

Whanga Qaakaghleq, Kingiikaankuk Aghhayankuk panigat, Sivungaghmi, Qiwaaghmi.

My name is Vera K. Metcalf, daughter of Theodore and May Kingeekuk from Savoonga, from the Qiwaaghmi clan. I am the Director of the Eskimo Walrus Commission (EWC) at Kawerak in Nome, an organization of 19 indigenous walrus-hunting communities in Alaska, and a former Commission member on the US Arctic Research Commission (USARC) representing the indigenous residents of the Arctic.

Alaska Native culture is a significant, crucial aspect of what makes Alaska vibrant and unique. It mustn't be taken for granted by us (whether we are a proud Alaska Native or a proud Alaskan, or both) without doing what we can to ensure that the health of what is the core of a culture, its language, is taken care of.

While a USARC Commissioner, we included Indigenous Languages, Cultures, and Identities as a major research recommendation in our 2009-2010 Goals and Objective Report. It explains, "Language helps us define the cultural diversity of our planet and serves as the strongest pillar to our diverse cultural heritage. Language is a fundamental indication of who we are, that is, of our identity. Although critical, language is one of the most vulnerable elements of our cultural being." Consequently, the Commission recommended that federal agencies continue to develop and fund a research plan to help prevent extinction of the diverse languages spoken by Arctic peoples. It specifically cited important entities to be: National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), Smithsonian Institution, BIA, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of Education (ED), USDA, the **State of Alaska**, and Alaska Native organizations.

During my work as a bilingual teacher aide, my work in repatriation, and now my work in natural, cultural resource management with EWC, I have learned that these three features (language, culture, and identity) of Arctic indigenous life are inseparable: To preserve an indigenous language, its cultural basis must be cherished and maintained, and for a community's cultural life to survive, its spiritual beliefs must reinforce the traditional way of life. It must be valued and used most naturally as the language of weather and environment, traditional and customary hunting practices, food preservation and preparation, clothing, boat building, storytelling, singing/dancing/drumming, or wherever a community's traditional knowledge is valued and shared.

"Community" is where language, culture, and identity are maintained and kept vital. Of course there are multiple layers of community; clan, village, common language, Inuit

Circumpolar Council, marine mammal organizations like AEWC, tribal organizations, Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN), WEIO, wherever indigenous knowledge and values are promoted and passed on to the next generation. Identities are supported through multiple relationships and group associations.

The question we need to continue asking is what are we doing that nurtures the health of a community's language; what policies, regulations, and decisions do we make that allows an Alaska Native language to prosper. The alternative is realizing and discovering what we're doing to undermine its long-term health. This is why we need the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council.