

# SURVIVAL DENIED

Stories from Alaska Native Families Living in a Broken System





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# INTRODUCTION

When cupboards are bare, most simply take a trip to a nearby restaurant or local grocery store to satisfy an appetite; however, for the thousands of Gwich'in and Koyukon Athabaskan Alaska Natives located in the remote areas of the Yukon Flats, the grocery store is the river and the forest.

Here, lies a world free from traffic jams and morning commutes; a life removed from Wall Street and financial institutions. No Starbucks. No Walmart. No drive up windows to McDonalds. Instead Alaska Natives take part in the time honored tradition of living from the land, providing them physical, economic, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing. It is a culture that prides itself on living harmoniously with the land and its resources while having respect for the beauty of the earth. Alaska Natives are the First Peoples of Alaska, the Inupiat, Yup'ik, Unangan, Alutiiq, Athabaskan, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian.

This way of life is being challenged by competing interests of natural resources extraction, commercial fishing, and governmental management. The Yukon Flats is dominated by the third largest national wildlife refuge in the nation, the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, with the federal government dominating land and resource management decisions affecting the daily lives of those who live within the Refuge. To the north, south, east, and west of the Yukon Flats there is a constant and continued threat of resource extraction and development, with corporate oil, gas, and mining interests all playing a part in devastating impacts to habitat and wildlife. Downriver the big business of commercial fishing industry threatens critical resources. To the east an international treaty promises the number of salmon the United States will provide cross the Canadian border.

Here, stories are shared that illustrate the impact current management practices and regulations have on the lives of Alaska Natives. Their first-hand testimonials reveal a complicated system that denies Alaska Natives their rights to traditional foods and ways of life; illustrating the need for a revised system that provides them a greater influence in land management, hunting, and fishing; a system that ensures their religious, physical and cultural survival.

## A Fight for Survival

Many Native communities are far removed from well stocked grocery stores. Access to fresh fruit, vegetables, and healthy supplements to meat and fish are limited. If a local store exists, prices can be up to five times acceptable prices found in the remainder of the United States. These prices, coupled with a staggering lack of job opportunities and record high unemployment, make relying on store-bought foods brought in to villages by plane or boat impossible for many. Securing food security for Alaska Natives requires securing their ability to hunt, fish, harvest, and share their traditional foods.

The people of the Yukon Flats rely almost exclusively upon nature's resources to feed their families. The term commonly used for such a lifestyle is known as "subsistence" which is defined as "the customary and traditional use of wild resources for food, clothing, fuel, transportation, construction, art, crafts, sharing, and customary trade."<sup>1</sup> Food obtained through traditional activities represent the overwhelming majority of the local diet, which includes everything from moose and caribou to salmon, birds, and berries.<sup>2</sup> In the Yukon Flats region, 94 percent of households consume moose or bear meat, and the region is responsible for 28 percent of Alaska's "subsistence"





fish harvest.<sup>3</sup> This varied and natural diet also confers many health benefits on Alaska Natives, including protection from cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and improved maternal and neonatal nutrition.<sup>4</sup>

Traditional hunting and fishing benefits go far beyond nutritional value and benefits, they are central to maintaining cultural norms and language.<sup>5</sup> They reinforce the deeply embedded value of a shared sense of community and responsibility for the welfare of others. By working together, Natives meet and overcome the challenges found in the Alaskan outdoors. In this region, it is common among Native members who are better equipped to hunt and fish, to distribute food to the less well-off in the community.<sup>6</sup>

Hunting and gathering are key components of traditional living. The act of hunting itself can be ceremonial. What is eaten, and what is left untouched are often life lessons retold from the elders to their young through the art of storytelling. Accordingly, traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering is more than what Alaska Natives do; it embodies who they are as a people as traditions are passed down from one generation to the next. This way of life provides for the cultural, spiritual, physical, emotional, social, and economic wellbeing of Alaska Natives.

## **Families Struggle to Harvest Food**

The amount of game in the Yukon Flats has fallen precipitously in recent years. According to a Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments (CATG) survey, successful hunting was down 4.5 percent from 2007 to 2008 and continues to decline.<sup>7</sup> Villages are unable to meet their game needs and hunters report they must travel further and hunt longer to find game.<sup>8</sup>

Fish numbers have been in a disastrous freefall in the Yukon over the past decade.<sup>9</sup> ADF&G reported that “subsistence” fishers are unable to meet their fishing needs in the Yukon Flats region since 2000, when 64 percent of households were unable to obtain enough fish.<sup>10</sup> Parents are left feeling helpless to find food to feed their children and elderly. Sadly, in 2007, just under half of the fishing families in the Yukon Flats met a majority of their needs for Chinook and summer chum salmon, and only 29 percent of households met a majority of their needs for Coho and fall chum salmon.<sup>11</sup>

Tensions between Natives and commercial fishing interests continue to rise as both compete head-to-head for the limited resource. A common frustration shared among traditional fishers is the level of “by catch”, accidentally caught salmon, by commercial fishermen in the Bering Sea who return this ‘by catch’ dead to the water. It is an offensive waste to a people whose core values and lifestyle are heavily dependent on salmon.

