their importance to the ecological process and the livelihood of our people, our marine areas, our islands and coasts remain among the world's most threatened habitats. Our marine areas are victims of over fishing and pollution, while our coastal wetlands and island systems face threats from sewage effluent, habitat loss associated with commercial development, and infestations of invasive plants and animals. As the global population continues to grow, with 300 million people now living in the United States

alone, the demands for food and high protein fish to meet these needs will continue, thus placing more stress on our people and our communities.

Thus the Alaska Native Marine Cultural Heritage Zone (MCHZ). As we have done with our land based cultural and traditional hunting zones, to protect our traditional foods, so we must begin to protect our marine reserves for our customary and traditional needs. Demands for marine resources are at an all time high, even depleting the vast resources of the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea. Foreign owned and operated processing companies have been given ownership to many of our public resources, such as the crab of the Bering Sea. Large factory trawlers are dragging our ocean floors destroying our source of life. The results of these destructive fishing practices are numerous. Of especially great importance to our people living on the coastline of Alaska is the depletion of our traditional foods. We would not stand by and watch a person using a bull-dozer to hunt for a deer in a forest and do nothing, and yet this is happening to our oceans. We must not be quiet about what is happening to our undersea forests in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea. The destruction to our traditional hunting grounds is much easier to see on land, but what we must understand is that this same kind of destruction is happening to our waters as well. We all understand that without a place to grow and thrive, our food will not return.

When our people were faced with the challenges to our ways of living by a government wanting to take away our subsistence ways of life, we rose to our feet in such a way that the entire world took notice. Our people were challenged and we met that challenge. Today we have some protections for our subsistence needs. Today we are proclaiming to the world that our subsistence ways of living is the source of our lives. Now we must meet another challenge, perhaps larger than our subsistence rights. Now we must come to our feet again to proclaim that our *marine heritage zones must be protected*, for all our people regardless if we live on the coast of Alaska or not. We are one people fighting to protect our homes. We must protect our heritage.

Several of our coastal and island communities are facing serious difficulties. Our people are quickly running out of our traditional foods, or are finding that harvesting these foods is becoming more and more difficult as we face climate changes and localized depletions. And yet the large commercial fishing companies are encroaching closer and closer to our villages with their destructive fishing practices. We need a way to collectively stop that destruction. We are not talking about stopping our small boat fishermen from making a living, for our small-scale commercial harvesting practices can be done in such a way as to protect our environment and resources. What we are talking about is community based management, where local people regain control over decisions affecting their resources, such as how much fish is taken from which areas at which times. It's about establishing marine protected zones within reasonable areas around our villages where these destructive practices are not allowed to encroach on our ways of living. These zones are our heritage zones, there to protect who and what we are. These heritage zones were used, are used to this day to allow the survival of our people. These heritage zones are as, or in many cases more, important than our land based protected hunting areas. They provide the necessary lifeline for many of our foods to survive and thrive.

Our discussions on this issue must begin on the local level. We need to address these problems with our Tribal Governments, City Councils and Village Corporations, and where we have them, our CDQ organizations. Our people are imaginative. When faced with challenges, we find ways to meet those challenges and find solutions. But we must keep in mind that these issues are not only regional issues, but issues that affect our entire planet. Help us develop these proposals, and join us as we work to protect our ecosystems and communities. The time is now to act and act decisively. Our children and our heritage depend on it.

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