A Balancing Act: Ethnography, Subsistence, and Alaska Parks

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> If people come in there, it'll never be the same. All these years people live there and it is still the same. They never ran out of moose. And when you get that moose you get a moose skin. And you make your moccasins so you make it through the winter and you wouldn't freeze. . . . We pick berries every summer, and all kinds of places back there to pick berries. And it never run out yet. We might have some good and bad seasons but we still live through the winter. I don't see why my kids shouldn't live like we do right now. But if you make parks, how, I can't understand how people could come in and just enjoy themselves. . . . I want to be able, 30–40 years from now, to still be able to hunt, fish, do everything I'm doing right now.
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> — *Flora Bergman, Allakaket, Alaska, 1979*[1]

Subsistence and the National Park Service

It has been over 25 years since Flora Bergman and other Alaskans testified in the run-up to the historic Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), passed by the US Congress in 1980. This landmark legislation provided for the addition of 104 million acres of federal lands in parks, refuges, and other conservation areas, thereby nearly doubling the size of conservation lands in the United States. And while it was certainly a watershed moment in environmental preservation, it was also the first such legislation to specifically recognize and protect human use, occupancy, and subsistence activities by Native and non-Native rural residents with cultural and historic ties to the newly created parklands.

As C. Mack Shaver, then the National Park Service (NPS) superintendent of Northwest Alaska Areas, said in 1984, this was an unprecedented experiment with social and political dimensions:

> The new Alaska parklands created in 1980 by ANILCA are an experiment on a grand scale. They have nearly doubled the size of the U.S. National Park System. They have set aside some of the world's largest and most magnificent remaining wildlands and dedicated them to not only protecting the state's vast natural resources and valuable resources, but providing for the continuation of the threatened lifestyles and cultures of the Alaska native people. The continuum of human history and use of the earth is nowhere better preserved; and the protection of fragile ecosystems without a complete cessation of use has been accomplished. These areas provide a great challenge to the managers and an even greater challenge to the public whose

parks they are—to continue to protect traditional park values and to allow consumptive resource use in Alaska's living cultural national park areas.[2]

ANILCA was a unique departure from the common Euroamerican philosophical separation of nature and culture, and one bound to vex management agencies used to "protecting" and "preserving" land and resources through exclusion of resident populations, as well as prohibitions on consumptive human activities and impacts. Anthropologists and ethnography featured prominently—then and now—in documenting customary and traditional associations of Native and non-Native communities on parklands, both in planning for park establishment and in the intervening years where management decisions require consideration of the subsistence provisions.[3]

In this paper I discuss the role of ethnography in fulfilling the NPS mandate to provide for continued subsistence opportunity on parklands. The examples are largely drawn from my own experience in Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve and Yukon–Charley Rivers National Preserve, where I have worked since 2002. While the examples are specific to my experience, I think they are fairly typical of that of ethnographers working in and around Alaskan parks, and they demonstrate the on-going importance of ethnographic research to subsistence issues.

Oral history, subsistence, and the ANILCA parks

When I joined the National Park Service in 2002, I had already worked for nearly ten years documenting oral histories with residents living in and around Alaska's national parks. I had worked as a research assistant in the oral history program of the University of Alaska–Fairbanks Rasmuson Library. William Schneider, founder and curator of the program, had recently developed "Project Jukebox," a pioneering project to digitize oral history interviews with added text, photographs, maps, and other material and make them available on computer and, later, via the Internet.

In the 1990s, Sande McDermott, the Alaska regional historian for NPS, was keen to capture the administrative and social history of Alaska's park history, and funded a series of these jukebox oral histories focused on ANILCA parks. The aim was to capture first-hand accounts of the experience of local Native and non-Native residents in and around the parks, as well as park planners and managers who had experienced those heady, turbulent days when the parks were first established. I recall thinking how unique it was for an agency to actively consult critics and allies alike, and to provide a prominent public forum for their voices to be heard without editorial or bureaucratic filters. I still believe this is a highly unusual form of auto-critique for any agency to engage in, and it is to NPS's credit that it did not shrink from the contrary voices of those directly impacted by the creation of Alaska's new parks.