Moreover, the treaty between the United States and Canada only exacerbates the challenge of Natives to secure food. The Yukon River Salmon Agreement between the U.S. and Canada divides the number of harvestable salmon on the Yukon between the two countries.<sup>12</sup> Because the Yukon Flats is near the Alaska-Canada border, fishing is closed in the area when salmon stocks are low to ensure that a sufficient number of fish make it to Canadian waters, further limiting the supply available to Yukon Flats residents.

Alaska Natives are placed in a precarious position: to look into the eyes of their starving family members, while watching their dinner swim beyond their grasps. Law-abiding people are sometimes turned into criminals for keeping with their sacred tradition of hunting and fishing to provide a healthy life for their family.

## **A Need for Government Protections**

The Supreme Court has consistently ruled in favor of indigenous hunting and fishing rights. The 1905 United States vs. Winans case was a landmark decision, upholding treaty language providing for Native Americans’ rights to hunt and fish in the areas the tribe is accustomed to, even if those grounds are now privately-owned land.<sup>13</sup> However, these rights continue to be questioned; as of 2012, the Native American Rights Fund has six active hunting and fishing rights cases to address the unjust challenges faced by Alaskan Natives.<sup>14</sup>

After aboriginal hunting and fishing rights were extinguished by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), an attempt

was made to protect “subsistence use” under Title VIII the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) passed by Congress in 1980. Only as ‘rural residents’ Alaska Natives are legally given “subsistence priority” or the right to hunt and fish above sport, personal, and commercial users when wildlife populations are too low to support all consumption. The clause for rural “subsistence priority,” the attempt to protect the resources and lifestyle of rural Alaskans, was deemed unconstitutional by the State of Alaska. Therefore the ANILCA Title VIII rural priority only applies to federal lands within Alaska.

The last thirty years have proven that this measure is not adequate to protect the traditional hunting, fishing, gathering and sharing needs of Alaska Natives, endangering their food security. The current management of “subsistence use” and resources is a dysfunctional co-management system with US Fish & Wildlife (USFWS) and Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) officials in Alaska regulating food security. This system consistently denies a basic human right of food security, promotes cultural genocide, and threatens the health of the people in the region who rely on traditional lifestyles to maintain their family and community health and well-being.

### **A Need for a Stronger Voice in Management Decisions**

The U.S. Constitution recognizes Tribal Governments as sovereign states with the power to enter into government-to-government agreements with state and federal entities. Accordingly, the USFWS and the Federal Subsistence Board have government-to-government tribal consultation policies that require federally recognized tribes be consulted early in the decision-making process for any policy that will significantly or uniquely affect the tribes.<sup>15</sup> This protection, however, falls short of ensuring the freedoms it was intended to provide, as the policies are weak and the recommendations of the Tribal Governments are only advisory and the government-to-government discussions are non-binding. As such Alaska Natives do not enjoy the freedom of rights to manage wildlife on their lands. Furthermore, the State of Alaska does not recognize Tribal Governments or their authorities, providing them no formal seat at decision-making tables.

### **Communication between Government and Citizens**

The input of Alaska Natives is not respected under the current system of governance. Instead, it is often a one-way system of communication in which the state and federal government issue orders, while ignoring the recommendation of Tribal Governments and the Alaska Native community. This is in part due to the fact that the government agencies and departments charged with the management of traditional hunting and fishing do not reflect the diversity in membership of those they serve. The USFWS and the ADF&G are largely composed of employees who are non-Native nor rural residents. While both agencies have advisory committees and councils that collect input from traditional hunters and are involved in developing regulatory proposals, it is the Boards of these agencies that are charged with making the final decisions. The Federal Subsistence Board has two representatives for rural “subsistence users,” though no secured seat for Native interests, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Boards of Fish and Game each have one to two “active subsistence users,” most of whom are non-Native.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, meetings on resource management held by these Boards take place largely in urban centers, a difficult trip for Yukon Flats residents without road access. The decision making process is inaccessible for many traditional hunters and fishers of the Yukon Flats.

