Title: Native Alaskan engagement with social constructions of rurality

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Abstract:

There is no doubt that defining and measuring 'rurality' is problematic. In states such as Alaska on the western Pacific coast of the United States, more than two-thirds of the State is classified as 'remote rural'. In 2000, despite only 10 per cent of the general Alaskan population living in these regions, for more than 41 per cent of Alaskan Natives, these places represent their traditional homelands. These areas generically referred to as the 'Alaskan bush' are considered remote, isolated and distant by not only the rest of mainland United States, but also, by most urban Alaskans. Labelling these places thus, continues to reinforce and sustain the much recognised 'rural-urban divide' and in turn, influences top down policy decisions which in Alaska tend to stereotype and pigeonhole regional development, rather than recognise reinterpretations of it. This paper therefore, considers how rurality is defined and measured in and by the State of Alaska and more broadly by the United States government. It questions whether these definitions are adequate descriptions of the realities on the ground and whether such labelling hinders growth, and economic and cultural survival. It also suggests that current interpretations of rurality need to be reconceptualised.

Key words:

Arctic, homelands, Native Alaskans, rurality, rural spaces, remoteness, sub-arctic, sustainability.

1. Introduction

There are currently more than fifteen definitions of 'rural' used by various federal agencies in the United States (U.S.) (Coburn et al 2007). Undoubtedly, much of this comes down to the fact that there is no single, universally preferred or endorsed definition that will serve all policy purposes. Halfacree (2006, p.45) concurs suggesting that "... neither at the official nor at the critical or popular level is there consensus on the delineation of the 'non-urban' spaces that the term 'rural' seeks to encapsulate". This problem, however, is not only confined to the United States. Globally, definitions of 'rural' and 'rurality' have long been associated solely with quantitative measurements such as distance from urban centres that can be readily mapped and modelled. For many years though, definitions of this nature have been shown to be inadequate as they do not take into account relative qualitative dimensions which often provide a more accurate account of space and the increasingly complex and diverse activities taking place there (Howitt 2001, Sherval 2007, Young 2006). For this reason, this paper argues that current definitions of 'rural' and 'rurality' need to be reconceptualised to represent more than what Young (2006, p.254) calls "the geographic tract that separates locales". As such, any new consideration must include not only the physical dimensions of these spaces, but also, the important relational characteristics which acknowledge that rural territories today continue to be deeply complex and contested spaces with overlapping concerns including those economic, environmental, geopolitical and cultural in nature (Hayter et al 2003). How rurality is conceptualised, becomes significant when it is responsible for determining by what means a place is classified as a result of that perception.

Through a case study of the State of Alaska, this paper argues that definitions of rural and rurality currently employed in the United States are inadequate. The terms of reference used are too broad and tend to perceive all rural places as homogeneous and therefore, at

the same stage of development. In doing so, this standardised view ignores the possibility of any difference or divergence away from the prescribed vision, despite the fact that as Cloke (2006, p.21) notes “researchers have...become increasingly aware of the need to extend beyond the ‘obvious’ interconnections between social construction and rural practice”. This has particular relevance in Alaska in terms of distinguishing between the needs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural populations as defined by current federal policy. In regards to Alaska’s Indigenous population for example, federal policies can dictate not only how subsistence farming methods can take place, but also where, and to what extent they should be allowed to occur. The implications of such discriminatory policymaking echoes dispossession narratives of old and has far-reaching consequences for the integrity of Indigenous cultural practices. As such, there is not only an urgent need to examine how rurality is currently being defined and perceived, but also how these conceptualisations might be responded to and challenged by populations who live and work in these complex spaces and places. The case study of Alaska in this paper aims to do this by offering another window onto the rural world through the guise of localised regional and economic development.

1. Defining and perceiving rurality

The United States Census Bureau classifies ‘rural’ as simply “all territory, population, and housing units located outside of an urbanized area or an urban cluster” (LaCaille 2005 p.27). This generally means an area with a core population of under 2,500 and/or having a population density of less than 500 persons per square mile (Rural Trust 2006). Of most interest, is the part of the US Census definition (2000, p.18) which continues, “the rural component contains both place and nonplace territory” which apparently includes low density urban fringes and other geographic entities such as “...the boundaries of county sub-

divisions, American Indian and Alaska Native areas”. The contemporary use of a term such as ‘nonplace territory’ is as Howitt (2001, p.233) argues “...suggestive of colonial spatial metaphors that presuppose exclusion and separation rather than interaction and co-existence”. The continued usage of this term to describe spaces largely populated by Indigenous peoples, reconfirms the need for a more inclusive definition and understanding of present day rural spaces. Likewise, the myriad of spatial imaginaries conjured up by the term ‘rural’ need to be deconstructed to acknowledge the unique character of these spaces rather than merely accepting what is often little more than a stereotyped representation of them (Edensor 2006).

Frequently, these perceptions tend to visualise all rural spaces as remote, frontier-like and often peripheral to a specific core. Many of the stories and legends that are told about these places tend to have a life of their own, and on retelling, the links between what is perceived as real and what is fiction, become blurred. Much of the reality of the landscape, its cultural and social significance, its economic potential and the lived experiences of the people who reside and work in these spaces become imagined or exaggerated and in the absence of truth, what remains is often a stereotyped, construction of reality.

