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Alaska Inuit over-regulated, researchers say

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KOTZEBUE, ALASKA — The subsistence and traditional food issues of the people of this region are similar to those of traditional peoples around the world — but the difference is the amount of regulations here.

That's according to three researchers from Canada who met recently for two days with representatives of the Northwest Arctic Borough, the Kotzebue Indian Reorganization Act and other organizations in Kotzebue about the security of traditional foods.

The researchers are gathering input and direction on that topic from communities across the Arctic.

"At first glance, I would say that the people around here are the most regulated people in the circumpolar Arctic," said researcher Gerard Duhaime, who has experience in Greenland, Canada, and Alaska, Norway and elsewhere.

Duhaime, a sociologist and political scientist, initiated the project, which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

The other researchers were Minnie Grey, Executive Director of the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services and lawyer Ghislain Otis, who with Duhaime, works at Université Laval in Quebec City. The University of Alaska's Rick Caulfield is also involved in the project.

"There's a basic incompatibility between the ways that people here are doing things — food and animals — and the way the outside regulatory bodies are used to doing that. And it is in each dimension of common life that you have these difficulties," he said at the meeting.

In a phone interview, Duhaime said that the fundamental precept of state and federal regulations is the consideration of individual hunting practices, and limiting an individual's harvest so that resources are preserved for other users.

"But in the Inupiat [tradition], hunters are not trying to meet the needs of an individual." Instead, often they are trying to meet the needs of family, extended family, and other village members.

According to Otis, the lawyer, "Legal aspects seem to be really important here — traditional rights are not properly recognized by legal system."

Elder Jonas Ramoth, who works with the U.S. National Park Service, is very familiar with those rights, and with them not being recognized by the legal system.

"It's not a disgrace to go to jail for trying to feed your family," he said near the close of the meeting, speaking of the past when people would unintentionally break Western laws to hunt and go to jail for it.

He added that native people, just like outsiders, once had difficulty defining the term subsistence.

"'Subsistence' — we had never heard of the word. It's an English word. Our word (means) 'it's a humble way to make a day-by-day living.'

"And that will continue, whether or not we go to jail."

The researchers, who are currently in the first, information-gathering phase of their project, hope to design a collaborative project that meets the needs of Arctic communities they visit.

"If there is an interest in having a collaboration with us, then that will define our agenda," Duhaime said.

Duhaime said that as a result of the meeting in Kotzebue, he has a better sense of the concerns of the region and use those concerns to orient the Alaska part of the project