Traditional ecological knowledge

When the Yukon River Chinook (king) and chum salmon runs inexplicably crashed and

escapement to upriver spawning grounds was among the lowest ever recorded, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) recognized the importance not only of continuing efforts to inventory and monitor biological aspects of the fisheries through stock status and trends studies, but also to investigate and document local and traditional ecological knowledge about the fishery.

In 2005, NPS received grant funding from USFWS to document traditional and local ecological knowledge of the Upper Yukon River fishery. The study design focused on qualitative information from key consultants who collectively have decades of experience and empirical observations about the fisheries. The results of that study will soon be available as a technical report available online through USFWS, but perhaps the most compelling element was the near unanimity of local fishers in claiming that average size of Chinook—probably the most important single subsistence resource in the area (Figure 1)—had dramatically declined, with huge implications for not only the numbers of escapement to the spawning grounds but also the quality of that escapement (fecundity rates of larger females can be more than twice that of smaller fish).

Figure 1 Eagle village resident Ethel Beck cuts Yukon River salmon.

The details of local and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) might seem deceptively simple to experienced subsistence practitioners, park managers, or biologists. But as a compendium of local wisdom, TEK has extraordinary and often untapped potential to inform our collective understanding, not only about subsistence resources but also the people who rely on them for their livelihood. In my study of Upper Yukon River TEK, for example, there was unmistakable and widespread alarm among fishers over salmon size and run strength. The fishers had practical advice about reading the river and about how to set nets safely in fast water. They explained how people cope with shortages of key resources, and how they might shift their efforts from fishing to focus more on caribou or moose hunting in times of poor fish runs. Perhaps most importantly of all, TEK helps remind resource managers that everyone has a stake in resources that transcend mere sustenance and speak instead to a deeper existential ecology of people interconnected with each other and their environment. Subsistence, as TEK demonstrates, is a way of life rather than simply a means of production.

Ethnographic overview and assessment

The NPS ethnography program often issues contracts to produce mandated informational studies, such as the ethnographic overview and assessment (EOA). One recent EOA, produced under contract with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Subsistence Division,

focused on Han Athabaskans with ancestral and contemporary ties to the Upper Yukon drainage from below Eagle, Alaska, all the way to Dawson, Yukon Territory. The final product, a book entitled *Han: People of the River*, by Craig Mishler and William Simeone, represents a comprehensive ethnography and cultural history of Eagle village residents and their fellow Han neighbors across the U.S.–Canada border region near Dawson. A more comprehensive EOA is underway for the entire Yukon–Charley Rivers National Preserve that will cover other communities in the area.[4] Barbara Cellarius's contribution to this volume addresses the role of EOAs in more detail.

Digital repatriation and community consultation

In and around Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, resident communities have long histories of patiently answering researcher inquiries about their lives and culture. But local residents want to know how this information will be preserved and shared to the benefit of their own communities. Local community members sometimes complain that they are only consulted when they can provide intellectual or cultural capital, only to be overlooked in the dissemination of results and products. Rather than propose new ethnographic and subsistence documentation every time a question arises, we developed a proposal to create digital portals to store research that has been completed, and to offer community access via the Internet to the rich cultural and intellectual property still archived in libraries and museums at the University of Alaska–Fairbanks.

There is an abundance of information concerning the cultural and natural landscape of Gates of the Arctic, so this comprehensive effort to develop a consultable record accessible to park staff, visitors, and village residents will provide community-based electronic portals to collate and make widely available reference materials relating to communities. A current version of this work in progress can be accessed at http://jukebox.uaf.edu/gatesportal/index.html. (Figure 2).

Subsistence Resource Commissions (SRCs) and other advisory groups

ANILCA mandated that the new national parks in Alaska would also support subsistence by establishing nine-member Subsistence Resource Commissions (SRCs) for each park. These commissions are to be primarily composed of local resident subsistence hunters and fishers who use park lands. The purpose of the commissions is to ensure that locally qualified rural residents would continue to have substantial input into the management of the resources that support their lifeways. NPS is responsible for assisting the SRCs in submitting new (or altered) hunting or fishing regulations, commenting on issues of general park management, and ensuring that the secretary of interior is advised regarding the SRC commission meetings and recommendations.