Rural spaces, particularly those associated with arctic, sub-arctic, desert and wilderness locations are most often seen through this lens. Even when incorporated into contemporary globalisation discourses, these metaphors remain central to folk wisdom and contemporary belief systems. Thus we still find places such as Alaska for example, constructed and labelled as: ‘the Land of the Midnight Sun’, the ‘Last Great Wilderness’ or ‘the Final Frontier’ (Swaney 1999; Williams 2002). These descriptions are reminiscent of many of the established frontier myths that valorise ‘wilderness’ and exclude all previous human presence

in their depiction. American classics such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*, Henry David Thoreau's *On Walden Pond*, and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* all depict wilderness as pristine and empty and as Langton (1996, p.17) argues poignantly, it is a wilderness that has "...accompanied an amnesia about the fate of Indigenous peoples" and areas that "are and have been inhabited and used by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years". Harner (2001, p.661) concurs noting that:

Landscape becomes contested terrain full of conflicting meanings from opposing classes, between those who previously had control and those who now seek to assert their power. Competing factions use landscape elements to strengthen the convergence between means and meaning.

Within popular, neoliberal globalisation discourse, rurality and possible remoteness of a place is considered solely in terms of cost analysis and distance from global hubs or centres. While this may be a necessary consideration in terms of strategic and logistical decision-making, it is limited and represents a far more complex situation. It is still common to find rural and remote areas cast in a negative or derisive light, described as 'distant' or 'on the frontier', 'on the margin', or even 'on the periphery'. To be described thus, implies that to be rural is to be always situated just outside the reach of civilised society situated 'here' and seen as global, cosmopolitan and legitimate as opposed to what is recognised as 'there', where we find the rural, often geographically extreme and seemingly unchanging places. Edensor (2006, p.484) confirms this by noting that "...it is especially the rural realm which is assigned significance as that which remains the same in a changing world". In these representations, nowhere is it acknowledged that economic maturity and alternate economies

in remote and rural places might in fact be impeded by metropolitan domination, which can only serve to further demarcate difference.

Continuing to perceive and construct rurality in this undifferentiated way groups all rural and remote places together, assuming them to be at the same stage of development and presenting logistical problems in terms of their ability to fully participate in the globalising, economic marketplace. It also assumes that the periphery needs to be part of the core to be legitimate (Hayter et al 2003). Most importantly, viewing rural and remote spaces this way commonly reduces the relationship to a series of simple yet concise binaries depicting them as: -‘near or far’, ‘here or there’, ‘inside or outside’, ‘in full or in empty spaces’; reduced to a subject or object as recalled by Durkhiem’s (1963) reductionist vision (cited in Shields, 1991). This view continues to stifle economic growth and participation opportunities by privileging urban capabilities over those situated in rural localities.

3. Labelling, external powers and decision-making about Alaska

Alaska is the largest state in the U.S., twice the size of the next biggest state Texas. Yet in 2008, Alaska’s population was estimated to be 686,293 people compared to Texas’ population of 24,326,974 people (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Two thirds of Alaska is classified as ‘rural’ and it has the highest share of Indigenous Americans of any U.S. State (one person in five), with Alaska Natives making up the majority of the population in remote rural census areas (Goldsmith 2007). In comparison, in Texas, Indigenous representation is only 0.7 per cent (U.S. Census 2006). Studies have shown that while the urbanised areas of Alaska have grown primarily through in-migration from other urban areas outside of Alaska, in rural areas, the majority of Alaska’s residents were born in the State (Wolfe and Fischer 2003).

In regard to contemporary rural definitions employed by U.S. government agencies, it is interesting to note that in Alaska there are only 1.1 persons per square mile (2.590 km²) yet in Texas, which is defined by the U.S. Census as equally 'rural', this figure rises to 79.6 persons per square mile which is the national average (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). While Texas has 28 large cities classed as 'urban' with populations of over 100,000, in Alaska, Anchorage is the only large city to be classified as 'urban' with a population of 278,735 (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). It would seem then, that population levels and the amount of residential development in each, remain the current criteria used for 'rural' classification in the U.S. In regards to Alaska though, its small population sizes are in part due to the difficult, historical laws that continue to bind settlement patterns and development in the State today. The complexity of these laws is outlined in the following sections.

3.1. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA)

In the State of Alaska, 222 million acres (approx. 89,840,212 hectares) of land, or 62% of Alaskan land is owned by the federal government and cannot be used for settlement or other activities (ADNR 2000). Since 1980, under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) these lands have been classified for use as national parks, wildlife refuges, national forests, military reservations and the North Slope National Petroleum Reserve and as such, come under the control of the federal government. Effectively, this has made Alaska the 'wilderness capital' for mainland USA, while leaving its residents severely restricted in how much land can be used to sustain their livelihood (see Fig 1 and Section 3.3). Quite simply, this Act legalises dispossession, taking away the rights of the State and its people to use the land for development and subsistence. This also has significant implications for both rural and remote parts of Alaska where most of the natural resource wealth of the State

originates. While the majority of Alaskans, both urban and rural are not anti-conservation, it is widely believed that one of the few means through which a vital economy can be constructed in Alaska is through the extraction of its natural resources. As Hornick (2000, p.69) highlights, however:

...the ANILCA's prohibition against roads, motorized vehicles, equipment and boats, the landing of aircraft and structures of any kind has caused considerable controversy among inholders [the name given to local land holders], miners, loggers, oil and gas drillers, developers and others who are concerned about the Federal government locking up lands from multiple use.

