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Meet Michael Opheim, representing Alaska Native Groups

Ask Michael Opheim about the medicinal properties of wormwood, devil's club or chocolate lily, and he might be able to tell you, having just attended a class taught by an expert in the field. Growing up on Spruce Island in the Kodiak Archipelago, Michael and his sister were encouraged to explore the Alaska wilderness with a freedom that influenced his appreciation and curiosity about his natural surroundings—a trait which he carried into adulthood.

But in 1974, his sister's love of swimming, a promising new school and job opportunities for his parents drew the Opheim family to Seldovia. There, they continued to carry on a tradition of living close to the land, gardening, fishing and hunting, while his mother worked in the cannery and his father fished and worked on log ships. The majority of Michael's family still lives in Seldovia, which Michael calls a great place to grow up.

Michael's grandfather Ed Opheim Sr. was born on Unga Island. Ed grew up cod fishing with his father in Kodiak. They fished cod by rowing their dories, casting their nets and pulling their catch in by hand. He led a very full life on his homestead in Pleasant Harbor, Spruce Island. Lifelong fisherman, logger, sawmill owner, fox farmer, cattle rancher and builder of the famous Opheim dory; his beautiful dories are still plying Alaska's waters today. His parents who are from Kodiak and Chignik, no doubt played a large role in influencing Michael's penchant for hands-on learning.

One early and difficult learning experience was the Exxon Valdez oil spill when Michael and other students were pulled out of high school to build booms, bag oil and keep it off the beaches. Seldovia enlisted residents to help with the clean-up, and Michael and his family pitched in, cleaning boats and providing logistical support. Michael remained interested in oil spill prevention and response, and joined the volunteer board of directors of the Seldovia Oil Spill response team in 2008 as well as being a member of CIRCAC's 13- member board.

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Michael has four chickens and four cats, and “the best job in the world.” For the past 12 years, he has worked as the Environmental Coordinator for the Seldovia Village Tribe where he’s juggled 12 to 18 grants at one time to afford the Tribe the opportunity to do field work, conduct environmental and fish monitoring, collect water and air quality data, participate in sea otter and fish consumption surveys, conduct creek coho assessments, and participate in studies. One of Michael’s favorite projects has been Culture Camp, an educational 3-day summer camp for children and families from surrounding communities to learn about traditional knowledge, western science, and research from scientists and Alaska Native elders.

Michael has represented Alaska Native Stakeholders on the CIRCAC Board of Directors for the past five years, providing a conduit for information about regulatory oversight, environmental monitoring and research, and what’s being done to protect Cook Inlet’s natural and subsistence resources from future spills. As a CIRCAC board member, Michael also serves on Committees which advance the organization’s program work. He is a member of the Environmental Monitoring Committee and Prevention, Response, Operations and Safety, or PROPS, Committee. Michael says he relishes the opportunity to learn something new every day from field work, industry tours, and presentations.

A current concern to the Seldovia Village Tribe is climate change and the potential toxicity of large algal blooms which may be responsible for fish, birds, and marine mammal die-offs.

“Folks want to be here a long time, and do what’s right so we can continue to enjoy our subsistence way of life. Education is important, it’s big,” he says. “Cook Inlet is cleaner, there’s more protection and more regulatory oversight now than in 1989. But there are other things we still don’t know enough about and I am grateful for every opportunity to learn and share as much as I can as a member of the CIRCAC Board of Directors.”