Ethnographers are sometimes called upon to assist in "staff analysis" of new federal or state hunting proposals. Anthropologists must determine the cultural and historic precedents for such contentious issues as the use of bear parts in the production of handicrafts; cultural precedents for the controversial practice of "denning," which involves the killing of

wolf pups or bear cubs in the den; and the collection on conservation lands of shed horns, antlers, and plant materials for the local production and sale of handicrafts.

More broadly, park and regional ethnographers provide research and consultation on "customary and traditional" determinations for proposed or on-going subsistence activities, as well as determinations of eligibility for individual users who are not affiliated with a resident-zone community but who claim subsistence rights on parklands.[5] These determinations of eligibility are meant to assure that legitimate claims to subsistence rights on parklands are honored while prohibiting spurious claims by people or communities with no cultural or historical connections to parklands.

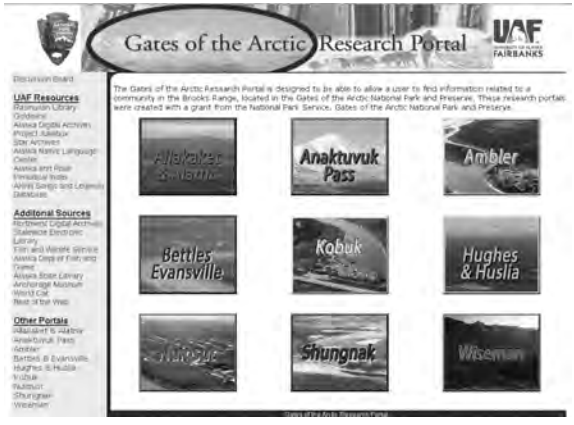

Figure 2 Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve research portal—a work in progress.

The National Park Service is a voting member of the Federal Subsistence Board (which manages subsistence on federal lands and waters in Alaska), is a key agency participating in the Federal Subsistence Program Regional Advisory Councils, and has multiple ANILCA parks with SRCs that advise parks on subsistence-related issues in park management. NPS ethnographers provide expertise that can be brought to bear on critical resource issues that have direct effect on subsistence-eligible park users, and can provide expert guidance to NPS on issues before the Federal Subsistence Board.

Subsistence harvest research

Another crucial duty for park ethnographers is to further develop, manage, and provide oversight for NPS-affiliated research activities related to contemporary subsistence activities in and around NPS lands. While NPS is mandated to provide for continued subsistence opportunities for qualified local residents on parklands, most information regarding the extent, nature, and sociocultural context for subsistence practices and harvest data are more than 25 years out of date. And while park managers are charged with managing for "natural and healthy" ecosystems, this requires reliable scientific information, including the impacts of subsistence activities on local plant and animal populations and quantifiable information on the impacts to subsistence users by other park visitors.

When, for example, Western Arctic Caribou herd numbers appear to be in decline, as is now the case, or when, as has been documented concerning the Yukon River Chinook fishery since 1998, return rates and fish size issues threaten the viability of local subsistence fisheries, NPS cannot meet its statutory management obligations without credible and up-to-date information.

NPS ethnographers work collaboratively with local residents, other staff, and other

agencies and stakeholders. This approach extends to designing and preparing internal and external funding proposals for future research, such as comprehensive harvest surveys or issue-specific subsistence studies. The goal is to ensure that all interested stakeholders have a meaningful role in subsistence programs from concept to completion.

The consultative, collaborative approach so necessary to subsistence and ethnographic documentation work also helps to avoid the pitfalls of "re-inventing the wheel" in regard to subsistence research protocols. Until recent years, the Subsistence Division of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game undertook much of the quantitative and qualitative research to develop survey and research protocols that the NPS relies upon. Taking the collaborative approach with state and federal agencies, tribes, and local stakeholders has the potential to leverage efficiencies in staffing, methods, information-sharing, and data parity. Similarly, coordination between ethnographers, subsistence personnel, and regional NPS inventory and monitoring programs help to design research projects and protocols that can address management issues that involve natural resources and the role of human harvest in population dynamics. For example, the Arctic inventory and monitoring program identified some 26 "vital signs" for the Arctic region that serve as indices of ecosystem health, including human harvest of subsistence resources.

Climate change and Arctic communities

In the context of rapidly changing environmental conditions, on-going and proposed development activities on adjacent lands, and dramatic alterations of local village socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, up-to-date and scientifically credible information is an essential foundation for future management decisions. The lack of such information currently leaves NPS in a reactive position, rather than proactively managing to minimize conflicts and impairment to ensure the best possible experience for all stakeholders and visitors.