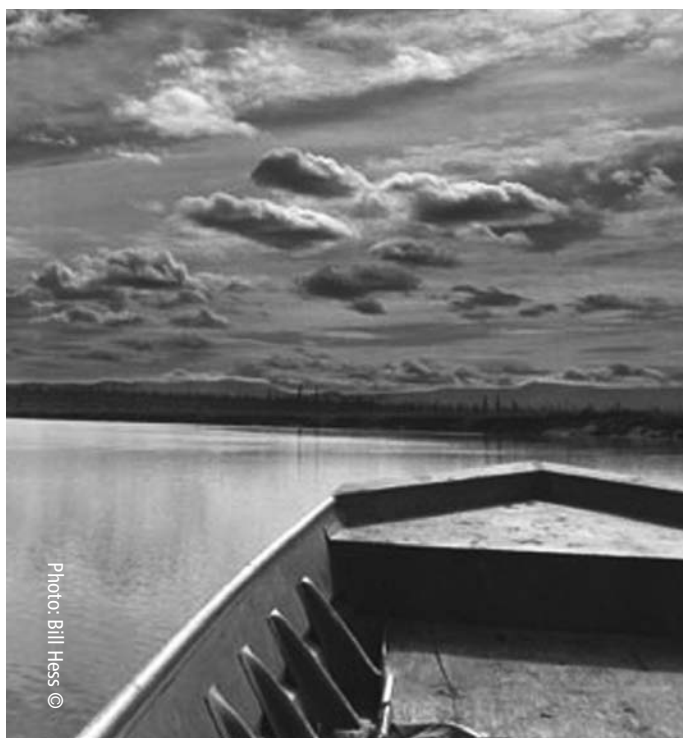


Photo: Bill Hess ©

## **Lack of Acknowledgement for Traditional Natural Resources Management Practices**

Alaska Natives successfully lived upon and managed the land, rivers, and resources for thousands of years, gaining an unsurpassed knowledge of their natural environment and the inter relationships therein. Most unfortunately this traditional knowledge is not taken into consideration by USFWS, ADF&G, or lawmakers. Traditional natural resources management practices vary greatly from those of western biological management utilized by agencies today. These conflicting management styles have led to issues which affect the daily lives of those dependent upon the resources, such as imbalances between prey and predator populations.

## **Recognition of a Failing System**

In a October 23, 2009 press release the Secretary of the Interior announced a review of the Federal Subsistence Program in Alaska, recognizing the failure of current “subsistence management.” The review mandated that “subsistence management” policies and programs “work more effectively to meet the needs of Native Alaskan communities.” The press release went on to say that the “revamped subsistence management plan will operate based on several principals, including: decision-making based on science and traditional knowledge; an understanding of the practice and importance of subsistence; and, most importantly a commitment to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) subsistence mandate—the promise made in law will not be compromised or relegated to a low priority status in this administration.” The Secretary’s findings and recommended actions published in September of 2010 reiterated the necessity of increased local user involvement in “subsistence management.” The Secretary’s



recommended actions included “encourage the FSB, OSM, and DOI agencies to utilize contracting and use of Section 809 cooperative agreements with local tribes and other entities to fulfill program imperatives.” The review and its findings were a statement of recognition from the DOI that the USFWS was failing its mandate to protect and provide for the “subsistence needs” of Alaska Natives. Following the review, the DOI has been unable to implement its own recommended actions to correct the failing system.

These stories were gathered from remote rural villages across the Yukon Flats. The stories are a testament to the daily struggle for survival and respect, and are echoed by Alaska Natives from all corners of the nation's largest state.



**Elder Elsie Pitka**

### Facing a Changing Culture

I'm 82 years old. When I was a little kid, we moved the fish camp at a certain time of summer, moved the muskrat camp at a certain time of spring, and wintertime we moved the winter camp. When the moose were having their babies, we never bothered them. We just hunted moose in the fall, and we only went after bulls. Once in a while we got grouse or rabbit, so we always had something to eat. We'd get our fish and moose so it would last all year round, all nine months of cold winter.

Nowadays we have to pull up our salmon fishing net and instead try to catch little fish on the side slough. They tell us, "You're supposed to pull the net out! Put it back in! Pull it out!" It's pretty hard for me and my little grandsons. We get whitefish, and pike, and that's what we live on. We don't get very many salmon, maybe four, five a day. But we really take care of it so it lasts us for the winter.

Enforcement really started getting bad just a couple of years ago. They come and harass us poor people who live on the river. The state enforcement tried to take my net without me knowing it. If they were human beings, they could come by and talk with me. I'm just an 82-year-old lady trying to get enough fish for the winter. If we can't fish, I don't know what we can live on. Half of our diet is fish. We have no jobs and no income to buy food. We have to go out in the woods and get our own.

I'm glad I'm 82 years old so I won't be living too much longer, so I don't have to see this kind of bologna going on. But I feel sorry for my grandchildren. What do they care about our grandchildren? What do they care about what we eat?

They're taking away our life. I just feel like they should line us up on the bank and just shoot us off, so they can just have the whole land.



## Making us criminals

I am a hunter, a fisherman. It's not just what I do, it is who I am. My life is hunting, trapping, fishing, and living off the land and water to make a living. With the food that I hunt and fish, I am able to feed 800 people. We feed each other, we share, we help each other.

Getting food has never been a problem for me. I know the land well. I learned how to hunt and fish like the way my grandparents lived and their parents from the beginning of time. Here, people usually don't shop at grocery stores for food. I mean, we may buy a few items such as sugar, tea, coffee, rice and flour; but everything else is grown, hunted, or fished.

Now, I am being told I am wrong, my hunting and fishing are criminal. I don't know what I will do if I cannot eat my traditional foods. I am 65 years-old and have been eating my food all of my life. Traditional foods have been my acquired taste from childhood. I do not want to eat anything else.

Several tickets have been issued to me and other hunters by the F&W or F&G. I have had to go to court more than once. I am not doing anything wrong. I am not committing a crime. I simply fish and hunt on the land that has always belonged to us all.

