

However it's defined, subsistence is still just a way of life

by Jim Hall

It is my culture, my way of life: living from the land, picking berries, canning and drying fish, eating wild game.

I remember my father teaching me these lessons as a young child back in the 1960s. I remember him telling me, "The land will give you what you need, if you will respect it. Only take what you need for food, and never waste anything."

We did not call it "subsistence" then, nor "personal use." It just was the way we lived. Our freezer was full of wild game; fish was dried, canned or frozen. Berries were frozen or made into jams and jellies, and by first frost each year we were ready for winter.

In Alaska, as time has passed, laws have been enacted and new words have entered the vocabulary. Words like "subsistence," "personal use," "Tier 2," "escapement" and "limited entry." What do these words mean to most Alaskans? These words control the way things are done and who controls them.

Is subsistence an issue here on the Kenai Peninsula? At first, one might hurry to say no, for the majority of the peninsula is not rural. However, some areas on the Kenai would be considered rural most anywhere, such as areas further than 30 miles from an established community, areas accessible only by boat, floatplane or foot.

These are questions that I trust will be answered in the coming years, and I trust they will be answered in an honorable and fair manner.

These areas, these rules and these words are issues too big for one person to deal with, for in giving something to someone you must take it from someone or something else. I do not envy the folks on the Federal Subsistence Board. Those folks have a very difficult job to do, and they do it trying to comply with the law, and knowing that each of their actions will affect someone.

As for me? I'll continue my way of life, like most Alaskans, within the confines of existing laws. I'll fish where it's legal, apply for permit hunts and try to get a moose when the season is open. This year I have moose, caribou, salmon, halibut, clams, trout and spruce grouse all preserved, and my family is ready for the winter.

It has been a good year for us, and I know there will be enough. We even had some to share with our neighbors. Life is good.

I'm not sure where the subsistence issue on the peninsula will go. One of the things that surprises me is the durability of the salmon fishery here. It begins when those salmon returning to Cook Inlet first meet the commercial fishers who are trying to make a living. Then the fish have to get by the personal-use fishers with dipnets. After that, it's the local recreational fishers, and the tourist fishers drawn to Alaska by the dream of catching an Alaska salmon.

Most of these folks will personally eat some, if not all of their catch. On top of all of these pressures, the salmon also have to escape seals, bears and a host of other critters that depend primarily on these fish for their survival. If the salmon can survive all of that, they get to spawn, to provide for the next generation.

Wow! That's pretty amazing if you think about it. Through continued protection of the habitat, and ensuring adequate escapement, we hope to always have this incredible resource to enjoy.

I'm not from Alaska. I grew up in the mountains of north Georgia, and I have seen days when if I didn't catch something, my family did not eat that day. Those were lean times.

Is it subsistence I have been practicing all of these years? To me, it does not matter what you call it, for I call it "living." Subsistence here in Alaska is a very complicated issue involving many diverse groups and individuals. Many people have been working very hard for many years to sort out the issues. It is complex, and there are no easy answers.

For those folks trying to find a solution, they have my support, sympathies and prayers. My family and I moved to the peninsula about a year and a half ago from Mississippi, and although some things can get complicated here, I feel that I should have been here all along.

Jim Hall is the deputy refuge manager of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Jim and his wife, Elaine, and daughters, Danya and Kit, live in Clam Gulch and enjoy harvesting the local bounty. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.