In the area of resource management specifically, the wishes of the State of Alaska and its people, often come second to those of the federal government which continues to see Alaska as a resource warehouse that can be tapped into when reserves on the mainland run low (Carey 1999). The recurrent discussion of the Bush administration (2001-January 2009) about trying to 'open up' Alaska's wilderness areas for further exploration and drilling of oil reserves, is evidence of this. With no end in sight to the Gulf conflict, however, and oil prices at unprecedented levels, the federal government's need for more resources is likely to be ongoing and this will undoubtedly place more pressure on currently protected areas in Alaska such as the 8 million acre (approx. 3,237,485 hectare) Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. A prominent reason for establishment of the Arctic Refuge in the first place was the fact that this single protected area encompassed an unbroken continuum of arctic and subarctic ecosystems (USFWS 2007). The refuge also encompasses the traditional homelands and subsistence areas of the Inupiaq Eskimos of the arctic coast and the Athabascan Indians of

the interior. That these areas should be threatened by development, however, should not come as a surprise because as Dinero (2007, p.255) notes:

the effects of globalisation upon native Alaska are incontrovertible. Increasingly, 'native' space' may be defined in 21st century Alaska as a milieu dominated by simultaneous contestation and hybridisation of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial social patterns and behaviours, economic activities and political agendas enmeshed within and across a single geographic territory.

In effect, what this situation represents, like so many other decisions made in regards to governing Alaska, is that when decisions are made externally and have to be implemented locally, unrest and uncertainty arise and mistrust manifests itself in various ways. As political power and economic advantage tend to be concentrated in urban areas, and in Alaska's case more often than not, in States distant from its own, urban-based interests typically with little knowledge of what life in Alaska is actually like, are actively engaged in making decisions about how resources should be used in the State.

The federal government's ability to override local wishes stems from clauses in ANILCA which mandate management principles under the National Park Service Organic Act (1916) which allows for the U.S. congress to intervene when it believes there has been a contravention of the Act. As Lurman and Rabinowitch (2007, p.147) note, the Organic Act tells the agency to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations". Over the years in

Alaska, courts have interpreted these somewhat vague statements to mean that the agency has broad discretion in making resource use decisions and in determining the proper balance between preservation and enjoyment. When it was considered that the State of Alaska was not applying the laws as the federal government had intended, the U.S. Congress under the Property Clause of the Constitution, intervened. Under the Property Clause, the federal government has the right to legislate concerning its land and the wildlife and as Redlich et al (1999, p.50) note, this includes the power to override any State action that is considered as “incompatible with a legitimate exercise of federal power... even within an area where the States might otherwise act”.

This is just one more measure of the power that the U.S. federal government has over its distant, rural spaces. It reflects the out-of-state control that it, as a distant landlord, continues to maintain over the cultural and economic landscape of Alaska and its resource sovereignty. As a result, in contemporary Alaska, substantial political and public tensions have emerged between urban and rural residents over issues including: land ownership, access and control; natural resource development; wildlife and fish allocation, subsistence farming and public funds expenditure (Berger 1985). Not only have these concerns been exacerbated by the ANILCA, but also by the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA).

3.2. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA)

Under the Statehood Act, Alaska was granted the right to select 104 million acres (approx. 42,087,306 hectares) of land which it could manage as a revenue base. During the first 8 years of statehood, Alaska identified 26 million acres (approx. 10,521,826 hectares) for

selection. Inevitably, these lands would also include the homelands of Alaska Natives.

Berger (1985, p.23) notes that “at that time, it was not easy for the people of village Alaska to be heard so in 1966, Alaska Natives established a state-wide organisation – the Alaska Federation of Natives” to help argue their case. This federation argued that without a treaty or an act of Congress extinguishing Native title (which had been assured by both the Treaty of Cession of Russian America and the First Organic Act of 1884), the State should freeze all land selections of federal land pending a land claims settlement (Berger 1985). The Secretary of the Interior at the time agreed and declared a freeze on any additional State land selections, though in conjunction with this, the State continued to maintain its paternalistic role controlling both the land and the money for Native people.

Realistically, during the late 1960s, the Native community would have been hard pressed to obtain any comprehensive lands claim settlement from the Congress if it had not been for the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay in 1968. Ironically though, under the federal land freeze, even the State was unable to proceed with the development of this resource. As a result, the local oil industry, the Nixon Administration, and the State of Alaska were suddenly galvanized into action and began advocating on behalf of Native people for a quick settlement to the land claims issue. Thus the ground-breaking Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was created and enacted by 1971, so that the Prudhoe Bay oil wells might begin production.

