

## Subsistence—Lessons from Canada

By Patrick Valkenburg

To Americans who travel abroad it is no surprise that our media coverage of issues in foreign countries is relatively poor. This is true even with major events occurring in Canada, our closest northern neighbor. During the last two winters my wife and I have had the opportunity to live and work in northern Ontario, Manitoba, and Labrador and talk to many local residents, including wildlife biologists, teachers, RCMP and conservation officers, and Native (First Nations) elders. I was not surprised to find that many of the problems we face in Alaska are also quite prevalent in northern Canada, including problems with alcoholism, domestic violence, child abuse, drug addiction, rapid population growth, and declining interest in traditional activities like hunting and trapping among the younger generation, etc. However, other issues like aboriginal rights, subsistence, racism, the rural-urban divide, and wildlife management issues are also huge problems in the Canadian north and these are issues that few outsiders hear anything about. The history of Native rights in northern Canada is quite different than it is in the US and Alaska, and the Canadian approach to solving the problems that have arisen has also been quite different. Some of the “solutions” that have been tried in Canada have also been proposed to resolve problems in Alaska. However, before Alaskans go too far down that road, a thorough and objective review of the Canadian aboriginal rights/subsistence situation should be undertaken. It would be impossible for me to cover all the issues in this short column, but I will try to relate some of the situations I observed in Canada and how they might have some bearing on the subsistence debate in Alaska.

Except in the southern portions of the prairie provinces, Canada was spared the wholesale destruction of wildlife that occurred in the US, and Native people in northern Canada were not displaced by the tide of European settlement and agriculture. Instead, what had been a purely subsistence lifestyle during the 1600s gradually changed to a life centered around trading furs for foreign-made goods and food. Treaties with Native people that were concluded with the governments of Britain and Canada were more concerned with guaranteeing hunting, fishing, and trapping rights than establishing land ownership. For about 250 years the Hudson’s Bay Company was the de-facto administrative government of northern Canada, and the HBC did everything it could to protect the fur trapping/subsistence lifestyle. Despite changes in technology, life in the north did not change much until after World War II. During the 1970s change was rapid and by the end of the decade the trapping/subsistence lifestyle of Native people was replaced by the government spending/welfare economy.

In most of Canada, First Nations have carte blanche to hunt within their treaty areas, unless species are declared endangered. As long as the human population remained low, and Native and non-native people largely lived in different areas, conflicts were few and wildlife could mostly sustain the unregulated subsistence harvest. However, as mining, logging, hydro developments, and roads expanded into northern Canada, and the population of both Natives and non-natives increased, conflict became inevitable. In addition, many of Canada’s First Nations are no longer content to live in a welfare-dominated economy and many leaders now want roads, development, jobs, and cultural diversity.

Rather than seeking long-term, creative solutions to social and economic problems and conflicts in the north, the recent national governments of Canada have reacted by acceding to the narrow political demands of groups of Canadians for more special privileges. The Metis (descendants of French and Scottish fur traders and Native women) of Manitoba and Ontario were recently granted treaty rights, including the right to hunt and fish without restriction. The granting of these rights to the Metis of Labrador will likely soon follow. Unlike most First Nations, the Metis largely live in urban and suburban areas and many live a very similar lifestyle to non-Native Canadians. Even the classification of individuals as “Metis” is problematic. Birth records were not well kept even a generation or two ago, and many “Metis” appear as European-looking as more recent immigrants to Canada. Some very uncomfortable situations now arise. For example, a non-native Canadian ice fishing in Ontario on the same lake with a Metis or Cree fisherman is restricted to taking 2 walleye per day, while his fellow fishermen can catch as many as they like and sell them to the local restaurants. Also in Ontario, Natives can kill as many woodland caribou as they want whenever they want while there is no season at all for their non-native neighbors. One Conservation Officer in Labrador who is married to a Labrador Inuit related to me how his children have unfettered rights because they are “classified” as Labrador Inuit even though they live in a large town. When they are hunting or fishing with their non-Native friends the group simply ignores any seasons and bag limits and takes all the game and fish they want. As one might expect, these situations result in considerable racial tension. Once special privileges are granted to the Metis, a majority of the population of Labrador will have them while the minority will not. Aside from the racial problems that arise, a very practical problem is that wildlife managers have no way to control harvest, except to classify species as threatened or endangered. In addition, to cope with these situations, in many cases wildlife managers are extremely conservative when allocating harvest to non-natives. Many non-native northern Canadians are bitter and frustrated over these situations, especially because their economic livelihood is often at stake.

However, for different reasons, Native people also feel frustrated and threatened. Similar to the situation in Alaska, Native people on the fringe of the road system in northern Canada feel overwhelmed by ever increasing numbers of outside hunters and fishermen with larger and larger boats, ATVs, and aircraft. In addition, unlike the US, in Canada there is no cohesive system of wildlife management and no dedicated source of revenue for that purpose. Hunting license money goes into provincial general funds to be doled out at the whim of politicians, and there is no reliable source of matching federal money as there is in the US. Provincial wildlife agencies are woefully short of money and qualified biologists. Some biologists I talked with mentioned having to spend two-thirds of their time fund raising. Partly because the provincial wildlife agencies are so poorly funded and staffed, and because biologists often come from urban areas or are under the scrutiny and control of politicians from the urbanized south, Native people are not inclined to relinquish their treaty rights to professional wildlife management agencies. There is no short-term solution to these problems in Canada, but in the long-term it seems clear to me that people will need to agree to be Canadians first and eschew the racial and group rights that are so entrenched today. By contrast, I think the subsistence issue in Alaska would be easier to resolve, partly because the idea of a racial preference has largely not taken hold (except for harvest of marine mammals). Anyone who suggests a racial preference as the solution to subsistence issue in Alaska would be well advised to visit the Canadian north and experience the racism and wildlife management problems that have resulted from its implementation there.