I wish the political leaders would stop focusing on subsistence users, and start focusing on the commercial fishers and hunters and the laws that are supposed to protect us. The federal government and law makers need to get rid of the fish and game wardens that patrol the river and land with their big new snow machines and fancy planes. We need our traditions protected. Instead, for years we are being told by others not familiar with our ways, how and when we are supposed to trap, hunt and fish.



**Hunter & Fisherman  
Paul Herbert**



**Chief Rhonda Pitka**

to get a certain amount of fish. And if it hits the middle part of the Yukon and the sonar says a certain number, then they cut off fishing for us, for the interior.

We haven't had commercial fishing in this part of the Yukon for years and years and years. So when they cut off our fishing, it just feels like a slap in the face. We live off of it, we feed our dogs fish. It's not only food. It's cultural. Because we could get food from other places but it wouldn't be the same, it wouldn't be our food.

These policies, they're just the termination policies of our generation. The termination policies used to be boarding schools, they have ANCSA. They formed the corporations and that was supposed to terminate us, it was supposed to take 20 years. But we're still here. So they're trying something else, it's just a new thing to try.

## Subsistence Termination Policy

Hunting and fishing are really important to us. We don't have big grocery stores here, so if we don't get meat and fish then we have to fly our food in, and then it becomes even more expensive.

It's really rough with the subsistence laws. I wouldn't go to Safeway and prevent people from going to the meat case.

And it's also important culturally. If you go to reservations in the lower 48, a lot of them have to live off of commodity food boxes. We get commodity food boxes here for our elders, with canned beef and broth. That's what they expect us to eat. And it's not good for you, it's not ok. It's really gross stuff.

Around here, we understand that the Canadians need their fish. The United States has a treaty with Canada for them



## The Need for Native Land Management

The land is under new management and I don't think they know what they're doing exactly. The Native people 10,000, or even 500 years ago, they did the same thing, had rules and regulations as to how you could manage the lands and the animals.

When the western people first came they thought that nobody lived here because we never hurt the land. We had trails and people who had dog teams knew each other, but that was about it. If you had a tent, or a teepee, you would carry all the sticks with you so you didn't have to cut down a lot of wood.

We've been here a long time, and we've got our own ways. Regulations are made in Juneau and D.C., and people here are forced to live by these regulations and try to fit them in. All these orders and laws from Congress aren't even followed because nobody knows what they are. Mostly people don't understand English. They speak English, but it's limited. It's hard to interpret the law, that's where the conflict comes in.

I know we're different from the lower 48 Native Americans and a lot of them manage their own land. And we're not doing that up here; the people who manage the land up here, they learn what they learn from university and colleges. They should live among us to see firsthand how we do these subsistence activities.

I think the regulations should be made by the Native people. We know our practices are tested ways that have been done over and over and were successful over thousands of years. One of the things that I would like to see is Native people possibly partnering with federal and state to manage the lands and waters. There's no true partnership, at least one I haven't seen. Under current laws, we're supposed to have a special relationship with the federal government, and it's down on paper. But I don't see any action being done by government-to-government consultation.

We're still being native. Somebody wrote down on paper one time, you can't stop a little puppy from barking, or a little bunny from hopping, because it's still a bunny. I compare that to us, we will always be what we are.

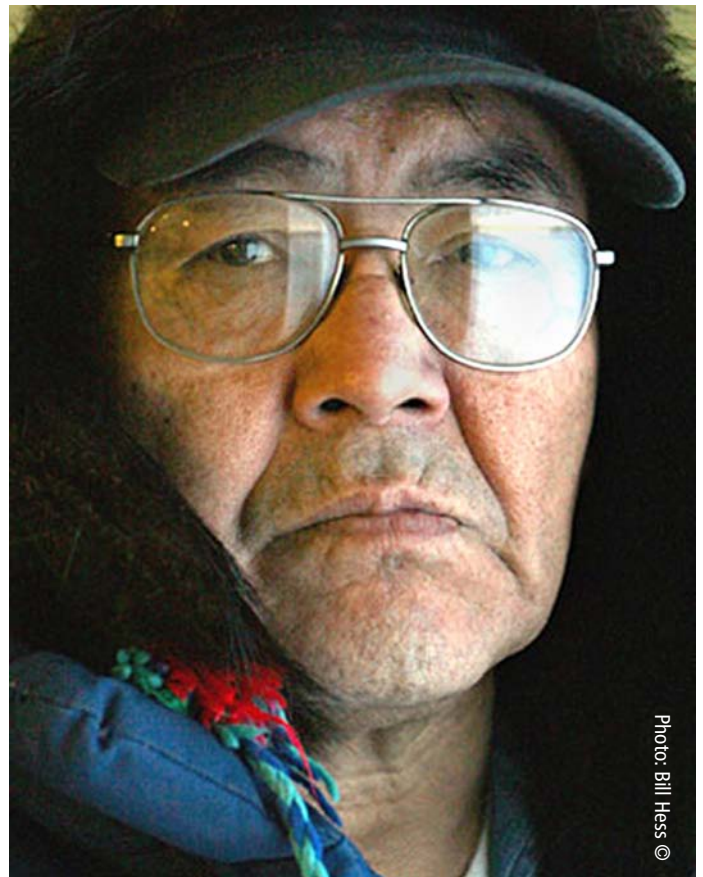


Photo: Bill Hess ©

**Elder & Traditional Chief  
Paul Williams Sr.**



## Making Us Look like We're Bad People

It's like we're constantly being watched. We have to have all kinds of licenses, and you never know whether you're on federal or state lands. It makes us feel like criminals.

