

Ethnographic Overviews and Assessments: An Example from Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve

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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW AND ASSESSMENT (EOA) is one of the baseline research reports prepared through the National Park Service's ethnography program and its network of regional and park-based ethnographers. These reports review and analyze archival data and previously published materials on park ethnographic resources¹ and the groups traditionally associated with a park and its natural and cultural resources.² Limited interviews and discussions occur with the traditionally associated people in order to supplement and assess the documentary evidence and identify gaps in the available data. This essay describes the experience of Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve with this report, including how it fits into a park's overall cultural resource program and the interaction that has taken place with local communities along the way.

Encompassing more than 13 million acres in south-central Alaska, Wrangell–St. Elias is the largest unit managed by the U.S. National Park Service (Figure 1). Wrangell–St. Elias, along with most other Alaskan parks, is different from the majority of national parks in other parts of the United States. The park is relatively young, having been established in 1980 when Congress passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, commonly referred to by the acronym ANILCA. When it was created, efforts were made to protect the fragile resources of its varied ecosystems while at the same time honoring well-established traditions of human use within the park. The park territory includes the homelands and traditional hunting and fishing areas for at least three Alaska Native groups—Ahtna, Upper Tanana, and Tlingit—and non-Native use and occupation of the region dates back to the early 20th century. Under the provisions of ANILCA, subsistence hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering by local rural residents—both Native and non-Native—are allowed on park lands, recognizing the important role that the harvest of wild resources has played in the lives of area residents (Figures 2, 3). Acknowledging the close and long-standing ties between local people and the park, Wrangell–St. Elias is one of about a dozen national parks nationwide to employ a professional cultural anthropologist or ethnographer on its staff.

Preparing an EOA for such a vast geographic area is a challenging task. Early on, a decision was made to divide the task into several projects. An EOA had been completed for the Ahtna Athabaskan region by the time the current park anthropologist was hired in 2002, with funding pending for an Upper Tanana Athabaskan report. That project is now done, and planning has begun for a Yakutat Tlingit EOA. Realizing, however, that these projects



Figure 1 Location of Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve.

were essentially being done by language group, in particular Alaska Native languages, it was clear that there was one language group yet to be addressed: English and other European languages. Starting in the early 20th century, the park area and its resources attracted people to the region—miners, trappers, big game hunters, and hunting guides. They are to be the subject of a future EOA, perhaps the last of the series for the park. For larger parks, it may well make sense to break the EOA task into several smaller projects, but it is also important to make sure that significant resources or peoples are not left out in the process.

At Wrangell–St. Elias, EOAs are designed to be researched and written by professional anthropologists, but in such a way that the material is understandable by a general, non-specialist audience. The need for this kind of “translation” has been specified in the project agreements. The reports are designed for use in educating the public and in orienting new



Figure 2 Ahtna fish wheel near Chitna on the Cooper River, circa 1927. Photo courtesy of Geoff Bleakley.



Figure 3 Lena Charley of Christochina begins processing a moose hide by scraping residual fat and tissue from the inside of the hide. Photo by Barbara A. Cellarius.

employees to the park. It is also envisioned that local communities might find the reports useful. Thus far, indications are that this will be the case. In a preliminary discussion of the Yakutat Tlingit project, the tribal council members were enthusiastic about the project. They had themselves talked about trying to establish a library of materials about the people of Yakutat and saw the EOA as making a contribution to their efforts. And requests for additional copies have been received from at least one of the communities included in the Upper Tanana report.

The Upper Tanana EOA was completed in 2007. The project was accomplished through a cooperative agreement with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and overseen by the park anthropologist. It benefited greatly from the fact that both principal investigators from ADF&G were cultural anthropologists who had done fieldwork in and written their doctoral dissertations about the study region. Going into the project, they were well versed in the published literature on the region and relevant archival sources. They were also able to draw on their own notes from the earlier fieldwork. Copies of the published report have been distributed to local schools and communities, and it is also available for download from the park website (www.nps.gov/wrst/historyculture/upper-tanana-ethnographic-study.htm) and from the website of ADF&G.

