When Global Warming Kills Your God

Twenty-three Alaskan tribesmen broke the law when they overfished king salmon, but they claim their faith gave them no other choice.

BY: ADAM WEYMOUTH JUN 3, 2014

"So there is a black fish swimming up the river, looking for a fish trap to swim into. Cycle of life, right?"

Grant Kashatok was telling me stories the traditional Yup'ik way—his fingers entwined with string, like a child playing cat's cradle. As he spoke, he looped the string into different shapes: it became a hunter, a mountain, a boat, an oar. "And he came to a fish trap that was broken," he said, "and some of the fish in it were dead. The black fish poked his head out of the river to see who it was that owned the trap, and he saw that the village was dirty, and that the dogs were not tied up, and the woman came out to throw out the scraps of a fish dinner and he watched the dogs fight over the bones. The fish did not want his bones fought over. So he carried on swimming up river."

Kashatok is the principal of the only school in Newtok, Alaska—a town of 354 perched at the mouth of the Ninglick River, just a few miles from the Pacific Ocean. In 2009, it was one of 26 indigenous villages listed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as "priority action communities": The ground beneath it is slipping into the sea at such a rate that the village may only have two more years before the first houses fall away.

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Throughout the state, climate change is intensifying storm surges and thawing the permafrost—land that previously remained frozen throughout the year. Parts of highways are sinking. Trees around Fairbanks have slipped to such rakish angles that they have become known as drunken forests.

But it's not hard to see why the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, a watershed the size of Britain, is especially vulnerable. Approaching from the air, it's difficult to determine whether this region is a landmass with many lakes or a body of water with many islands. The Yup'ik never intended to live here year-round: They were a nomadic people forced into settlements by missionaries and the government. The villages where the Yup'ik now live year-round were once their summer fishing and hunting grounds.

I went to the Delta to cover the trial of 23 Yup'ik fishermen who had violated a ban on the fishing of king (or Chinook) salmon. In late June and early July, as many as 40 million of the fish have been known to migrate throughout the state, returning from the sea to spawn on gravel beds. They run so thick that the fish swimming on the outer edges of the river are forced onto the banks. King salmon, I am told, can weigh as much as sled dogs.

But over the past few years, their numbers have dropped dramatically. By the beginning of the 2012 season, the Department of Fish and Game was alarmed enough to gather a panel of fishery scientists and ecologists from across Alaska to determine a response.

They came up with seven hypotheses for the decline. Natural cycles are cited, but the report returns again and again to climate change. Rivers are breaking up earlier along their routes, sending more vulnerable juveniles out into the ocean. Changing ocean currents may be spreading disease. There are shifts in other species in the food chain upon which the salmon depend. Warmer waters are depleting the energy of the fish, causing higher mortality rates along the migration route. The impact of each of these factors is currently unknown.

In June 2012, after Fish and Game announced a ban throughout the Delta, State Trooper Brett Scott Gibbens was sent out to patrol the rivers around Bethel, the central hub of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. He'd learned, through a press release, that a group of Yup'ik fishermen planned to defy the ban, and as he came down the Kuskokwim River, he found a small fleet of boats—somewhere between 12 and 16, he later testified. The gill nets they were using were perhaps 50 fathoms long, which made them illegal under the ban. Many of the fishermen pulled their gear and left as he was identifying and rounding up the others. Some of the fishermen later went on to pay fines. But 23 of them refused, and last summer, they stood trial in a Bethel courtroom.

On the first morning of the trial, the court was standing-room only, crowded with defendants, supporters, families with babies, and a handful of journalists and cops. Behind Judge Bruce Ward, next to the American flag, hung a traditional Yup'ik mask. Someone produced a Ziploc of salmon jerky and passed it down the row. Everyone took a piece and chewed on it, including the two state troopers. The courtroom began to smell like a fish market.

Felix Flynn was the first fisherman to take the stand. "Is it okay if he occasionally breaks into Yup'ik?" asked his lawyer, Jim Davis, pushing back a luxuriant sweep of hair. He is one of the founders of the Northern Justice Project, a private firm that represents low- and middle-income native Alaskans, and had taken this case pro bono.

“We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,” replied the judge.

Flynn raised his hand and swore on the Bible. A short man with drooping moustaches and cheeks scarred by frostbite, he began by telling the court how his father took him out herring fishing when he was a boy. “To start with, all I see is ocean,” he said. “Then after a while there’s glassy water, and there’s other water that’s not glassy. And that means the herring are here. That’s what I learnt from my father. I'm subsistence. I was born and raised an Eskimo. It’s in my blood. It’s in my family blood.”