Under ANCSA, 220 village corporations as well as 13 regional corporations were created roughly along tribal lines, including 12 in Alaska and 1 that was created later to represent

Alaska Natives living outside the State (see Fig 2). Historically, Alaska's Natives had always lived in village communities throughout the State, from the Inupiat Eskimos' of the Arctic North in Barrow, to the Athabascan tribes of the State's interior, from the Aleuts of the Aleutian Chain, to the Tlingit and Haida Indians of the Southeast. With this decision, they were also granted \$962 million dollars in seed money, and Native corporations were authorised to select 44 million acres (approx. 38,930,758 hectares) of federal lands in Alaska (Borell 2000). While this settlement was generally seen as a good outcome, Berger (1985, p.21) notes that before the Act of 1971, "...Alaska Natives held aboriginal title to virtually all of Alaska, a title based on Native use and occupation of the land since time immemorial". The Act essentially sought not only to redraw the boundaries of the land title, but also to "divide and subdivide places, people and resources into manageable units" (Howitt 2001, p.234). It also legally required that all corporations make profits and pursue entrepreneurial activities that utilised their now commodified lands. In addition to this, Section 7(i) of ANSCA required that regional corporations 'share' 70 percent of their resource revenues with the other Native corporations. As this was an extremely complex aspect of the Act, it took Native corporations approximately 10 years to hammer out an agreement which would spell out exactly how this could be undertaken to ensure that those who were resource-poor simply by accident of location, could still benefit from those who were resource-rich (Naske and Slotnick 1987).

In requiring 'sharing' to be a mandatory condition, ANCSA totally ignored traditional customs and social practices. Although sharing had always been a part of Native cultures, it was generally encouraged only within particular communities and not usually between cultures. It is significant therefore, that the sharing provisions of ANCSA required sharing

among culturally different Native corporations. As Marini and Mooney (2006:92) argue “economic interaction within rural places is more likely to take place in the context of ‘other than economic relationships’ (kinship, cohort, neighbours, friendships, etc)...”. The condition to ‘share’, therefore, remains a difficult component to implement. This is mainly because there are approximately 90,000 Indigenous people (half of whom are Inuit) and speak 20 different Indigenous languages, living in a variety of locations throughout Alaska (Crowell 2002). Even more significant though, is the fact that within this notion of ‘sharing’, lies the assumption that the rural spaces in which the majority of Native Alaskan’s live, are assumed to be ‘productive’ spaces, where a sustainable living can be made from utilising land through a variety of associated industries. Critics of ANCSA such as Berger (1985, p.6) believe that “the Native ...corporate structures actually put land at risk. For Native land is now a corporate asset and many Alaska Natives fear that, through corporate failure, corporate take-overs, and taxation, they could actually lose their land”.

From the edict to make profits, also came the general assumption that Native corporations actually knew how to go about strategically managing their resources and operating at a level that would successfully engage with the globalising economy. This proved to be something that had to be learnt over time, as with the majority of corporations situated in extremely under-capitalised, remote regions, the prospects of making quick profits was always going to be fraught with difficulty. In fact, some of the more remote corporations barely made a profit for the first few decades under the Act (see Fig 3). This should not come as a surprise though, as many of these corporations are in arctic and sub-arctic regions which present their own unique concerns.

In Alaska therefore, the considerable variation we see among rural places and their associated corporations is highly contingent on the type of natural resources available for development. Marini and Mooney (2006, p.92) argue that this variability “...not only exists as remnants of the past but that such difference continues to be preserved and, sometimes even newly constructed, by the processes of modernization and globalization”. Against these constructs, Native Alaskan’s also continue to live by Indigenous values and supplement their diet and incomes by living off the land through subsistence hunting and gathering as they have done for generations. Even this aspect of life, though, has not been without conflict.

3.3. The Subsistence Economy

The most divisive issue in Alaska today has its origins in both ANILCA and ANCSA though it is not about restrictions on development. Rather, it stems from the use of the word ‘rural’ in federal definitions pertaining to use of natural resources and subsistence hunting and gathering. ANILCA essentially gives priority to subsistence hunting and fishing on federal lands – and defines subsistence as “customary and traditional uses of fish and game by rural Alaska residents” (Hull and Leask 2000, p.11). To comply with this federal definition, in the 1980s, the Alaska legislature passed a law describing subsistence users as those ‘domiciled in a rural area of the state’. This definition, however, was vigorously opposed by some advocacy groups representing urban-based hunters and fishermen who viewed the rural preference as unfair and unconstitutional. In 1989, the Alaska Supreme court ruled in their favour that the law was indeed unconstitutional because Alaska’s constitution does not allow the State to allocate fish and game on the basis of residence (Hull and Leask 2000, p.11). Since that decision nearly twenty years ago, the federal government, which as previously noted already controls more than half of Alaska’s lands, stepped in again to take control over

the regulation of subsistence hunting in the State. By 1999, it had also taken over regulation of subsistence fishing on navigable waters. This is a significant move particularly when as Davis and Jentoft. (2001, p.223) note “access to marine resources has become a key issue for many aboriginal peoples struggling to move from dependency on the nation state to self-determining agency”. In 2000, the State won the right to appeal this intervention but most analysts believe that it is very unlikely that that State will ever gain sole control over subsistence management again (Haycox, 2002a; Lurman and Rabinowitch, 2007).