In addition to a narrative synthesizing topics such as territory and language, economy, social and political organization, religion and ritual, and material culture prior to sustained western contact, the Upper Tanana EOA discusses social, political, and economic changes experienced by these communities in the twentieth century. Particular attention is paid to relationships with the neighboring Ahtna Athabaskans and relationships to lands and resources within Wrangell–St. Elias. An extensive annotated bibliography on the upper Tanana region is also included. The EOA is illustrated with numerous photographs from the personal collections of the authors as well as from archival collections.

The concluding chapter of the Upper Tanana EOA identifies data gaps and potential future projects. These recommendations have been helpful in planning cultural resource projects at Wrangell–St. Elias. For example, the park sought and is now in line for funding to add oral history interviews with residents of the Upper Tanana villages to the park's existing Project Jukebox collection, an interactive, multi-media computer system that provides digital access to oral history recordings, associated maps, photographs, and text. (The original Jukebox project was completed before the ties of these communities to the park had been formally recognized.) Other helpful suggestions address documenting traditional ecological knowledge and presenting cultural and historical information to park visitors, specifically producing a map or interpretive display combining Native place names along with the travel routes between the upper Ahtna and upper Tanana regions.

Another aspect of these projects is coordination with local communities and tribal governments in the process of preparing EOAs. The park anthropologist and one of the principal investigators met with the council members and staff of each of the federally recognized tribal governments in the upper Tanana region to introduce the project, and the local tribes were also sent copies of the draft report for their review and comment. These introductory meetings can serve as an opportunity for the tribes to have input into the project. In an introductory meeting on the Yakutat EOA, for example, a tribal council member recommended adding a related community to the project. Coming before the project had gotten started, it

was easy to implement, as well as being a welcome comment. Since some of the communities are half a day's travel or more from the park headquarters, the meetings and the other contacts with the tribes regarding the project have had the additional benefit of furthering the relationship between the park and these park-affiliated communities.

Finally, a portion of the funding for these projects has been set aside for community histories. The goal of this has been to allow the local communities to put their history or culture into their own words, to share information they think is important for park staff and visitors to know and understand. In the case of the Upper Tanana EOA, three tribes indicated an interest in writing something about themselves and entered into cooperative agreements with the park to do so. The community history received from Dot Lake Village, for example, was largely written by a retired community member and former tribal council president interested in documenting stories and other information he had heard from his mother-in-law and other community elders. An alternative approach was taken for one of the community histories written for Denali National Park and Preserve. Rather than having a single primary author, the Minchumina community history was done instead as a school project. The local middle and high school students prepared biographical sketches of long-time local residents and wrote historical essays on topics such as the general community, transportation, and trapping (Students and Teachers of Minchumina Community School 2000). Whatever the approach taken in preparing a community history, the resulting documents can be distributed alongside the associated EOA.

Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve has benefited in several ways from its series of EOAs. Technical information on park-affiliated communities and peoples has been collected, organized, and presented in a manner understandable to a general audience. Recommendations have been received regarding future research projects and the presentation of the information to the public. But the benefits extend beyond the reports themselves. They create opportunities for new partnerships and to build upon existing partnerships and relationships. A possible partnership to explore in the future as an outgrowth of the Upper Tanana EOA, for example, is to work with a local tribe or tribal cultural organization on a map or other interpretive exhibit presenting Upper Tanana and Ahtna place names and travel routes. In addition, the increased interaction between park staff and the staff and officials from local communities, for the community histories as well as the EOAs, can also benefit existing relationships with park affiliated communities more generally, including government-to-government relationships with federally recognized Indian tribes.

Endnotes

1. “Ethnographic resources” are defined as “objects and places, including sites, structures, landscapes, and natural resources, with traditional cultural meaning and value to associated peoples. Research and consultation with associated people identifies and explains the places and things they find culturally meaningful” (NPS 2005, 157).
2. NPS defines “traditionally associated peoples” as follows: “[S]ocial/cultural entities such as tribes, communities, and kinship units, as well as park neighbors, traditional residents, and former residents who remain attached to a park area despite having relocated, are ‘traditionally associated’ with a particular park when (1) the entity regards park

resources as essential to its development and continued identity as a culturally distinct people; (2) the association has endured for at least two generations (40 years); and (3) the association began prior to establishment of the park” (NPS 2005, 159).

References

- NPS [National Park Service]. 2005. *Management Policies 2006*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service.
- Students and Teachers of Minchumina Community School. 2000. “Lake Minchumina Past and Present.” Photocopy of unpublished manuscript in author’s possession.
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