“And what does that mean to you, subsistence?” prompted Davis, leaning over with his hands on the podium.

“Subsistence is living from the land,” said Flynn. “It’s what we've always done. We go hunt ducks and seals in the ocean in the springtime. Ptarmigan. Salmon. My great-grandfather and grandfather told us we have to be very careful what we catch. God made them for everyone. I was living subsistence even when I was in the military. My whole life. I make a fish camp every year and dry 30, 40 kings. I set a net last summer but there was too much closure. Things have been rough.”

“And how did it feel not to be able to catch enough?” Davis asked him.

“I have a grandchild, 2 years old—” He paused and rubbed his eyes. Several other men in the gallery also began to cry. “My grandson said to me, ‘When we gonna go check the net?’ And I couldn't say anything.”

Michael Cresswell, a state trooper, leaned over and whispered in my ear: “This is momentous. This is climate change on trial.”

A few days later, I flew to the small village of Akiak, population 346, to visit Mike Williams, the current chief of the Yupiit nation. Williams is one of Alaska’s most outspoken voices on climate change. In 2007, he was invited to testify before a U.S. Representatives Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming. “If global warming is not addressed,” he told them, “the impacts on Alaskan Natives and American Indians will be immense.” He spoke to Congress about the Iditarod, the thousand-mile sled dog race from Anchorage to Nome. “To keep the dogs cool, since the days are too warm, we have to mostly mush by night now,” Williams told the politicians. “And we also mush more on land and less on frozen rivers because of thawing.” The Iditarod’s sponsors include, among others, ExxonMobil.

Now, Williams was helping to coordinate the fishermen’s defense. To get to his Akiak office, you have to enter through a bingo hall. The doors hang from their hinges, the plasterboard sags from the ceiling. The toilet is broken. During our interview, the Internet was down; he spent much of the two hours trying to check his Yahoo account. “This is my war room,” he said, gesturing around himself. “This is where I cause trouble. I'm doing better than Gandhi.”

In court, the fishermen’s civil disobedience has been framed as a First Amendment issue: The Yup’ik believe they have an obligation to continue their ancestral traditions. As Jim Davis summarized it, in a brief submitted before the trial: “If Yup’ik people do not fish for King Salmon, the King Salmon spirit will be offended and it will not return to the river.”

“Spiritually, it brought me down,” said David Phillip, explaining on the witness stand how last year’s shortage of king salmon affected him.

An amicus brief filed by the American Civil Liberties Union elaborated further:

> A Yup’ik fisherman who is a sincere believer in his religious role as a steward of nature, believes that he must fulfill his prescribed role to maintain this 'collaborative reciprocity' between hunter and game. Completely barring him from the salmon fishery thwarts the practice of a real religious belief. Under Yup’ik religious belief, this cycle of interplay between humans and animals helped perpetuate the seasons; without the maintaining of that balance, a new year will not follow the old one.

But now the seasons are out of balance, and the Yup’ik can't stop hold the sea back. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, an estimated 86 percent of indigenous villages in Alaska will need to move within the next 50 years, at a cost of $200 to $500 million per village. Newtok is preparing to move to a new site, across the water to Nelson Island, but a struggle against the village leadership has recently stalled the relocation effort.

As Williams drove me back to his house for lunch, he told me how Akiak had lost its graveyard to the water three years earlier. The bones and skulls of their ancestors had started emerging from the banks, drifting down toward Bethel. The community had gathered up what they could and carried the remains to a new mass grave on the other side of town.

Lunch was a soup of whitefront goose, shot by one of Mike’s five kids. I sucked at the thin flesh of a boiled head, its eyes cooked to cataracts, its teeth a saw line. Dessert was the local version of ice cream: blueberries, margarine, and sugar, mixed and frozen. The soup was good, the ice cream revolting. The paneled walls were lined with photos of sledding kids bundled up in parkas, dream catchers, graduation portraits, animal hide drums, mushing memorabilia, and a Moravian church calendar. There was a basketball game on the corner—Montana vs. Indiana. A wood-burning stove in the corner heated the room, fueled with driftwood snagged from the river.

Outside, Williams told me he wanted to show me where he had been born. He led me down to his dog yard by the river. His 30-year-old son, Mike Jr.—who ran his first Iditarod last year and came in 22 places ahead of his dad—was putting eight dogs into their traces and tethering them to a quad bike, the only way to exercise them without snow on the ground. About 40 dogs were pacing on their chains, yelping and yammering—a mottled crew of huskies and malamutes, lean, strong, and eager.

