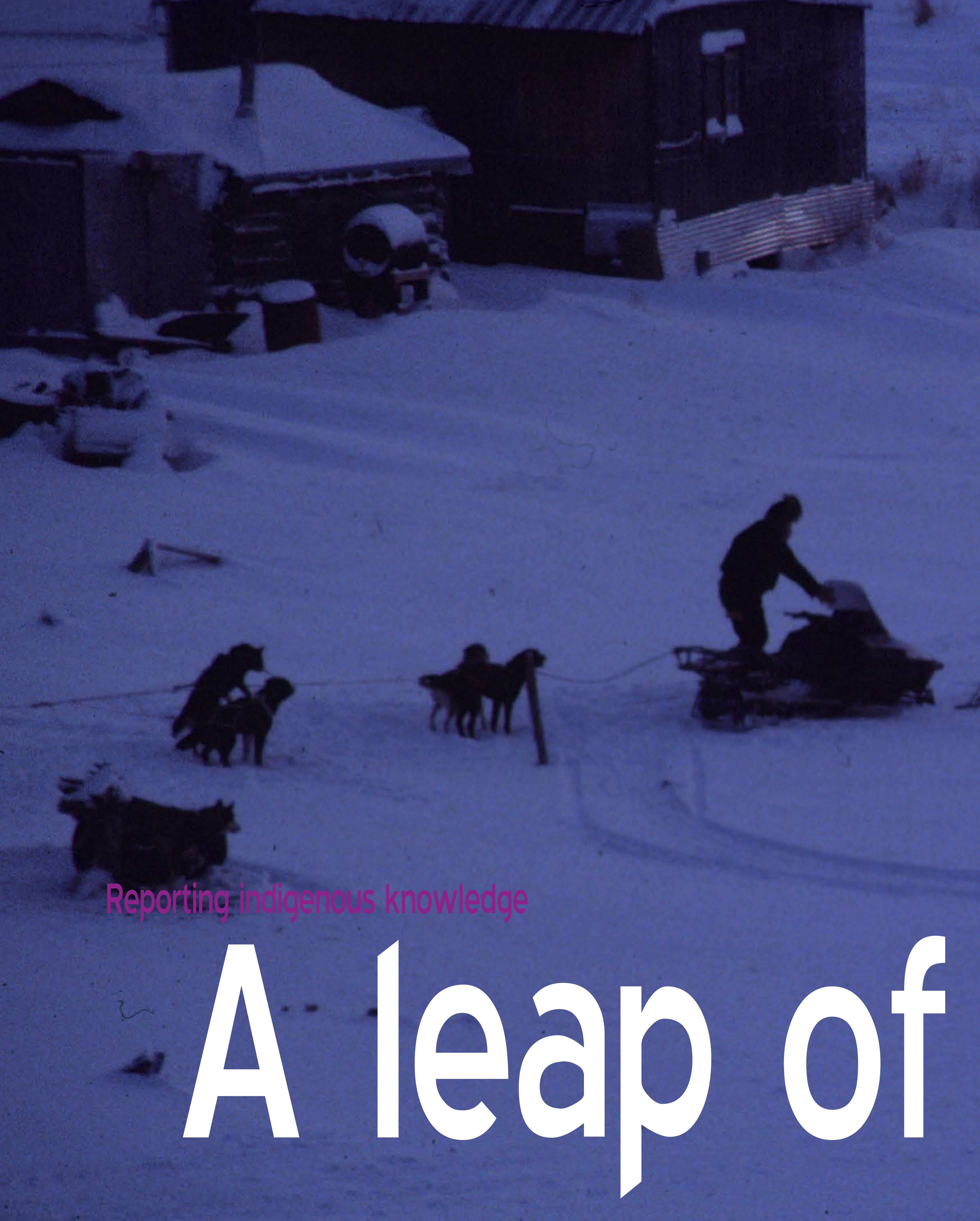

Reporting indigenous knowledge

A leap of

Fern Greenbank spent five years in Alaska, as editor of The Artic Sounder and director of special journalism projects for the University of Alaska, Anchorage.

