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Is Subsistence Living an Issue?

My name is Anna, a student at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. I made the trip across the country to study Alaska and its issues. Specifically, I investigated the rights of the Alaskan Native people and the protection of subsistence fishing. Subsistence living is defined by Alaska state law as “noncommercial customary and traditional uses” of fish and wildlife. This does not just include food, but also transportation, homes, fuel, clothing, tools, and more (Alaska Department of Fish and Game). The state of Alaska has had tension with Alaskan Native corporations for many years now, 40 to be exact. So, why is this an issue? Let’s find out.

Subsistence ways of living have been a major part of Alaskan Native life for centuries. Corporations all over Alaska have preserved this way of living off the land, keeping their traditions alive. As Alaska became a part of the United States, tensions began to rise between the Alaskan Natives and commercial fishermen. Legal battles regarding subsistence living continue to go on. For instance, let’s take a look at *State of Alaska v. Federal Subsistence Board*. This court case took place only a year ago in 2021. The state of Alaska attempted to take away the Federal Subsistence Board and its ability to protect subsistence rights in rural and tribal villages. The state felt that their authority over fish and game was being overstepped and that the federal government should not have this kind of power over them (*State of Alaska v. Federal Subsistence Board*, 2021). But how can the government overstep in protecting a way of life? A tradition passed down from generation to generation? In the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, there were several pieces of artwork depicting subsistence ways of life and hunting. One in particular stood out to me.



Figure 1: Artwork from the Museum of the North in Fairbanks, Alaska

This depicted an entire community; hunting, fishing, and gathering gear, families, and traditional gatherings, all in one miniature piece of art. It showed how these traditions have been alive for ages and continue to be displayed today. This helped me to realize that this is beyond just lawmaking, we are talking about protecting history and protecting a population's way of living and surviving. Maybe we should start caring about the people of our present as much as we care about preserving the artifacts and history connected to this issue.

So, the Alaskan State government has tried to take away subsistence rights for Alaskan Native peoples, but what have they done to protect them? When I visited the Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center in Fairbanks, I had the opportunity to talk to a park ranger there. I asked her what regulations are in place to protect subsistence ways of living and she told me about the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971. "ANCSA helped to settle land claims for Alaska native corporations. Instead of the typical Indian reservation that the lower 48 has, Alaska decided to form 12 native regional corporations. These corporations received 44,000,000 acres of land, which is about 10% of Alaska, plus \$1 billion to settle any

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land claims. This helped to protect the land and culture of the Alaskan native people, but it did not really solve any issues of subsistence rights and tribal sovereignty. But this is where the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act comes in. It was passed about a decade after ANCSA, under President Carter. This act helped to set aside 106,000,000 acres of land for preservation of public lands. However, when they passed this act, they took into account the Alaska native claims settlement act in order to try to preserve recreational, commercial, and subsistence activities on these lands.” (Ranger, June 18, 2022, Fairbanks). The passage of these acts was vital to the protection of land ownership for the Alaskan native people, and it started to stir the pot about the protection of subsistence living. These acts continue to play a major role in the protection of subsistence fishing and hunting.

Now that we have a good background on why this is an issue, let’s hear some opinions on subsistence living. On June 18, 2022, we went to the Midnight Sun Festival in Fairbanks. The town was alive with many shops, booths, street food, and celebration of the summer solstice. Among all the vendors and shop owners there were mayoral and gubernatorial candidates campaigning for the upcoming election. During the chaos of the festival, we decided to chat with them about their stance as somebody in a government position on the protection of subsistence living rights. We first approached David Pruhs, who is running for mayor. When we asked him about subsistence rights for Alaska natives, he said, “Subsistence is first priority, but returns have been so low. Chum salmon populations are low, but we can fly fish out to those who need it. I think it’s important to focus on having the maximum yield for the benefit of the people” (David Pruhs, June 18, 2022, Fairbanks). On the other hand, we talked to gubernatorial candidate Les Cook. Before we could even ask him any questions, he prefaced, “I am pro-choice, pro-education, and pro-environment. Okay, now let’s begin. What questions do you have for me?”

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When I asked him about his opinions on subsistence fishing rights, he was very passionate. He said, “subsistence is a priority right. They used to be in our Constitution but that was not enough to protect subsistence rights. There’s always been a battle to maintain subsistence rights. I think a big issue with this is that there are not enough people in government that represent these rural communities. This has always been a racial issue. We need more people that look like Alaskan Natives and look like the Alaskan population in general to represent our people more accurately. But as for my stance on this issue specifically I feel like this was their land first, so we can’t tell Alaskan Natives that they can’t fish or hunt in the way that they traditionally do. You can’t tell Alaskan Natives you can’t subsistence fish and then let corporations kill fish. It’s just not fair. Education of the people is part of the solution” (Les Cook, June 18, 2022, Fairbanks).