“So where were you born?” I asked, looking at the houses around us: cheap rectangular structures raised on stilts. Their yards were full of buoys and outboards, caribou antlers and skulls, snowmobiles and aluminum skiffs awaiting their respective seasons. Williams pointed out toward the middle of the river.

“Out there.”

That, he told me, is where the hospital once was—where all of Akiak once was. He waved his hand expansively. “I'm continuously moving my dog yard,” he said. I followed him down a dirt track that stopped abruptly at the river. “We lost this whole road last year,” he said. “One day I was driving down it. The next day, it was gone.”

Shrubs had slipped, pointing horizontally across the water. The detritus of a house lay beside them—twisted sheets of corrugated iron, sodden insulation, pipes and tubes and lumber. It looked like the flotsam from a storm.

“Nobody here knows the weather,” said 66-year-old fisherman Noah Okoviak, speaking from the witness stand in the Bethel courtroom. “Nobody here knows how many fish will come. Only the creator.”

Judge Ward listened to Okoviak’s defense and found his beliefs to be sincere. But as with the other 22 fishermen, he found Okoviak guilty. The state had sufficient reason to impose the ban, the judge explained, and the fishermen had violated it. But the sentences were lenient—a year of probation and a fine of $250 apiece (in one case, $500) to be paid over the course of a year or sometimes two. At times, the judge was openly sympathetic. “When this case goes up for appeal,” he said, as Okoviak took his seat, “the cold transcript will not reflect that everyone in the courtroom was standing, and that record will not reflect that there are a number of people in the courtroom with tears in their eyes.”

The fishermen’s cases have indeed moved on to the Alaska Court of Appeals, where their oral arguments may be heard as early as this summer. There, state-appointed judges will grapple with the same question the court faced in 1979, when an indigenous hunter named Carlos Frank was charged with illegally transporting a newly slain moose. Frank argued that he had needed the animal for a religious ceremony. Two lower courts found him guilty, but the Alaska Supreme Court reversed the verdict, calling moose meat “the sacramental equivalent to the wine and wafer in Christianity.”

This, in the end, is what’s at stake for the Yup’ik fishermen. Their villages may be swallowed up by the sea, but the people themselves won’t float away. They’ll relocate en masse or drift into the urban diaspora of Anchorage. But if they stop fishing king salmon, the Yup’ik believe they’ll lose something far more fundamental than their homes. Harold Borbridge, an indigenous Fairbanks-based consultant with a wife from Newtok, put it this way: “If they can move the things that are important, the language, the culture, the dancing, if they can move the character, they'll have been successful. Anyone can move a few houses.”

Article Written Response Assignment (Please complete on a separate sheet of paper)

1) Identify the problem and article summary (Paragraph 1 MINUMUM OF 4 SENTENCES)

1) At the top of the page include: your name, class and period, title of article, URL, or television information, and thematic labels.
2) Write the problem addressed in the article/segment in the form of a question. Make sure your question can be answered affirmatively ("yes") by supporters and negatively ("no") by opponents.
3) Write a summary of the article/segment in your own words. This summary should clearly demonstrate an understanding of the material. This summary should clearly demonstrate an understanding of the material.
4) The first sentence of your summary should identify the 5 W's (who, what, where, when and why) and be underlined. Place the 5W's in parenthesis. **Example: The United States government (who) is currently (when) facing a war on terrorism (what) that threatens the country's national security (where and why).**

2) Personal Commentary (Paragraph 3 MINIMUM OF 3 SENTENCES)

1) Describe how this article expanded your understanding of issues important to the state of the world, or (even better) a topic that we are currently studying. Explain what insights you gained from the article. Questions to consider:
   a. How does the information in the article relate to you, our country, or our world?
   b. What is your opinion of what you are reading and the issued being discussed? Do you agree/disagree with the writer/creator of the news item? Why or why not?
2) Write **one (1) question** that came to your mind concerning the issues or event mentioned in the article. Be sure the questions are thoughtful as they may be used for class discussion.

3) Theme Analysis (Paragraph 2 MINIMUM OF 4 SENTENCES)

1) Identify the *Themes of Social Studies* (below) that are present in the article. You MUST identify a **minimum** of two (2) themes. You may identify more.
2) Explain how each theme is explained/analyzed within the article.

Themes of Social Studies

1) Culture	**6) Power, Authority, and Governance**
2) Change and Continuity over Time	**7) Production, Distribution, and Consumption**
3) People, Place, and Environment	**8) Science, Technology, and Society**
4) Individual Development and Identity	**9) Global Connections**
5) Individuals, Groups, Institutions	**10) Civic Ideals and Practices**