As important as "harvest survey" data are for wise park management, ethnographers move the discussion beyond harvest numbers to provide the cultural context. One example from NPS-sponsored research in Northwest Alaska demonstrates that hunting and fishing activities are unequally distributed within communities.[6] Certain individuals act as key "producers" who regularly redistribute their harvest via complex networks of trade and reciprocity, thereby often replicating older traditional familial or tribal social organization. Among the many practical implications of such studies is that regulations focusing on individual harvest limits may not reflect the actual hunting and fishing practices within communities. Some "community harvest" regulations have been developed to reflect this reality of sharing networks. Ethnographers help to document these cultural nuances and ensure that these insights find their way into the regulatory bureaucracy of resource management.

Dramatic environmental change highlights another key ethnographic insight, one that complicates resource management strategies but also refines their applicability: rural Alaskans and subsistence practitioners must not be confined to an "ethnographic present," nor to an idealized sepia image of the "traditional" or the "customary," nor to a notion of "pure subsistence." The environment is changing but so too are local communities. Subsistence is deeply rooted in tradition but focused on the now. People adapt and change. Resource use

patterns are dynamic. Hunting, fishing, and trapping activities are opportunistic and mutable. "If the caribou don't come by we have to work harder for moose," for example. Or, "We used to rely on dog-team but now we use snow machines." Ethnographers help both to document these adaptations and to explore their management implications. All-terrain vehicle (ATV) access to parklands, for example, has been an on-going issue, and historical and ethnographic research has been used to determine the nature and extent of prior use, which then guides management actions to either accommodate or prohibit such uses and users.

A seat at the table: Park management

One of the most important roles for Alaskan ethnographers is simply to have a seat at the table in park management, and to be ever-attentive to the impact of park policies and management actions on subsistence users. I sit on a variety of park management teams, such as the Integrated Research Compliance Team, which analyzes internal and external research proposals to ensure their compliance with park purposes and mandates. The subsistence "filter" ensures that projects do not conflict with section 810 of ANILCA, and might involve asking for changes in research design or scheduling of fieldwork so as not to have overflights or other impacts during key hunting seasons or caribou migrations. Other management actions, such as prescribed fire efforts or decisions about whether to repair cabins, will be considered in light of our obligations to provide continued subsistence opportunity.

Differing views of the land and resources is evident in the many instances of user conflict that arise each year in and around parks. In Gates of the Arctic, for example, sport hunters and recreational floaters are drawn to the Upper Kobuk River area and often "put in" on parklands at Walker Lake, which is at the headwaters of the Kobuk River. They then float down through the preserve and eventually pass into state, federal, and private lands. There are many local camps that provide a base of activities for subsistence hunting and fishing, and the potential for conflicts between users is high. Ethnographers have helped to develop informational products that sensitize the visiting public to these subsistence activities and other methods to minimize interference with lawful consumptive uses of resources. An oft-cited example of conflicting values surrounds the issue of "catch and release" fishing practices that are permitted under sport fishing regulations. While the purpose of such regulations is to preserve the resource while allowing recreational activity, the practice is an affront to Alaska Native cultures, akin to "playing with food." A brochure was developed a few years back aimed at reducing conflict between local subsistence fishers and sport fishers who are angling for trophy-size sheefish (*Stendous leucichthys*) to address just this case of conflicting values.

It is critically important for ethnographers to remain vigilant in keeping NPS obligations under ANILCA in the forefront of awareness for new managers. These obligations are to protect—in perpetuity—subsistence opportunity. Retired park historian William Brown touched on this issue in describing the ideal subsistence program:

> What we need to further develop and perfect [a locally responsive NPS subsistence program] is the ongoing negotiation process, a constant, rolling negotiation regime. Essential to make

> that regime work are knowledgeable park superintendents with much-devolved power of decision. And to make informed decisions, the superintendents must be advised by the best possible staffs: both subsistence program managers and onsite subsistence coordinators, the latter spending much time in the villages and camps to keep abreast of changing circumstances, as well as nurturing the trust relationship with the local people that keeps communications going. The importance of continuity of personnel in these operating positions cannot be overstated. That's why local people should get priority for these positions. In practical terms, whenever possible, it should be mandatory that the onsite coordinators be local people. Otherwise the whole delicate house of cards can tumble in a heap when the new face hops off the plane.[7]