I don't know about the fishing this year, I think we're going to have a tough time. That's a main part of our diet. You live in this village; you live mainly off the land. That's how we were raised. We didn't know anything about buying store food until the late '70s or early '80s. We never really had to. We always lived off fish, moose, geese, ducks ...

A few years ago we didn't get that much fish because we had closures when all the fish were going by. By the time they opened up the river there were hardly any fish, just a few stragglers. What fish we do get in our fish camp we share



Photo: Rhonda Pitka

### Hunter & Fisherwoman Wilma Pitka

amongst eight families, so we ran out of fish by Christmas time. It was pretty hard for us that year. What little salmon strips we did get, it was for our mom, because she can't go without our native foods. If they start taking our rights of fishing and hunting away, they might as well get rid of all the elders, because the elders live off of that food. That's the way they were raised. And that's the way I was raised.

When I travel, I usually try to take dried fish or meat so I'll have some kind of native food to eat. It's kind of hard if you were raised on your foods, and all of a sudden, because of all these regulations, have to switch to the store; it's not very healthy. That's why I love my native foods; I know it's healthy food. It's not processed.

It wasn't so bad long ago. But now there's so much regulation, so many rules. It's just making us look like we're bad people for wanting to continue living the way we were brought up.



Photo: Bill Hess ©

## Sustaining the Native Way

My first memory in life is from when I was a year-and-a-half old, and I'm trapping. I'm strapped in a dogsled with my father mushing the dogs on a trap line. So I've been living from the land out here since I was a kid. And I can remember doing it 50 years ago.

There's a big difference between the old days and today. There are regulations. Sometimes regulations are good, like for when outsiders come in and start shooting game for antlers. As far as coming out here and writing a ticket for somebody who's trying to put food on the table, it's a whole different situation, and that really burns me.

Commercial fishing and bycatch are killing hundreds of thousands of fish. It's frustrating. There are people who have commercial licenses at the mouth of the Yukon, and they don't care if we get a fish or not. It's their pocket that needs money, and it doesn't matter if the guy next door goes hungry.

We're not commercial fishers here, we're subsistence fishers, and salmon is probably half of my family's food for the year. The last couple of years have been really tough fishing; I've put lots of extra work into it just to get enough to get by. It used to be



that I could feed this family and my relatives. I used to feed four to six households. This past couple of years, I'm barely feeding one. It almost feels like I'm failing my family.

Shutting down the commercial fishing at the mouth of the river is the only way the fish are going to survive. They do salmon fishing in the ocean. I think that's enough. But king salmon are \$30 a pound right now. How long is that going to keep the commercial fishing shut down? Not very long. It's scary. We already have enough problems up here, trying to survive. And now taking food off the table just adds to it. There are no jobs up here and the price of everything is very expensive. Just getting this food that's right here in the neighborhood makes life a little bit easier.

For years and years and years we've had too many wolves and bears. Everybody used to have dog teams for transportation. People would harvest a lot of bears and use the fat as fuel for the dogs. Nobody uses dog teams anymore. Right now I think I'm allowed three bears under the regulations. Three doesn't do anything to a bear population like we have. Within a 15-mile radius of this village there's 300 bears. That's a lot of bears. And each bear wants to eat moose, so we have a problem with a low moose population. I think we need to be more involved and have more say, be able to make those calls ourselves. We need to be heard, and listened to more, and what we say actually needs to be considered.



**Hunter & Fisherman  
Clifford Adams Jr.**

## Hunting and fishing provide for our well being

I feel very strongly about my traditional way of life. I grew up in the woods- hunting, trapping, fishing. It's kind of all I knew most of my life until recently when I started going out and adventuring and doing things on my own. It's a topic that's dear to me. There's nothing like practicing our traditional way of the living. The best feeling is when you take out a younger person, somebody that doesn't know as much, that's the best feeling in the world.

The way we live impacts our health a lot. There's no label that says there are foreign chemicals in the bag of moose we catch ourselves. There are no chemicals in the fish that we catch, the moose that we hunt, or anything. That has to be a plus, rather than going to a store and buying foods containing monosodium glutamate.

It would be devastating if we couldn't practice our traditional way of life. Especially living here, on the land, I can't imagine what it would be like to not be able to go out and practice my traditional hunting skills, fishing, trapping... it would just be devastating.

Our subsistence lifestyle is the main part of our food source here in the village. Almost every piece of meat I cook and put on my table, myself, my brother, and my father harvested ourselves. With the prices of foreign meats, you know, cattle, things like that, with the prices we get over here, it's ridiculous. Getting moose, ducks, all that, it's just better. It's what we grew up on.



**Hunter & Fisherman  
Clinton Wiehl**

During hunting season, everybody is happier. They get to go out; you don't worry about anything else except what you're doing at the time. It's just spiritually cleansing, being out in the country.

