

Daily News Opinion

Alaska's 'commons' idea inspires global action

Thanks to Nelson Mandela and F. W. De Klerk, today's South Africa is admired by the world for its peaceful transition from a racist state to a multicultural democracy. It has the strongest economy on the continent, world-class vineyards and game parks, and six new stadiums built for soccer football's 2010 World Cup.

But all is not well. Illegal immigrants flood across the borders from neighboring countries ravaged by civil war, hunger and hopelessness. Millions live in squalor, and one-third of the population is infected with HIV.

My grandson Jason, 26, knows South Africa well. He was born and raised in nearby Swaziland and speaks fluent Zulu. While earning a doctorate at the University of Virginia he is doing research in Durban, a beautiful city on the Indian Ocean, famous as the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi's history-making non-violence movement.

Jason, like many of his generation, wonders how to break the cycle of resource exploitation, insider corruption, and ingrained poverty that plagues Africa. Last summer, he learned that the Center for Civil Society at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in Durban was planning a conference on these issues. He approached Patrick Bond, the director, who embraced the idea to include on the agenda the Alaska model known as the Owner State.

I wanted to attend, but at 90, couldn't make the trip in the time allowed. Malcolm Roberts, senior fellow at the Institute of the North, and Art and Anna Davidson, long-time activists in Alaska's environmental and Native communities, flew to Durban to tell the story. They were joined by Jason's father, Dr. Jack Hickel, a physician who is building a hospital in the Sudan.



WALLY HICKEL

COMMENT

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The conference began with bitter, angry voices from Durban neighborhoods unheard and unseen by the tourists who flock to this city. Few realize that the massive refineries next to the international airport, the largest complex south of Nigeria, lack advanced environmental protection. The air in nearby homes, streets and playgrounds is acrid with sulfur, and the elementary schools have a high percentage of children who suffer from asthma.

Some of the conference keynote speakers advocated extreme tactics, including violence, to get the attention of government officials to address Africa's dramatic problems. Others concluded there is no solution.

Against this backdrop, the Alaska delegation described Alaska's Owner State where our commonly-owned land and resources (known as the commons) have been used to elevate our people from poverty and create an excellent quality of life.

The commons is a new concept in the U.S., but it is well-known around the world. Eighty-four percent of the Earth's surface is commonly-owned or owned by no one and therefore the responsibility of all. This includes the oceans and vast regions in the Arctic, Australia, Asia and Africa. The air we breathe is commons, as is fresh water.

The importance of the commons was underlined last month by the news that Elinor Ostrom will receive a 2009 Nobel economics prize for her research on the commons. And the Alaskans reported in Durban that Elinor's husband, Victor, helped draft the section in our constitution that mandates that commonly-owned resources must be developed "for the maximum benefit of the people."

After hearing the Alaska Owner State presentation, the delegates discussed in committee a campaign to amend and strengthen all African constitutions with a Commons Amendment that would include the "maximum benefit" provision.

And then they took a step further: Professor Dani Nabudere from Uganda called on the delegates to think beyond Africa and launch a "Global Campaign for the Commons." His motion was adopted enthusiastically and plans were drawn up to enlist the support of prominent leaders worldwide.

This global campaign will be successful because it addresses reality. We must unite the environmental movement with those dedicated to helping billions of human beings struggling to survive extreme poverty. You can't save one without the other.

I truly believe that as Africa champions and leads this campaign, it will change the world.

Walter J. Hickel with Malcolm Roberts. Hickel served as governor of Alaska 1966-1968 and 1990-1994 and as U.S. Secretary of the Interior 1969-1970. He is the founder of the Institute of the North. His latest book is "Crisis in the Commons: the Alaska Solution." Contact wjhickel@gcl.net.