Thus despite Alaska’s Statehood being declared in 1959, the federal government continues to regulate resource use and governance of resource development irrespective of the fact that the term ‘rural’ in ANSCA was originally intended as a political compromise designed to protect Native subsistence activities. As Davis and Jentoft (2001, p.223) note further “access to and use of natural resources is a cornerstone in sustaining Indigenous culture”. This was confirmed by Nelson Frank, a Haida man from southeast Alaska before the Alaska Native Review Commission (in Thorton, 1998, p.2):

Subsistence living, a marginal way of life to most, has no such connotation to the Native people of southeast Alaska. The relationship between the native population and the resources of the land and sea is so close than an entire culture is reflected...Traditional law...was passed from generation to generation, intact, through repetition of legends and observance of ceremonials which were largely concerned with the use of land, water, and the resources contained within. Subsistence living was not only a way of life, but also a life enriching process.

Conservation and perpetuation of subsistence resources was part of that life and was mandated by traditional law and custom.

Today this tradition continues, even when young people have left their villages, they tend to return during times of harvest. As Irene Anderson (of Bering Straits Native Corporation, Nome, *pers comm.* 2007) notes:

a large number of Alaska Natives now live and work in urban places such as Anchorage, but it seems to me that they always associate themselves with 'home' which is defined as this village or that one and is 'rural'. Many come home for picking berries, greens, fishing, hunting and such. Sometimes they come back, with their education, to work as school teachers, nurses, etc. Sometimes they come back for funerals and church gatherings, Native dance festivals and such. The thing about Alaska Natives is that we've generally kept our rural identity as our villages are still intact.

Subsistence activities, which are conducted seasonally throughout the year, therefore, remain a vital component of what it is to be rural and Indigenous in contemporary Alaska. These activities establish a sense of belonging and although with globalisation, changes are now occurring in how subsistence is being carried out, the extent to which it is being carried out, and by whom, it remains a cultural and economic link between urban and rurally based Indigenous Alaskans. Importantly, contemporary subsistence practices represent both the economic potential and the socio/cultural identity associated with homelands. It is precisely because of the dual nature of these rural homelands that specific places become empowered and as such, these places become more than simply empty spaces or edges of empires (Jacobs

1996). These homelands are places where Entrikin (2001:696) notes “the self is emplaced and embodied” and as such, they continue to offer new modes of cultural, ecological, economic, and sustainable development which challenge dominant perceptions concerning what it is to be rural in contemporary Alaska.

4. The performance of rurality in Alaska

Although the use of the words ‘rural’ and ‘rurality’ are not exclusively used by White/Anglo populations in Alaska, it is generally understood by all that such labels come from urban centres and are employed by government agencies (Anderson, *pers Comm.* 2007). While from the outside it might appear that being defined or classified as ‘rural’ should not matter, it matters significantly when you are situated in a State that is highly dependent on federal government grants, pension payments and local procurement. Federal funding programs in Alaska are vital for not only sustainability, but also as necessary seed money to support entrepreneurial opportunities. Some federal programs are limited to rural and remotes areas, yet each program has its own definition of rural and urban, so depending on how rurality is defined in any particular program, a rural area and its residents may or may not qualify for a program’s funds and benefits. Disturbingly, some programs include benefit criteria based on ‘metropolitan and non-metropolitan’ status. Coburn et al (2007:2) note that this is where “one or more county is considered the ‘core’ and other counties are included [or excluded] based on commuting patterns into that core”. Importantly, even though the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB’s) ‘metropolitan’ classification was not designed to create a definition of rural, as Cobern et al (2007:2) note: “many federal programs use the metropolitan designation to declare all other counties ‘rural’ even though 20 million Census Bureau-defined urban people also live in OMB-defined ‘non-metropolitan’ areas”.

Despite this, even though these definitions were specifically developed only for statistical purposes, in 2000, the OMB had to officially caution that their definitions did not “equate to an urban-rural classification” and that “programs that base funding levels or eligibility on whether a county is included in a Metropolitan or Micropolitan Statistical Area may not accurately address issues or problems faced by local populations”. Given this, as well as the fact that OMB definitions continue to be widely used to define what is rural and what is not, the need for a more inclusive definition that assists with understanding the complexities of rurality, is paramount. Simply using distance from an urban centre and population size as the only distinguishing data for rural classification is inappropriate and does not acknowledge that even within definitions of ‘rural’, there are also degrees of rurality, remoteness, access, distance and so on. Neither does it acknowledge that even when using available data sets, rural designations can change with shifts in population distribution, or as a result of changes in geographic boundaries or levels of local development.

In Alaska, while there is generally a greater understanding of the differences between rural and urban as manifested through local characteristics, when it comes to statistical representations, however, the State is forced to use the same definitions as the U.S. mainland and as such, finds itself unable to adequately measure place-specific differences such as employment, household consumption, personal income, cost of living, levels of subsistence etc (Goldsmith 2007). Again, much of this is because definitions for classifying these types of data are based on urban models that, as suggested previously in Alaska’s case, are totally inadequate. In Anchorage for example, the transport costs for imported foods, fuel, goods and services are much less than in rural towns and villages so cannot be used as an adequate measure for comparison.