It doesn't matter where you live in America, some time or another you've probably read, or glanced, at a story about the Gwich'in Indians in Alaska. The stories usually relate to oil development in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and not to the people themselves.

Time and again, we read the mantra: "We know who we are," as the Gwich'in reply to reporters' questions year after year. But, time and again, I think, reporters miss the mark. They don't report who the people are.

We read and hear about the "national" controversy over ANWR, the Porcupine Caribou Herd that calls ANWR home, Indians versus Eskimo, environmentalism versus capitalism, and the Outsiders versus Insiders dilemmas. We really don't know the tiny tribe that has managed to ward off lobbyists, politicians, consultants and their oil-wealthy Northern Eskimo neighbors. They do this with a dogged sense of self and land, and by using the media so expertly you'd think it were a traditional Gwich'in tool.

Reporting environmental issues often involves reporting Native issues, aboriginal rights, uncomfortable historical oppression, culture and alternative forms of place, self and spirituality. It's one thing to research new drilling technologies and another thing to research "alternative" ways of knowing, seeing, believing and living. It's another thing entirely to "believe" or "understand" these things enough to convey them to an audience. One is relatively easy. The others next to impossible. The former is deemed necessary, the latter optional. But is it?

The Gwich'in know who they are. But do we, the readers, the audience, the reporters, the citizens? They tell us time and again who they are – the Caribou People. They tell us time and again why they believe oil production in their backyard will be destructive. But media reports often reflect doubt and suspicion. The assumption is: one Native is the same as another. They're not.

MULTIPLE 'TRUTHS'

In Jerry Mander's classic, yet controversial, book *In the Absence of the Sacred: the Failure of Technology and the Survival of Indian Nations*, "reasons" are offered for the lack of media coverage related to indigenous peoples and their view of the environment.

Media managers, and journalists, have little personal contact with Indians; indigenous peoples tend to live where the media don't, in rural and isolated areas. American education does not routinely integrate Native history into the curricula. The media are not usually present to see what transpires when corporations or government try to control land and minerals.

When journalists do arrive to cover Native news, they have little knowledge of the culture and language.

The "Indian message…is far too subtle, sensory, complex, spiritual and ephemeral to fit the gross guidelines of mass-media reporting, which emphasises conflict and easily grasped imagery. It takes a great deal of time for reporters to adequately understand the Native point of view. And finally, "even if the reporter does understand, to successfully translate that understanding through the medium, and through the editors and the commercial sponsors – all of whom are looking for action – is nearly impossible".

As a university student, Mander's book was required reading in a course on Native American literature, and not just for journalism students. We were forced to look critically at the way we viewed the world versus the way others viewed the world. As a journalist in training, it made sense to understand the time and effort necessary to present issues from within a framework of knowledge, not from a distance. So, off I went to the Arctic to gain a better understanding of the Native point of view.

'MITIGATING' FACTORS

It didn't take long to realise it was easier said than done. You can live among Native peoples for decades and still not truly be able to speak "for them". The greatest lesson I learned in the Arctic, besides how to stand upright in a blizzard without suffering a broken nose, was that journalists MUST consider indigenous points of view as valid, not just as a journalistic exercise. Whenever humanly possible, journalists MUST ask people to speak for themselves, then write what they say.

I served as editor of *The Arctic Sounder*, a community newspaper located in the Inupiaq Eskimo village of Kotzebue on the shores of the Chukchi Sea. The Kotzebue office was one half of a two-bureau newspaper. The other was located in Barrow, the northernmost point in America, a village already touched by the riches of oil production in Prudhoe Bay, a village also culturally dependent on its ability to subsist on whaling. Between the two offices, we served more than 20 Native villages.

Kotzebue is a village of approximately 3,500, located 30 miles above the Arctic Circle. The Northwest Arctic Borough borders the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but sits poised to benefit if oil pours across those borders. My tenure as editor of *The Arctic Sounder* in 1995 was a time of great anxiety over ANWR, which is often called the American Serengeti or The Last True Wilderness. Then President Bill Clinton vowed to veto any bill that would open ANWR to oil development, but he was subjected to incredible pressure. No one in the Far North knew from one minute to the next if Clinton would hold his ground.

