State of the Arctic Conference
Local Indigenous Perspectives on the Arctic
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Vera Kingeekuk Metcalf
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Eskimo Walrus Commission
Alaska village embraces Native dances banned by church

CENSUS: Celebration for 1st count led elders to lift century-old rules.

By RACHEL D'ORO
The Associated Press
(02/22/10 07:36:03)

NOORVIK -- Bobby Wells has lived all his life in this remote Alaska village, where the Eskimo dancing of his ancestors was banned by Quaker missionaries a century ago as primitive idolatry.

Now Wells, 53, and other residents of Noorvik have wholeheartedly embraced the ancient practice outlawed in the Inupiat settlement, which was established in 1914.

"This is the way God made us, to express our thankfulness to him with dancing," Wells said.

The belief of traditional dancing as somehow evil, however, remains deeply ingrained in scores of Native villages around the state. But some communities have broken away from that ideology in recent decades. One by one, they have resurrected the old dances and songs of the long ago past, along with culture camps and language immersion programs.

Mike Ulroan can't imagine life without dance. It was already revived in the Cup'ik village of Chevak when he was born 21 years ago, long after the practice was prohibited by Russian Catholic missionaries. Dancing has always been a constant for Ulroan, even after he left four years ago to attend the University of Alaska Anchorage. In Alaska's largest city, he dances with several groups.

"It's just a way to make me feel happy," he said. "With the movements we do, we push away bad spirits and keep away sickness."

Created by Congress in 1998 at the request of then-Sen. Ted Stevens, the Denali Commission oversees spending on rural infrastructure in Alaska. It trains crews to weatherize village homes and replaces rotting rural fuel tanks, funds alternative energy projects and builds roads.
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Photograph courtesy of Carleton Ray
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Courtesy of Gambell Video Committee
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Hunter meeting in Gambell, St. Lawrence Island
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Floyd Kingeekuk, Sr.

Photo courtesy of Doug Burn
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Courtesy of Savoonga Video Committee
Walrus Harvest Monitoring discussions between EWC & ATMMHC
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TEK Advisors,
Michael Apatiki
and
Perry Pungowiyi,
on the
USCG Healy
TEK documentation project:
“Conserving Our Culture Through Traditional Management”

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Neqniighvigput
(Where We Get Our Food From)

Eskimo Walrus Commision