

## FORUM

## Coping with the time when the water died

By WALTER MEGANACK SR.

The Native story is different from the white man's story of oil devastation. It is different because our lives are different, what we value is different; how we see the water and the land, the plants and the animals, is different. What white men do for sport and recreation and money, we do for life: for the life of our bodies, for the life of our spirits, and for the life of our ancient culture.

Our lives are rooted in the seasons of God's creation. Since time immemorial, the lives of the Native peoples harmonize with the rhythm and the cycles of nature. We are a part of nature. We don't need a calendar or a clock to tell us what time it is.

When the days get longer, we get ready. Boots and boats and nets and gear are prepared for the fishing time. The winter beaches are not lonely anymore, because our children and our grownups visit the beaches in the springtime and they gather the abundance of the sea: the shellfish, the snails, the chitons. When the first salmon is caught, our whole villages are excited. It is an annual ritual of mouth watering and delight.

When our bellies are filled with the fresh new life, then we put up the food for the winter. We dry and smoke and can. Hundreds of fish to feed a family.

Much has happened to our people in recent centuries. We have toilets now, and schools. We have



clocks and calendars in our homes. Some of us go to an office in the morning. The children go to school in the morning. But sometimes the office is empty and locked. Sometimes the child is absent from school. Because there are more important things to do. Like walking the beaches. Collecting the chitons. Watching for the fish.

The land and the water are our sources of life. The water is sacred. The water is like a baptismal font, and its abundance is the Holy Communion of our lives. Of all the things that we have lost since non-Natives came to our land, we have never lost our connection with the water. The water is our source of life. So long as the water is alive, the Chugach Natives are alive.

It was early in the springtime. No fish yet. No snails yet. But the signs were with us. The green was starting. Some birds were flying and singing. The excitement of the season had just begun. And then we heard the news. Oil in the water. Lots of oil. Killing lots of water. It is too shocking to understand. Never in the millenium of our tradition have we thought it possible for the water to die. But it is true.

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snails and the barnacles and the chitons are falling off the rocks. Dead. Dead water. We caught our first fish, the annual first fish, the traditional delight of all — but it got sent to the state to be tested for oil. No first fish this year. We walk our beaches. But instead of gathering life, we gather death. Dead birds. Dead otters. Dead seaweed.

Before we have a chance to hold each other and share our tears, our sorrow, our loss, we suffer yet another devastation ... we are invaded by the oil company. Offering jobs. High pay. Lots of money. We are in shock. We need to clean the oil, get it out of our water, bring death back to life. We are intoxicated with desperation. We don't have a choice but to take what is offered. So we take the jobs, we take the orders, we take the disruption.

We start fighting. We lose trust for each other. We lose control of our daily life. Everybody is pushing everyone. We Native people aren't used to being bossed around. We don't like it. But now our own people are pointing fingers at us. Everyone wants to be boss; we are not working like a team. We lose control of our village.

Our people get sick. Elders and children in the village. Everybody is touchy. Everybody is ready to jump you and blame you. People are angry. And afraid. Afraid, and confused. Our elders feel helpless. They cannot work on cleanup, they cannot do all the activities of gathering food and preparing for winter. And most of all, they cannot teach the young ones the Native way. How will the children learn the values and the ways if the water is dead?

The oil companies lied about preventing a spill. Now they lie about the cleanup. Our people know what happens on the beaches. Spend all day cleaning one huge rock, and the tide comes in and covers it with oil again. Spend a week wiping and spraying the surface, but pick up a rock and there's 4 inches of oil underneath. Our people know the water and the beaches. But they get told what to do by ignorant people who should be asking, not telling.

We fight a rich and powerful giant, the oil industry, while at the same time we take orders and a paycheck from it. We are torn in half.

Will it end? After five years, maybe we will see some spring-

time water life again. But will the water and the beaches see us? What will happen to our lives in the next five years? What will happen this fall, when the cleanup stops and the money stops? We have lived through much devastation. Our villages were almost destroyed by chicken pox and tuberculosis. We fight the battles of alcohol and drugs and abuse. And we survive.

But what we see now is death. Death — not of each other, but of the source of life, the water. We will need much help, much listening in order to live through the long barren season of dead water, a longer winter than before.

I am an elder. I am chief. I will not lose hope. And I will help my people. We have never lived through this kind of death. But we have lived through lots of other kinds of death. We will learn from the past, we will learn from each other, and we will live. The water is dead. But we are alive. And where there is life, there is hope.

Thank you for listening to the Native story. God bless you.

□ Walter Meganack is chief of the Native village of Port Graham. This essay is an edited version of remarks he prepared for a conference of mayors who met June 27 in Valdez to review the Exxon Valdez oil spill's impact. The speech was read by the village council secretary, Elenore McMullen.