In Alaska, remote and/or rural Alaska is defined as that “part of the state that is generally off the road and marine highway system in Northern and Western Alaska” (Goldsmith 2007, p.4). These areas are often located in arctic and sub-arctic areas. At 395,000 square miles (1,023,045.26 km²), the remote rural region is large enough to house Japan, Germany, and Great Britain. Yet with a population of only approximately 70,000 people, most households survive on a mixture of cash, subsistence, sharing, and non-cash trading (Goldsmith 2006). As imagined, this situation is a world away from the State's urban economy, and under standard measures such as ‘income’, the remote rural economy appears to lag far behind. As local scholars Goldsmith (2006, 2007) and Ulner (2007) suggest, however, standard measurements cannot hope to capture all the economic activity in a region where subsistence and non-cash trading play such an important part.

Despite the fact that more than two thirds of the State cannot be accessed by road or by rail, as Alaska is primarily a resource economy, it remains a very attractive place to invest. Alaska’s natural endowment concurs with dimensions of ‘rural’ that are recognised as “areas which are dominated (either currently or recently) by extensive land uses” (Clope in Johnson, 2000, p.718). Types of extensive land uses historically found in rural Alaska include – commercial fishing (mainly ground-fish, Halibut and Salmon) and whaling; fur harvesting; reindeer herding; commercial logging; hard-rock mining (especially gold, silver and zinc); placer mining; quarrying of sand and gravel; oil and gas extraction; and agriculture and tourism (Wolff and Fischer 2003). Importantly and somewhat ironically, many of the extensive land uses originating in rural areas of Alaska have been responsible for the development of more permanent urban-based towns and ‘cities’ such as Juneau and Fairbanks (through gold mining) and Anchorage, Kenai and Valdez (through support services

for petroleum development and export) (Williams, 2000). It is these important inter-connected and often unseen flow-on effects that keep the Alaskan economy competitive, yet heavily dependent on the rural and mainly Indigenous parts of the State.

After oil and gas extraction, mining is Alaska's next most lucrative resource sector. Consequently, many of the Native land selections made under ANSCA, particularly those by regional corporations, were actually based on mineral potential. For example, the Bering Straits Native Corporation owns 2.2 million acres (approx. 890,308 hectares) of land on the Seward Peninsula in the historically prospective area of Nome. Likewise, the Calista Native Corporation owns 7 million acres (approx. 2,832,994 hectares) in the Southwest part of Alaska, including the Yukon Delta region where very large epithermal gold systems have been shown to exist (AMA 2005, p.116). What is essential to note in terms of mineral development in contemporary Alaska, however, is that under ANSCA, both the surface and sub-surface of the soils are owned by *different* Native groups. As such, this can make for complicated, yet not impossible negotiations between Native groups themselves, as well as outside interests. As Irene Anderson (*pers Comm* 2002) notes in terms of large scale global mining ventures, however:

...when we see the positive impacts of one mine, such as we see with the 'Fort Knox' gold project in Fairbanks [owned by Kinross Mining], and we see the potential, of the 'Red Dog' mine, a world-class zinc mine in Kotzebue [owned by Teck Cominco], we see these projects as positive to the Native peoples in the region. I think Alaskans generally are receptive to dealing with issues such as finding a resource and figuring

out how to get it working. Sometimes it's the development time that can cause problems and kill a project, not our people.

This is an important point as often external mining companies blame their lack of involvement in Alaska on Native corporations. They incorrectly perceive that Native corporations will not want mining to take place on their lands, when in fact it is often the bigger mining companies, who are not interested in participating in negotiations. As companies continue to enter previously unexplored rural regions, however, it is a more common occurrence for them to come into contact with Indigenous communities and avoiding negotiations will become increasingly impossible. In Alaska though, negotiations do not have to be perceived as problematic for as Morris Thompson, former President and CEO of Doyon Native Corporation Ltd (1997, p.109) notes:

...new mines do not have to be on Doyon or other Native lands to benefit Native corporations or Native people. Without a doubt, more mining industry activity in Alaska will help Doyon and other Native corporations in their efforts to attract exploration dollars to Native lands. New mines, wherever they are located, should mean opportunities for all Alaskans.

As such, while mining and resource development in Alaska may from the outside initially appear complicated by considerations such as land ownership and management, in Alaska today, "...there is still a tremendous amount of federal, state and private Native Corporation lands that are available for mineral development" (AMA, 2002, p.1). In respect to Native Corporations more generally, they are now viewed as:

...contemporary businesses who are actively marketing their lands for mineral development and given the fact that many greenfields deposits no longer exist in established regions of the globe, and that Alaska's oil production is declining at a rate of 7% a year, Alaska wants and needs the important revenue that can come from mining and other such industries (AMA, 2002, p.1-2).

Due to the fact that Alaska Native corporations own much of the land that mining and other resource exploitation takes place on, they have become a powerful stimulus for the State's economy. For example, in 2005, seven of the 10 Alaska-based companies that generated the most revenue were Native corporations (Bluemink, 2006). Considering that bankruptcies and near-bankruptcies were common experiences initially for most of these corporations, they have come a long way from those early lean years. Now, some 39 years into the ANCSA deal, as Simpson (2007, p.3) notes:

the corporations are a prime economic driver of the state and collectively, they have revenues in the billions and distribute tens of millions in payroll in Alaska and thousands of direct employment jobs. They have made investments all over the United States and globally.

