

88-49-127

Rosita Worl is interviewed by Jeff Kennedy

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

Series: Potlatch series

1977

Song by Ian and Sylvia

Rosita Worl said she was originally from southeast Alaska. She came to the North Slope to do research on the political development of the North Slope Inupiat for the past two years. She was looking at traditional politics and expanded into the subsistence question. She had a fellowship for a while. She was receiving support from the North Slope Borough. She was helping them to review or analyze some of the impact statements. They realized the value of her work. Jeff Kennedy talked about subsistence hunters in Anaktuvuk Pass. Worl comments. She said there were a lot of planes flying into Anaktuvuk Pass. The villagers were complaining because the planes were filled with sports hunters. They were hunting the caribou before the caribou started their migration through the Pass. The residents of Anaktuvuk Pass know that you have to let the first groups of caribou pass through so the rest of the herd will follow. The sports hunters diverted the herd from going through. There were few caribou going through. The Anaktuvuk Pass did have a certain amount of food but if their traditional sharing complex hadn't been in existence it would have been a disastrous situation. You would have had a group of people with available food. The people from the North Slope started gathering food and shipped it into Anaktuvuk Pass. It is the kind of social welfare system that exists on the North Slope. It is not entirely dependent on the outside. Kennedy commented about the possibility of subsistence hunting being eliminated. Worl said her research indicates that subsistence is a very viable activity and rural Alaskans are involved in it totally. They are involved as a subsistence user, a recipient, or as a subsistence harvester. Sharing patterns are extensive. She said there is interrelationships between subsistence and cash economies. It is not on the wane. There were periods in Alaska where there was a boom bust cycle when there was a lot of western economic activity. When the bust was over the Natives went back to almost a totally subsistence economy. In the North Slope this happened when the commercial whalers came up there and nearly depleted the bowhead whale. After they left the northern Eskimos reverted to a subsistence economy. There was a fur trapping era and a military period. After each period they returned to a subsistence economy. Kennedy asked if subsistence hunters could survive without a cash economy. Worl said at this point she would have to say no. She said subsistence is economic but it also has its social aspects such as their distribution system and how it brings a community together. There is a strong cultural attachment to subsistence. These work together to make subsistence viable. A cash economy is not present in rural Alaska. Even where it is available the cost of living is extremely high in rural Alaska. She talked about different perceptions of a cash economy in a western view and a village view.

Song by Jose Feliciano

Jeff Kennedy said during hearings in Fairbanks on subsistence hunting there were comments about priority given to Native subsistence hunters. Rosita Worl said there were a lot of people who weren't familiar with the legal history of their own country. She said the Native Americans have a legal relationship with the United States government. The conflict comes in understanding this. She said the government was wise in developing the environmental policy act of 1971. They recognize that economic activities do occur in a cultural context. They recognize that they do have a cultural heritage that should be protected. They are anxious to protect their cultural resource. When she was in D.C. for the hearings on bowhead whales she said the conservationists were concerned about Japanese and Russian whale hunting and they were willing to trade off Eskimo hunting. She thinks that it is a political issue and the position they have taken about the bowhead whale is based on inaccurate and undocumented work. They ignored the reports by the National Marine Fisheries (NMF) which states that the bowhead whale population is rising. Whaling captions confirm these findings. There has been misreporting by the NMF. They count strikes and losses. The NMF observer counts whales that have been struck and lost. If the same whale goes down and gets struck again it is counted as another strike and loss. She said the figures are inflated. Native people depend on the continuing supply of the resources. They care about the continuing availability of resources. They are forced to use outmoded weaponry. Kennedy asked about the physical reasons someone kills a whale but is not able to recover the whale. Worl said a whale measures from thirty to sixty feet and weighs a half a ton per foot for smaller whales and a ton a foot for larger whales. Whales have always been lost. Whaling is much more effective today than it was in the aboriginal period. It is a difficult animal to get and hold. Jeff Kennedy asked about the weapons that are outmoded. Worl said she can't go into too much detail. The bombs that are used are more or less handmade. There are weaponry that could be more effective. Jeff Kennedy asked about the United States not backing the Eskimo hunters. Worl said the United States has taken the leading effort to protect the whales. All of the other nations are being asked to give and the United States must give too and that includes Eskimo hunting. She said there were no Eskimo people present when those decisions were made. It was only at the last minute that the North Slope people heard about this. Worl said that Eskimo whaling is going to continue. She said this is a strong attachment that has developed over four thousand years. Kennedy asked if the Eskimos will run out of whales if they continue hunting. Worl said she doesn't think so. The population is increasing. They are reviewing their own activities. They have set up their own whaling commission to advocate for more research. Very little attention has been given to the bowhead whale populations. She thinks the Eskimo people are being used. They have been the ones concerned about the ecological system of the bowhead whale. They monitor their own activities and look for modernized weaponry and look for ways to cut down on losses.

Song by John Garring