Of course governmental candidates are going to have opinions on subsistence fishing rights, what is the general public think? Let’s visit small town Seward Alaska. Unlike Fairbanks or Anchorage, Seward is a very small rural community that mostly thrives off tourist income in the summer season. During our time here we went into a small wellness shop that sold tea, spices, sandwiches, and health foods. We talked to one of the workers here, Sarah, who gave us a little bit more insight about fishing on a more personal level. “I moved here from Minnesota with my husband who was in the military at the time, but Alaska is where I call home. This is mainly a tourist town; most of our revenue comes in during the summer months and we all closed during the winter months because it’s too cold to operate and nobody comes in town. So, a lot of the people around here rely on subsistence fishing and hunting just to get through the winter. The further away you live from Anchorage the harder it is to get resources like food, so most people will fish or hunt and put it away in the freezer to last the winter. This is all so much cheaper than trying to import food from Anchorage. That’s one of the downfalls of living in such a small town

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such as Seward, the cost of living just gets higher the further away you are from Anchorage and other cities. Rural living in Alaska is a bit different than other areas in the lower 48.” Sarah went on to talk about some of the competition between commercial fishermen and subsistence fishing. “The only time I notice a little bit of tension and competition is during the summer dip netting season, especially in the Kenai River. Other than that, there’s not much competition per se, one is for selling in the others for dependence on survival. You can’t really compare the two” (Sarah, June 20, 2022, Seward). So why if there’s not much competition, why does the state government keep on insisting that there is? Let’s take a look at the number of fish brought in commercially versus for subsistence or other uses.

Table 1

Resource harvests by use in Alaska, 2017

Type of fishing use	Percent Harvested out of 3.839 billion pounds of fish
Commercial uses	98.6
Subsistence uses	0.9
Personal uses	0.2
Sport uses	0.3

Subsistence harvests only make up 0.9% of the annual fish and game harvest in Alaska, equating to about 33.6 million pounds out of 3.839 billion total pounds annually (Fall, 2018). With a whopping 97.7% difference between commercial and subsistence uses of fishing, it is clear that this is not as big of an issue as the state government and commercial fishing corporations make it out to be.

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This issue became a lot clearer to me once we went to the Alaskan Native Heritage Center. We took a tour around the center to see a glimpse of what Alaskan Native life was like historically. Each native house represented a different region and their traditions. In the midst of the Alaskan heat wave and going from house to house, I felt immersed in this culture and way of living. It helped me to grow a better connection to the group of people I was studying. This was also the first time in our trip that I got to experience one-on-one interaction with an Alaskan Native and hear about the issue of subsistence fishing rights directly from the people that this controversy is affecting. This experience also helped me to think outside of the context of fishing and hunting for food and allowed me to understand the other uses for these resources. Our tour guide showed us how they use seal intestines in sky lights and drums, seal bodies as buoys for hunting, and other ways that they use the animals they hunt incredibly resourcefully without generating waste. Before leaving the Alaskan Native Heritage Center, we talked to Charlie Pardo, an Alaskan Native who works at the Heritage Center. When we asked what he thought about subsistence rights, I could feel his passion fill the room. The other people we had interviewed had not had this type of anger and emotion attached to this issue. "This has always been a huge problem between the state and the Natives," said Pardo. "The state cares more about tourists than me as an Alaskan Native whose people have lived here for centuries. A tourist can come and catch a king salmon, but I can't as an Alaskan Native. Why? This is a resource that belongs to my people. They are trying to take away the food and resources we've had for centuries away. This is a part of our way of living, and we should not have to compromise on that. These traditions are things that we pass on to our children, and that is in jeopardy. Subsistence fishing is in competition with the fishing trawlers and hatcheries. King salmon returns keep dropping, and I am really not sure if there will be enough salmon for subsistence

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fishing in the near future. I know you guys have to go soon, but just know I could talk about this subject all day. This is something very close to me and my family so I'm very passionate about protecting these rights for future generations.” (Charlie Pardo, June 21, 2022, Anchorage). The strength of his opinion helped me to realize how important this issue is to this population. Where other people I interviewed were more passive, Charlie was passionate. How would I feel if my rights to my way of living were in limbo like this?

An unexpected change of heart happened for me at an Eklutna Historical Park. Throughout my time researching and exploring Alaska, I knew I supported the Alaskan Native community's right to subsistence ways of living. To me it was just the obvious stance. They were there first, this is their tradition, let them live how they wish and how they need to survive. The law should be in favor of this population. However, my way of thinking was very logistical. When we visited the Eklutna Historical Park, I was surrounded by spirit houses, which are used in place of gravestones. They are supposed to house the spirits before they move on to the next phase of the afterlife, whether that is heaven or elsewhere, depending on your belief.



Figure 2: Spirit Houses at Eklutna Historical Park

Each spirit house was uniquely decorated for the person who had passed. They were beautifully painted and had personal items that were dear to the passed individual. While I roamed the cemetery, I felt a sense of peace come over me. I could feel the love that these

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LU@Alaska

families had for each other and preserving their memories and traditions. It was at this moment that I truly realized that I wasn't just researching laws and court cases, I was researching a community. A community made up of individuals all with different lives and stories to tell, all with different traditions to pass on. I was researching people with feelings and emotions and a lifestyle to be protected. At this moment I understood the importance of what I was doing here.

Alaskan Native subsistence rights have been debated for years, but what is there to really debate? This is a community, a way of life, a tradition that has been cultivated over generations that needs to be protected. I challenge you to take a stance. Stand with the people who deserve to maintain their way of life. Even in your own community, find ways to connect with those who need your help or may be relying on legislation to protect them. This experience helped me to realize the importance of protecting human rights as a whole.

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