Today, however, not all their revenue comes from the harvesting of natural resources. For example, 45 per cent of Bering Straits Native Corporation's revenue is now earned through federal and State contracts such as providing security at the Elmendorf Air Force Base hospital in Anchorage or maintenance and operations for the Coast Guard air base in Kodiak, these projects providing about \$14 million in revenue annually (Bluemink 2006). Sealaksa Corporation has subsidiary businesses in five other U.S. states and Mexico, all of which sell

products globally. As a result, in 2006, their profits were in excess of \$41 million (Simpson 2007). Much of the success of these corporations is because they have made sound investments, but also partly because they have found a niche in government contracting and the diverse supply field.

As these examples show, Native Alaska, is generally performing well in a State that is itself predominantly 'rural' yet does not see this as a disadvantage or a constraint. Importantly, unlike other for-profit, urban-based corporations, the rural Native corporations have also assumed obligations to advance the social, cultural, environmental and economic welfare of all Alaska Natives and by doing so, have advanced the standing of Indigenous agency more generally not only in Alaska, but in the United States as a whole. In fact, a 2007 survey on living conditions in the Arctic (which accounts for one third of Alaska's landmass) found that although at times life was not easy, 81 per cent of people interviewed in Arctic Alaska rated their quality of life as "very satisfying" (Leask, 2007, p.1). The survey also noted that the "more than two-thirds of their households relied on a combination of traditional subsistence activities and waged jobs" to survive (Leask, 2007, p.1).

What this snapshot attempts to show is that stereotypes that assume that most Indigenous people in rural areas are unemployed (McPhee 1977), are in Alaska's case, incorrect. Although unemployment does exist and is obviously higher in rural areas (8.5%) than in urban Alaska (6%), statistics generated for these regions do not take into account factors such as seasonal employment, subsistence hunting and gathering, cash-paying job opportunities in the informal sector and those who are willing to work, but cannot find any job that enables

them to work (Goldsmith 2007, p.45). Like the definition of rural, though, unemployment is also a relational concept and data sources typically used to depict and quantify the economy do not allow for a complete and accurate description to be put forward. As Goldsmith (2007, p.45) notes:

employment figures from the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (ADLWD) do not distinguish between local residents and non-local residents, nor do they account for those self-employed or those involved in subsistence and informal sectors, so gaining an accurate picture of employment in the state is not only difficult, but current data collection does not provide a complete or balanced picture of the complexity of the economy as a whole.

Powell (2006:126) has noted that “in the cacophony of competing...claims and recommended approaches, the voices with alternate proposals are sometimes lost”. This is particularly true of arctic and sub-arctic Alaska where we find Indigenous communities actively reinterpreting and reconstructing through local understandings, the notions of what it is to be rural today. Thus in spite of the rigid top-down definitions that consider these places as peripheral to the core, by continuing to live and work in productive homelands, Indigenous communities represent an active part of the regional economy that provides much needed jobs and revenue for the State’s economy. By utilising the laws in ANSCA that legally require regional and village corporations to provide jobs and be self-supportive, these same homelands that provide security and succor for their inhabitants also constitute new productive work spaces with ready workforces who openly challenge the narrow definitions of ‘rurality’ that continue to exist in the United States today.

While by official definition, rural spaces in the U.S. might seem peripheral to the ‘metropolitan core’, the State of Alaska does not underestimate the continued value and significance of its rural spaces. It recognises in fact that there are at least three specific economic links that have been created between its rural and urban areas. These include that:

1. Thousands of jobs in urban Alaska can be traced directly and indirectly to natural resource production in remote and rural Alaska. These include jobs for people working in resource extraction and living in urban Alaska as well as urban jobs in engineering, finance, and other occupations supporting these resource extraction efforts. They also include jobs in businesses supplying materials and services in support of production, such as transportation firms and drilling contractors. Jobs are also created in businesses that sell to the families of these workers such as local retailers and restaurants. Finally, jobs are created by government spending of the statewide tax and other revenues generated by natural resource production.
2. Other types of jobs in urban Alaska owe their existence to purchases of goods and services made by remote rural businesses and households in urban areas. For example, financial services are mostly located in urban centres, but many of their customers are businesses and households living in rural areas.
3. Many jobs associated with the delivery of services and products for the benefit of remote rural residents are filled by urban Alaskans. For example, jobs associated with the construction and maintenance of health and transportation facilities in rural

communities are often filled by urban residents (Goldsmith, 2007; Wolfe & Fischer 2003).

Therefore, the blurring of the traditional notions of city and countryside or urban and rural spaces that Cloke (2006) suggests, do echo Watts (1991, p.10) claim that “...living in a global economy *necessarily* blurs the distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’” as Alaska’s important employment links and growing business relationships clearly show.

