

Decades ago, Alaska Native elders forecast hard times

By Johanna Eurich

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Long before climate dominated headlines, Native elders noticed changes, and advised the young to prepare for hard times.

It was the 1970s and Larry Mercurieff was living in the Pribiloffs where he grew up. Elders started pointing out things that were not right.

"One day an elder came to my office," he recounts, "with a fur-seal pelt with the fat fleshed off of it. And he said, 'take a look at this.' He held it toward the light and you could see light through it. He shook his head and said 'something's wrong.'"

As wildlife declines mounted on the island, Mercurieff got the elders together to talk about it, creating a Native think-tank in the 80's. They met four times a year for four years. The Council of Bering Sea Elders' discussions 30 years ago outlined things that scientists are just now beginning to confirm.

Among the concerns elders raised, Mercurieff says, were lakes drying as permafrost melted, allowing the water to seep deeper into the ground.

"If you fly over Alaska, you will see lakes having bathtub rings."

Thirty years ago, elders worried that more beavers building dams, creating slower shallower rivers, meant the water would get too warm for salmon eggs. Mercurieff says it took scientists 30 years to do the studies confirming Native predictions.

"It was only recently, I think it was last year that scientists have concluded it's gotten to the point that at the peak, the temperature of the Kenai River [a popular salmon fishing destination in South-central Alaska] is too high for salmon eggs to survive."

As he listened, elders advised going back to ancient knowledge to get through what they said would be hard times. They talked about the ancient information networks that existed along trade routes linking North and South America.

"It's very interesting for me because they are talking about a long time ago. We don't know when."

Many of the elders Mercurieff listened to are now gone and he's fast becoming an elder himself. But the idea of an ancient network of Natives sharing information is already taking form. Natives from Siberia shared work they did to protect walrus hauling out near their village when ice retreated. When the same thing happened on the Alaskan side of the Chukchi Sea, Inuit in Point Lay were ready. They took actions to protect the tens of thousands of walrus hauling out near them.

Willard Neakok works in his village to manage the haul-out, establishing rules for travel near it to keep the noise down and to prevent walrus from stampeding and killing each other -- something neither state or federal officials had the resources to do.

"We want to protect animals that we harvest, so we won't have to be blamed in case

they stampede or get spooked by planes or boats," he says.

Working with state and federal officials, Point Lay has rerouted its barge deliveries to keep from disturbing the animals, and also convinced the Federal Aviation Administration to put flight restrictions over the haul-out. Villagers have changed their own boating patterns to avoid disturbing the animals.

Meanwhile, on Saint Lawrence Island, the communities of Gamble and Savoonga are working to reinstate an antique ordinance setting their own catch limits and other protections for the island's marine mammals.

"We need to have something that's our own, that was made by our elders in the past, that is working," says Perry Pungowiiyi, a hunter. "We all agreed to follow this ordinance so it might benefit us in the long run."

Larry Mercurieff is now studying how villages are taking control. He says Natives know they can't wait for scientists or government. Climate change is happening so fast it's leaving both behind.

"It changes almost monthly now," he says, "changes so rapidly. But yet people in the urban setting seem to be complacent. Native people know now that they can't depend on anybody else except themselves."

Many scientists are also now turning to Natives for help in understanding the changes sweeping the world. As one said to me recently, "Climate change is too big. We need to listen to each other. "