There were other newspapers covering the debate, but my bureau partner and I were closest to the action. The reading audience of *The Arctic Sounder* had the most to lose and the most to gain from the outcome. We were often amused, sometimes troubled, by the description of the Gwich'in and Inupiat in Outside papers. But, we also understood. Distance is just that—distance – geographically and emotionally. The media debate inside Alaska's borders was emotional and personal. Outside, it was only about money and power. I was facing directly into the world Mander had described.

The Inupiaq Eskimo of the North Slope Region were waging an all out public relations campaign, paid for with millions from their own oil production dollars. Their Prudhoe Bay oilfield accounts for more than 70% of the state's income, and the North Slope Borough is the richest in the country. The Inupiaq are proud whalers, and the health and welfare of Beaufort Sea whales is key to their survival. They protected their whales. The Gwich'in wanted to protect their Caribou.

The Inupiaq neighbors of the Northwest Arctic, the region with the highest unemployment in the state, were holding a somewhat shaky middle ground, out of fear, it seemed. If they did not support opening ANWR to development, they would lose job opportunities and service contracts. On the other hand, the people seemed to abhor the idea of taking sides; it is not the Native way. Natives in the Northwest had already experienced the environmental degradation of development in an Arctic environment with the expansion of the Red Dog zinc mine, but they were also benefiting from the jobs. To have to choose between a job and desecrating the earth is not easy for people who are inherently close to the land.

The Gwich'in Athabascan Indians remained steadfast in their assertion that the Porcupine Caribou Herd's sacred calving ground near the village of Kaktovik (known as the 10-0-2 area) would be disrupted and the future of the caribou jeopardized. No amount of environmental protection promises would sway the Gwich'in, not in 1995 and not now. "We are the Caribou People," they said. And the caribou are not to be disturbed.

Despite the amount of money poured into the PR campaign by the wealthy Inupiaq, the Gwich'in organised themselves and countered those millions of dollars with unlimited determination. They chose their audience wisely, then chose their media wisely, then chose their message wisely. Every media dollar had a purpose. It was like watching expert marksmen hitting the bullseye shot after shot. They seemed to know exactly where the next Inupiat or government message would be placed, then they beat them to the punch with their own

faith

media message. Billboards, brochures, web sites, feature stories, press conferences, sound bites and powerful quotes, all strategically placed for maximum results.

The debate is still the same, after all these years, and the Gwich'in show no sign of losing their media touch, but a new administration under President George W. Bush seems determined to push through legislation that will result in oil extraction from pristine lands.

Even in 1995, my colleague and I knew we were in the middle of an issue larger than our coverage area, outside our realm of authentic understanding. We were right there in the heart of a region being discussed from Washington, D.C. to Greenland. We were closer to ANWR than we wanted to be at times. We watched and read the national coverage closely. We watched and read and marveled at the skill with which these traditional groups used the media to hang on to tradition.

My colleague and I ran one-person offices covering more than 100 000 square miles each, in the Arctic, with no roads and limited resources. Over a crucial six-month period, we split the issue into mini-topics and tried to provide information, always feeling, sometimes knowing, we weren't doing an adequate job. Deadlines, blizzards and darkness set in. The environment tended to freeze our energy. But, if you listen, trust, and capture moments, then bits of truth sift through misunderstanding.

The truth is hard to tell in a place like Alaska. It's hard anywhere, but more so in Alaska it seems. There is a lot of muffled talk among like-minded groups, but little honest public dialogue among groups with divergent views. Many writers have been there, written about the land and the people, then left. That's a different form of truth, one that is urged along by the safety of distance. Few writers and photographers, if any, tell the truth and stay there. Those that do stay and brave the cold and complexities, provide insight and clarity which helps shrink the divide between them and us.

To be honest, I think Alaskan journalists do a remarkable job covering the debate, but it's the rural-based journalists in particular, those writing for village papers and public radio that offers the most accurate picture. They live in villages. They start to understand, if not feel, the truth. Unfortunately, when those stories are picked up by Outside organisations as 'background', they're stripped of the local language providing the Native view.

