Edward S. Itta, Mayor

North Slope Borough

NSSI Banquet

Ipalook Elementary

March 29, 2011, 6:30 pm

I've been thinking about your dedication of this week's workshop to our elders. And that got me thinking about the role of elders in general as protectors of the Arctic environment. In some ways, they fulfill the same role as you scientists do. Their knowledge comes from repeated observations over a long period of time. These daily or weekly or annual observations amount to a database of knowledge that they carry in their heads. It is a record of Nature's behavior—its consistency and its changes over time.

Think of it in terms of my father, whose name was Esauganna Pualu in our language, and in English it was Noah. He was born in a camp on the eastern side of Teshekpuk Lake. He grew up in a family that followed the migrations of marine mammals and land-based animals of all kinds. They lived and died by their ability to observe and interpret what they saw. They remembered what they had observed from year to year, and they used this knowledge to guide their decisions. They depended on the accuracy of that knowledge for their survival.

Their knowledge was tested on a daily basis, and the reward for their study was one day of survival after another. It was a high-stakes education. They lived on the edge in many respects, inhabiting a world that was both unforgiving and highly productive, and they became intimately familiar with the subtleties of ice and ocean and tundra. Their knowledge was not only in

their heads; it was in their bones and their hearts and their ancestry.

I guess that's why I say that our people are not separate from our environment. We are part of it, because we have been here so long and we have such an intimate relationship with it. You cannot think of the Arctic without thinking of the Inupiat. We belong here, just like the polar bear and the walrus and the snowy owl.

In his later years, my father noticed how the climate seemed to be changing. He would comment on how spring came earlier and warmed up faster, making our whaling activities more hazardous. We hunt from the edge of the shorefast ice in the spring, and changes in the ice pack have a big impact on our ability to participate in this traditional hunt. As time went on, even us young folks could see the changes. The ice pack was shrinking, and shorefast ice was rotting earlier in the year, and the ice retreated farther out during the summer and stayed out longer. It's almost like a rug was gradually being pulled from under us.

The pace of these changes seems to be increasing, and we are very concerned about how it will affect the whale migration and the ability of other marine mammals and shore-based animals to survive. Since we are inextricably tied to these subsistence species, their fate is our fate. We recognize this, and we lose sleep over it. We need the scientific efforts and collaborative approach of NSSI if we are going to build an accurate understanding of the changes underway in this unique region of the world. Scientists and Inupiat alike desperately need to know the extent of these changes and how they affect other links in the chain of life. Our people intuitively understand the concept of the interconnectedness of all things. We

have seen it in action. We feel it. And collaboration is part of our DNA. Our culture depends on group effort. Nobody "goes it alone" in Inupiaq culture. Survival depends on working together.

Climate change is not our only concern when it comes to the ecological stability of the Arctic Ocean. We are also faced with the likelihood of new industrial activity in the ocean. This could eventually include trans-Arctic maritime shipping and increased ocean-going tourism as the ice recedes. More immediately, it looks like there will be oil and gas exploration offshore. One of the policies that President Bush and President Obama seem to have agreed on is their support for offshore development in the Arctic. There was limited exploration in the Chukchi Sea during the 1980s. Now there seems to be greater interest, and as the sea ice recedes, promising new areas will be exposed for the first time. This could introduce major changes in the way our ocean ecosystem is used, and it could have significant impacts.

As I said this morning, we generally support oil development. Ever since 10 billion barrels of it were discovered over at Prudhoe Bay 43 years ago, we have lived with the oil industry. But Prudhoe Bay production is onshore, where impacts can be more easily monitored and mitigated. The direct social and cultural impacts on our communities have been limited, although satellite fields have extended to the village of Nuiqsut, which is on the western edge of the oil fields and has seen its caribou hunting restricted by roads and pipelines across its subsistence hunting territory.

There is a powerful counterbalance to the impacts we have felt from onshore development. Oil has given us a tax base, which provided the foundation for our regional economy. The North Slope Borough is able to

provide 800 jobs in our communities because of oil, and our private-sector Native corporations are among the largest economic engines in the state. After 40+ years of experience with oil, we have learned that we cannot live without our traditional subsistence hunting activities; nor can we live without jobs and a cash economy. How do we balance the protection of our subsistence resources and the need to make sure that our children and grandchildren will have a decent standard of living? This is the central challenge for Inupiat in the 21st Century. We are people with one foot in our traditional Native world and one foot in contemporary America. Our challenge is to make it work, because we cannot thrive without both.

That is why we don't reject oil development. We have learned to live with it and even to welcome it if it is conducted with adequate safeguards and local involvement in the process. However, the reserves of onshore oil are running out, and if the pipeline is going to continue operating, it's going to need more oil. The oil companies seem to think their best chance for discovery is offshore.

But while we encourage development, we will also fight with our last breath to protect the ecosystem that allows the bowhead whale to thrive, along with the other animals we harvest for our sustenance. The bowhead is at the center of our traditional cultural life, and as I said before, its fate is our fate.

This is where you come in.

In the context of this delicate balance, science becomes an enormous asset to us. Our traditional ecological knowledge can't stand by itself in arguing for policies that adequately protect our subsistence animal

populations. By merging traditional knowledge into the scientific process that you people are engaged in, our generations of observation can be put to work in the service of an accurate and quantifiable description that **can** drive policy.

So now you know our secret agenda as participants in NSSI. We need good science—and plenty of it—in order to thread the needle that leads to our future. I sure don't want you to feel any pressure … but yes, your involvement in NSSI can help to save a proud and ancient American culture. If that's not enough to get you focused on your work, I don't know what is!!

But seriously, my approach has been to take our concerns to the table when decisions are being made. We've already made significant progress, particularly with industry, in tightening up the rules that will govern offshore industrial activity. We've got more work to do on this, and it seems to me that good science is a good ally when you're pushing for good decisions.

Thank you again for joining us this week here in the capital of America's Arctic.

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