It's definitely depressing when you can't hunt or fish. I hope that my future children, and the people behind me, get to keep living the subsistence lifestyle that I myself grew up on, my parents, my grandparents, thousands of years back. That's what I wish for. It was for our mom, because she can't go without our native foods. If they start taking our rights of fishing and hunting away, they might as well get rid of all the elders, because the elders live off of that food. That's the way they were raised. And that's the way I was raised.



## The Effects of Tightened Regulations

In years past we went to our fish camps down river from Beaver and came back in the fall with a boatload of fish. And now, you can't even fish for a long enough time to get a rub load of fish. And it's getting worse.

We have so many entities around. We have the federal Fish and Wildlife people, we have the state people ... when you run into one of them, you don't know which permit to pull out. The Fish and Wildlife people gave a citation to a man who was just helping my mom check her nets. Another guy got a citation when he helped a young kid; it was dark, and the kid accidentally got a female moose, and just by helping the kid bring it into the village so it didn't go to waste he got a citation.

I think there's going to be a lot of river closures this year. They're maybe going to give us just a couple of days this year to fish. I feel sorry for my mom and my elders in the village because that's what they depend on. We do too, but the elders don't do things like eat tuna from the store, like I could, because that's not their way of life. It's scary.

And we have to live by their laws, though living by their rules and trying to survive are two separate issues to me.

**Hunter & Fisherwoman**  
**Arlene Pitka**



Photo: Carrie Stevens

## Living off the Land for Survival

I hunt and fish to feed a family of twelve. It seems like I am always hunting for something. I grew up hunting rabbits since I was eleven. That is where all of my hunting skills come from. We hunt for them in the fall time before it snows because it is easy to see them. We hunt ducks and geese in the spring and put them away for the year. I hunt close to around 100 geese and around 50 ducks a year. We also fish for king salmon. 100 is my limit, so we can freeze, dry, and jar them. This is our main diet. There is no steak or chicken in my freezer.

Our food feeds us each season, and we put some away to eat throughout the year. This year, I put up dry silver salmon. It takes two moose to feed my family. I give half of this to my mother; but the amount we have to live on really depends on our luck. There are eleven to twelve people in my family I feed, plus my mother and my wife's mother. We donate foods to our potlatches and our community. Nothing ever goes to waste; we are always sharing and giving our foods.

It is getting harder, fishing and hunting, with changes in the land and with regulations. It gets dangerous, like having to go earlier and earlier when the ice is running to hunt geese. You have to know what you are doing; you have to know migration patterns. I am fortunate when I get my harvest. Our main diet is off the land. We only get rice, pilot bread, sugar, and coffee. Others are less fortunate than us, and this is a great impact. Times will definitely be getting harder. But you know we adapt, just got to keep on going.

Us native hunters have been made to feel like criminals just to honor our traditional ways and feed our families. A couple, three times I felt harassed by state and federal officers. One time a State trooper came to my work, to question me about my hunting and fishing. He made me look as if I were a fugitive, the way he conducted himself and did his business running around crazily in search of me. It was foolish and embarrassing at my place of work. Another time, I was accused of shooting a grizzly bear. I was surrounded by two Fish and Wildlife officers, and a city police officer. They cornered me and questioned me

like a criminal. On a different occasion, a State Trooper came to my home under the accusation I had taken a cow moose, when I was friendly and helpful he asked to see my harvest ticket. I went to get it and he followed me into my room. I didn't like that. He ticketed me \$160 for not punching my harvest ticket. I know their tricks now. Now I can walk away, I do not have to talk to them, they are not welcome at my place.

The State of Alaska must first recognize tribal governments in the same way that the federal government does. There are many regulations that must be changed. There should be a hunting season for Alaska Natives, and not for 'subsistence' uses, but for 'cultural and spiritual' uses. The state government has different hunting seasons from that of the federal government hunting season; the two laws are too confusing. It should be one hunt.

I would like to see the political leaders amend the ANCSA to restore our rights to hunt and live off the land. Times are getting hard for us to feed our families, we must have a right to live off the land.



Photo: Walter Peter Jr.

**Hunter & Fisherman  
Walter Peter, Jr.**

## Passing Knowledge On

I want to teach my kids to grow up the same way I did, teach them about hunting and trapping, how to gather your own food, and to live off the land if you had to. I think it's important for my kids to grow up that way.

Today with all these regulations and all that... I think it's kind of lame. I don't think Fish and Wildlife, and Fish and Game, understand our way of life. They wouldn't put all of this on us. Our way of life is gathering, hunting, fishing. They're cutting us off right when we get the right amount of stuff, when the fish start coming in good, they cut it off. If we don't stop hunting and trapping and things like that when they say to, they'll take it, they'll fine us. I don't think that's good.

I would like to see some of these regulations that they have allow us to hunt and fish for a longer period of time, where we could actually get something. You know, most of these people that fish around here, they don't actually get anything. When it starts coming in we get cut off. I don't think people's subsistence needs are being met. To a certain point, my family's needs are met today. But it could be better.