5. Concluding remarks

Panelli (2001:164) has noted that “...rural communities can be recognised through a range of meanings, practices and spaces that are constructed by local people”. In Alaska, as this paper has attempted to show, this is indeed the case. Even though much of ‘rural’ Alaska is geographically arctic and sub-arctic, to Native Alaskans specifically, rurality is not seen as limiting, rather, it is viewed with pride and is merely one way of describing ‘home’. As Anderson (*pers Comm.* 2007) notes “the thing about Alaska Natives is that we all come from rural areas and have generally kept our rural identity”. She continues (*pers Comm.* 2007):

I think we are generally a proud people, who acknowledge that we live in beautiful places without the busyness of cities such as Anchorage and its traffic and volume of people. In our villages, we generally know the people who live in the communities and the villagers generally work toward consensus on issues, so we are happy and it is home.

Thus in summary, the first point to make in regards to rigid definitions of ‘rurality’ is that they fail to take into account individual circumstances or to accept that ‘homelands’ can be culturally productive, workable and sustainable spaces where a harmonious co-

existence flourishes. The problem lies in the fact that current neoliberal policies fail to comprehend that Indigenous spaces do not need nor wish to be defined nor recognized solely by their economic utility alone.

Other implications of the rigid classification system in place in the U.S. include that despite the OMB's insistence in 2000 that their policies should not be used to categorise places or determine eligibility for funding, few more inclusive or specific definitions have been forthcoming from other major governmental agencies. This lack of interest in clarifying inconsistencies and avoiding urban bias would seem to reinforce Howitt's (2001) argument that spatial metaphors that presuppose exclusion and separation rather than interaction and inclusion, continue to dominate representations of landscape. As a result, peripheral images of rurality, real and imagined, continue to exist despite grounded evidence that clearly confronts these outdated perceptions.

In Alaska's case it remains important to recognise that much of the State's problems today stem from its historic relationship with the United States mainland. As most of Alaska's history has been written outside the broader context of the history of America's westward development, it has remained for the most part, on the periphery of the American consciousness (Haycox, 2002b). Essentially, Alaska is still considered to be a colony of the mainland to be utilised as it sees fit and as such, the federal government has no qualms concerning its constant intervention in the management of the State's resources, land development, settlement and access requirements (Noon, 2005). As a result of this, it has been largely responsible for the constant "...struggles between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, between transient and permanent residents, between the region and the

nation...” and for the State’s heavy reliance on federal government revenue (Coates, 1993, p.12).

In spite of this, the picture of the economy in arctic and sub-arctic Alaska specifically that has emerged is one of surprising complexity, vitality and potential. The region is rich in natural resources which are of tremendous economic value and the economic opportunities for residents associated with these resources are substantial. The large profits made by many regional Native Corporations through resource development, royalties, tendering for government contracts and business opportunities generally, are evidence of this. As Goldsmith (2007, p.43) notes: “most other rural areas of the United States would be envious of such an economic base as exists in remote rural Alaska”.

In conclusion then, how should we conceptualise rurality today when as Cloke (2006:18) reminds us “as soon as attempts are made to deconstruct the rural metanarrative, much of [the] conceptual strength dissipates into the nooks and crevices of particular locations, economic processes and social identities”. Although that might be so, it also reinforces most clearly why rurality *should* be recognised as an ever-changing perspective, not something that is static, permanent or fixed. Thus, as conditions in rural places alter, so too, there is a need for government agencies and the like to adapt their definitions to cater for development and variation in rural spaces. This is particularly important when considering the State of Alaska which currently remains classified as a ‘remote, rural and non-place territory’ (U.S. Census, 2000). Marini and Mooney (2006:101) concur noting that

there is a pragmatic need to recognize the impact of social, political, regulatory, scientific and cultural spheres in concrete economic spheres...Attempts to separate

these spheres in accord with disciplinary interests or the boundaries of bureaucratic agencies can only have a disorganizing ‘Tower of Babel’ effect.

Thus while it is important to acknowledge that not all rural places or their experiences are the same, in this paper, the intention has been to show that current definitions of rurality in the United States specifically, do not adequately or accurately describe what we find on the ground in rural Alaska. This paper has also sought to show that these spaces are not only the homelands of many Native Alaskans, but are also productive, profitable and sustainable spaces that are actively contributing to the State’s economy by creating jobs not only for rural workers, but also those in urban centres. As such, the State of Alaska shows clearly, that there is no urban without its rural counterpart and while differences may continue to exist, they do not have to impede growth or development.

These places, therefore, need to be recognised for what they are – Indigenous homelands *and* productive regional economies which by their actions are situated more in the core, than on the periphery of it. It is precisely because of this, that dominant and prevailing definitions of rurality need be reconceptualised. A qualitative reconceptualisation would accurately take into account the spatial complexities of the rural and recognise its shifting geographic dynamics. It would also elevate the importance of the local and recognise that rurality today is more a social construction than an actual state or condition that can be applied evenly to all rural spaces. As the case study of Alaska shows, productive rural localities are actively involved in creating a bridge between the rural and urban in response to local and national protocols and the demands of the broader globalising, economic market place. Ultimately, therefore, Alaska provides an example that reinforces the fact that rural spaces are dynamic

and engaging spaces that defy all attempts to be contained or restrained by out-dated and out-moded social constructions of rurality.

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