With so few Native journalists, in a state where communities are isolated non-Native journalists writing for the state's chain of rural newspapers can't write and run. It forces you to think twice about every question asked, every word written.

I spent enough time in Native villages, among Natives and non-Natives, to hear 'the truth', but I didn't always write it and I noticed few others did either. You have to choose your battles wisely, and sometimes the 'whole' truth loses out. I knew the truth from a Western fact-based perspective, but I had to report the truth of those I served. It was hard work. It wreaked havoc on my conscience.

To write "about" Natives is frowned upon in Alaska. The requirement is to write with Natives. To teach Natives to write about themselves is considered patronising by some, dangerous by others and offensive at times to a culture that doesn't believe in drawing attention to itself. But, to live in Native communities, to try and understand the history of a people, their spirit, their knowledge of the land and to learn from it, is worth the effort some media organisations make.

The chain of rural Alaskan newspapers (Alaska Newspapers, Inc.) happens to be owned by a Native corporation. The chain rarely makes a profit and editor turnover is extremely high.

But, I admire the Calista Corporation for hanging tough and hanging on to the only source of information produced within village boundaries. Some say the corporation clings to the papers because it gives them control over information, which means power, but the amount of power those small papers give the corporation is worth the benefit to the rural residents of Alaska. And, at the end of the day, the amount of work it takes to run a chain of papers in far flung and mostly frozen villages is out of proportion to any power they might gain. I believe they hang on because passionate journalists past and present have convinced Native leaders that owning a piece of media insures Natives have a voice.

> "The Gwich'in know who they are. They are the Caribou People."

The effort and time it takes for journalists to come to "know" others' beliefs is tremendous. Few want to take a leap of faith and just believe. It's even harder to develop a tenuous level of trust, then play a necessary devil's advocate role, with people who have good reason for mistrusting any non-Native, and non-Native journalists in particular.

Being There

When the Gwich'in speak of "needing" the caribou to survive, they aren't talking about food necessarily; they are speaking of their souls. This is interpreted by many non-Natives as more "beads and feathers." Again, so many of us don't believe what we do not feel or understand.

The Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, Alaska's Interior daily, allowed me to serve a reporting internship in the Fall of 1994, which became the beginning of an understanding process that continues to this day. I geared up to write an in-depth piece on the lives of itinerant public health nurses. One of the nurse's routes included the Gwichin Indian Country village of Venetie – the base for the ANWR struggle.

In Venetie, the people were gracious and warm. The language of Gwich'in was spoken all around me. I didn't have a clue at that time of the controversy engulfing the village. By the time I came to 'know' the history and the struggle, I was free of fear and misperceptions so many carry about the Gwich'in.

The Elder women were like my grandmother, beading an alter cloth for the church. The children's skin was a different colour, but they smiled, laughed, cried and played like all children. The poverty, alcoholism, unemployment and cultural disruption were significant to me, not because the people affected were 'poor Natives,' but because people were affected.

We don't have to be naïve, soft or thin-skinned as they say in the media industry, but truth is so much more accessible when we care. It removes that outer layer we build around ourselves. We are taught the opposite in journalism school.

The problem is more than apathy, here and elsewhere; it is a national disinterest in caring about the consequences of our thoughts, as well as our actions. If we incorporate compassion, worldviews and indigenous knowledge into our journalism curricula, we won't produce wimpy reporters; we'll produce better reporters. Judging without knowing is not journalism.

It doesn't matter whether you're an environmentalist or pro-development, Native or non-Native, conservative or liberal – the lessons learned from the Gwich'in strategies are priceless: identity is not just a word, it's a virtue; old and new can mesh, tribe above self, and, the media can serve the people. All the people.

The Gwich'in have been forced to justify their values and lives for the purpose of saving their culture, their borders, their self determination and their caribou. There are no equivalent Gwich'in terms, but they've learned to speak press lingo because it's a survival tool. But within the confines of their village, I never heard them justify their lives. They just lived them.

Journalists need to insist on the time and resources it takes to present and share Native knowledge without justifying it, thereby making it part of this world, not a separate world. Editors, publishers, producers and directors should recognise there is economic gain from 'doing the right thing.' It just takes time to see the gains.