Photo: Kyle Wiehl

**Hunter & Fisherman**  
**Kyle Wiehl**



## Losing our Self-Reliance

Being native means living the way our ancestors did: hunting, fishing, trapping. We have a healthy living surviving off of our traditional ways, our traditional foods. We hunt for geese and ducks in the spring. We hunt for moose in the fall and winter. We fish in the summer. We only take what we need.

When I cannot get fish, when I cannot get moose, I have to rely on others. It makes me dependent on others. It makes me unhappy.

There must be openings for subsistence hunting, and elders must be provided for with their traditional foods. Traditional foods are important for our health, our well-being, we rely upon them.



**Elder Sam Nathaniel**



**Hunter & Fisherman  
Dennis Carroll**

## The Land Provides for our Health

Hunting and fishing were passed down to me by my mother and my father. Living off the land provides for us, it provides us a healthy diet of subsistence foods. Living off the land makes our families healthy, we spend time with our children out on the land.

I hunt and fish each season, I hunt and fish during the legal openings. With my harvest I feed 10 family members directly, children, parents, siblings. And all share our food.

It is getting so much harder to provide for my family. Fishing closures, gas prices, and the changing game patterns affect the game I catch. Also, outside hunters affect my harvest. There are too many hunters from outside our community who hunt in our traditional area. They affect our moose population and us. It is so hard, so upsetting when I come home with nothing to feed my family. Groceries are too expensive, I have to provide for my family with subsistence hunting and fishing.

The State and Federal governments must provide us our native rights to hunting and fishing, that is our way of life. They should communicate more with native hunters, gatherers, and fishermen, so they can see and understand our way of life..

## Threats, Disrespect, & Taking Food from Our Children

It was now a few years ago, when I was serving as the 2nd Chief of my Tribal Government and I was at my desk in the Tribal Office. It was a very happy day for me and my family, my fiancé had harvested a bull moose. We had spent the last several days putting up the meat for our family in our traditional way, and hanging the meat in our cache to be smoked. This was a family process: my fiancé's parents, grandmother, brother, our children and I all worked hard preserving every part of the moose, right down to the bones and guts, as nothing would be wasted. We knew this moose would probably be the only one we would get for the year due to the many outside hunters taking moose in our traditional use areas. This moose would provide for our elderly parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, children, and also those less fortunate than us. We were happy because salmon numbers were very low and fishing closures resulted in us and our family not catching enough to feed us through the winter.

There, at my desk, there was a knock on the door. I said come in; an Alaska State Trooper came in and asked me if I knew why he was there and I replied I did not. He said I'm here because of the cow moose hanging in your cache. I laughed at him and explained that we did not have a cow moose hanging in our cache. We had in fact a bull moose that was killed following to fish and game regulations. The trooper did not believe me, so I offered to show him to prove our innocence.

I took this State Trooper to my home and he carefully inspected our moose including the head and antlers, as well as photographs of our family putting the moose up for the winter. The Trooper also questioned every person who was present during the hunt. My father in-law stated that he raised his boys better than to take a cow moose. The Trooper questioned my fiancé next, in an accusing voice he asked about the harvest ticket which my fiancé provided right away. After concluding the ticket was filled out correctly, he went on to say that maybe we had killed a cow moose and got the antlers from someone else. My fiancé was now becoming upset, and eventually the trooper



**Chief Jessica Boyle**

said he would let us off with a warning and that next time we killed a moose that we had better follow all the regulations. The Trooper went on to threaten my fiancé, stating that anytime my fiancé's name is run through any law enforcement system it will appear flagged noting he is uncooperative and combative. He continued, stating if he is hunting he should be checked to see if he is following regulations.

Even though we had done nothing wrong, we felt punished, like we were criminals. My fiancé served in the Army for four years and was deployed to the middle-east to serve and protect our nation, and this is the treatment he receives from State government employees. I was very angry and afraid, no because I was afraid of going to jail; I knew we had not broken any laws. I was afraid because this person had the authority to take food from my children.

# URGENT ACTION MUST BE TAKEN

Alaska Natives of the Yukon Flats live in an isolated area of the United States where their indigenous hunting and fishing practices, including the harvesting and sharing of fish, game, and other resources and the ceremonies which accompany these practices, provide for the physical, social, cultural, spiritual, and economic wellbeing and survival for healthy people and communities. Restrictive regulation of these activities greatly affect people in their daily lives, and is a symptom of an unjust system in which Native culture is not respected and Native people are not given a voice in how their lives are lived. Only through systemic changes will the Gwich'in and Koyukon peoples of the Yukon Flats be able to survive.

## 1 Recognize Indigenous Hunting and Fishing Rights

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act extinguished aboriginal hunting and fishing rights, these rights must be restored. Current federal protections for traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering under ANILCA Title VIII are weak and limited, only protecting 'rural priority' on federal lands. Recognition and protection of indigenous hunting and fishing rights on lands and waters within the State of Alaska, state, federal, or private lands and waters must be attained. This protection will allow "subsistence management" that is unified and meets Alaska Native needs across the state.

This mandate will ease the burden of "subsistence management" (administration, human resources, coordination, and budget). The State of Alaska does not recognize 'rural priority' established in ANILCA, however they are funded through the federal "subsistence management" program to assist in implementation of managing this priority. The current dual-management system is a boon to users, managers, and bureaucrats alike.