Conclusion

Ever since I watched Flora Bergman's testimony from 1979, and her eloquent plea for protection not just of land and resources but for a *way of life,* I've thought of her remarks as a challenge to contemporary managers. Are we succeeding in fulfilling ANILCA's promise to its resident people and cultures? The short answer seems to be "yes." NPS has so far protected the subsistence opportunity on protected lands, and local residents can still rely upon the bounty of the land and water for their essential livelihood and sustenance. The caveat is that there are so very many changes afoot—from changing community dynamics to development pressures to global climate change—and NPS must continue to work in partnership with other stakeholders to confront these challenges and adapt, just as the subsistence way of life has for millennia. Ethnographers will continue to document this cultural and natural dynamic and attempt to draw out its multiple meanings and implications for wise park management.

I close with a quotation from retired Assistant Park Manager Steve Ulvi, whose own biography reflected the complexities and challenges of subsistence and protected lands before and after ANILCA.[8] Whereas some see danger lurking in the complexities of managing human consumptive uses and subsistence rights on parklands, Ulvi nudges us to embrace this rich natural and cultural tapestry as a resource worthy of protection and preservation. It is in that hopeful and positive light that I see our continued ethnographic mission:

> We have unheralded opportunities to achieve the greater public good in these large, intact northern biotic systems precisely because they are meant to be inclusive of, and imbued with, human culture. Biomes that still blur the arbitrary distinctions between people and nature. Human associations of nearly infinite variety. Verbal. Symbolic. Sensory. Physical. Mythic. Spiritual. Landscapes as a mutable stage for rich living traditions, cultural time capsules from the past, and human oral histories that continue to evolve. Infinite meaning in "empty landscapes" (Brown 2000)—whether we are ready to recognize it or not.[9]

Endnotes

1. Excerpt from Flora Bergman's testimony before the Alaska Joint Federal State Land Use

Planning Commission, ANILCA D-2 hearings at Allakaket, Alaska, May 5, 1979.

2. C. Mack Shaver, "Traditional National Park Values and Living Cultural Parks: Seemingly Conflicting Management Demands Coexisting in Alaska's New National Parklands," in *International Perspectives on Cultural Parks: Proceedings of the First World Conference, Mesa Verde National Park* (Washington, D.C.: US National Park Service and Colorado Historical Society, 1984), 311–315.
3. As summarized in Title VIII of ANILCA.
4. The project is being carried out under the terms of a Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU) agreement with Michael Koskey, professor in the Rural Development Program at the University of Alaska–Fairbanks.
5. Individual subsistence permits are authorized under Section 13.44 of ANILCA.
6. James S. Magdanz, Robert J. Walker, and Ronald R. Paciorek, *The Subsistence Harvest of Wild Foods by Residents of Shungnak, Alaska, 2002,* Technical Paper no. 279 (Juneau: Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 2004).
7. William E. Brown, "Overview of Subsistence in Alaska," in *Crossing Boundaries in Park Management: Proceedings of the 11th Conference on Research and Resource Management in Parks and on Public Lands,* David Harmon, ed. (Hancock, Mich.: The George Wright Society, 2001), 262.
8. Steve Ulvi chucked a comfortable California life for the rigors of a subsistence lifestyle along the Upper Yukon River in the early 1970s. He eventually worked seasonally for the newly created Yukon–Charley Rivers National Preserve before moving to Fairbanks to further his education and that of his children. He stayed with the National Park Service and much of his work involved park management and planning, always with an eye to balancing ANILCA obligations to Alaska residents and the wider Park Service duties to the visiting American public.
9. Steve Ulvi, "On Common Ground: An Enduring Wilderness as Cultural Landscape and Biotic Reserve," in *Crossing Boundaries in Park Management: Proceedings of the 11th Conference on Research and Resource Management in Parks and on Public Lands,* David Harmon, ed. (Hancock, Mich.: The George Wright Society, 2001), 275. Ulvi cites Brown's unpublished paper "Ah, wilderness" (Fairbanks: Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, 2000).

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