## 2 Respect Native Sovereignty

The people of the Yukon Flats have a 10,000 year tradition of sustainable natural resource management. Alaska Natives are disenfranchised by a system in which they have little power, being told when, where, and how to live their lives with no co-management powers, as promised by law, for the lands that they depend on. Native cultural traditions are not respected under current natural resources management practices. Native people must be reinstated as the stewards of their lands, rivers, and wildlife, as resource management decisions directly impact their livelihood and continued survival as a people. The region has seen success in utilizing traditional knowledge and western science in order to manage the land and resources under these agreements. Currently Alaska Natives play limited roles in resource management; increased efforts should be placed on using the talent and expertise of those who live upon and have intimate knowledge of the land. A direct role and voice for Alaska Natives is necessary:

- **State Recognition**

The State of Alaska must recognize Tribal Governments and their authority. As the state with the most numerous federally recognized tribes in the nation, the State of Alaska must establish a cabinet level position for Alaska Native Affairs.

- **Increase Tribal Government Authority and Self-governance**

Decisions about the land should be made locally by those relying upon the resources, not by distant political figures whom only have theoretical western understandings of the fish and game conditions. Under Title IV of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, self-governance Tribal Governments/Organization can enter into Annual Funding Agreements with federal agencies to undertake programs, functions, services and activities on behalf of the government. Tribal entities have established partnerships with government agencies such as USFWS and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). To maximize gains, these partnerships should expand substantially. Increased self-governance in natural resource management will provide desperately needed wage employment in the underserved and impoverished Yukon Flats.



- **Government-to-Government Consultation**

The state and federal government must engage in culturally competent and meaningful consultation as mandated by the Obama administration in Executive Order 13175, with accessible, regularly scheduled, and measurable process for engaging in these consultations. Alaska Natives must have a say on all government actions that affect traditional or customary use of natural resources on traditional land use areas.

- **Provide Opportunity for Participation**

Agencies regulating natural resources management in the Yukon Flats largely hold meetings in urban areas. Meetings that address Native people's access to resources should be held in rural communities. Agencies also need systems of public outreach that make the regulatory process accessible to traditional hunters and enable two-way communication, where Native input is taken into consideration and the government is able to convey jurisdiction and regulations to those affected. Research and management projects that are managed from urban areas should also be locally based and hire residents of the region in order to take advantage of traditional knowledge, local active management programs and improve local economies.



### 3 Practice Wise Natural Resources Management: Target the Real Problems, not the Native People

The state, federal, and tribal governments share a common goal of sustainability. Utilizing limited state and federal government resources to enforce laws which disrupt Native culture does not advance this goal; Alaska Natives who survive off the land have a vested interest in sustaining their lands. Instead, the government should focus limited resources toward:

- **Manage Resources not the People**

The remote management of the fish and wildlife resources in the far reaches of Alaska has developed a dysfunctional system of natural resources management, which does not benefit resources or users. Management agencies need to engage the environment through active management activities of habitat revitalization, prescribed burns, population thinning, and cumulative effects research. These active management undertakings focus on basic principles of ecology and ecological balance rather than regulating the small amount of users engaged in harvest activities in the respective regions.

- **Increase Salmon Recovery Efforts**

The federal government should budget for more fisheries research in the Yukon in order to support the recovery of the Yukon River salmon stocks. This will support the long-term recovery of fish populations and allow a traditional way of life to continue on the river.

- **Increase Regulation of Commercial Fishing**

Commercial fishing accounts for 97 percent of the fish and wildlife harvest in Alaska, and traditional hunters only 2 percent. Regulation of the expansive commercial fishing industry, and not the small number of people who must fish to survive, would have a greater impact on sustaining the salmon population.





## CONCLUSION

The indigenous hunting and fishing practices of ALL Alaska Natives, including the harvesting and sharing of fish, game, and other resources and the ceremonies which accompany these practices provide for the SOCIAL, CULTURAL, SPIRITUAL, & ECONOMIC WELLBEING & SURVIVAL of the Alaska Native community. The current regulatory of hunting and fishing in Alaska leaves Alaska Natives disenfranchised; with little voice in the decisions affecting their daily lives. Many have become CRIMINALS in their own lands, CRIMINALS for hunting, fishing, and sharing.

The 2012 Alaska Federation of Natives *Proclamation To Achieve Subsistence Rights and Protection of Native Cultures* states:

*"Let it be known throughout the land that we, the First Peoples of Alaska---the Inupiat, Yup'ik, Unangan, Alutiiq, Athabascan, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian, gathered at the Alaska Federation of Natives 2012 Convention, demand the revocation of federal laws that undermine our subsistence rights. We further proclaim that we commit ourselves to a unified, statewide effort at the international, national and local levels using every political and legal means at our disposal to achieve the following two overarching goals: 1. Full and lasting federal protections for our hunting, fishing and gathering way of life, and 2. A co-equal role in managing the fish, wildlife and other renewable resources that we rely upon for our economic and cultural existence."*

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I AM  
ALASKA NATIVE



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