

44 Overview of subsistence in Alaska

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Introduction

The native presence in Alaska's national parks, and increasingly in the rest of the National Park System, comprises a broad spectrum of associations, uses, activities, and concerns. These include consumptive uses, as exemplified—but not limited to—legally provided subsistence in Alaska; innumerable ceremonial activities with attendant harvest of symbolic plant, animal, and mineral materials—both known and unknown to the National Park Service (NPS) and other agency officials; and ongoing concerns and actions relating to protection of shrines, burial grounds, and other sacred and historic sites.

The fact is, national parks and other designated preserves overlay—in their entirety—old homelands of traditional peoples. In fact, not a square foot of the entire country lacks site-specific or contextual associations with the multiple millennia of Native Americans' cultural histories. That is why, in a new era of cultural awareness and inclusion, these multitudes of tribes and nations seek our welcome and sensitive accommodation as they continue, or renew, traditional ties to their old homelands.

I have a particular interest in the Alaska subsistence issue. For I was fortunate to be involved with the gifted NPS crew that fashioned the philosophical concept of subsistence, helped develop the legislative language and operational frame for the subsistence title in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA), and implemented the subsistence program in the new NPS Alaska Region. Notable among these people were the leaders of the 1970s NPS Alaska task force, Ted Swem in Washington, D.C., and Al Henson in Alaska; members of the task force, including Bob Belous, Stell Newman, Ray Bane, Dick Nelson, and Zorro Bradley; and the first Alaska regional director, John Cook, under whose direction the delicate task of implementation was accomplished on the ground and in the villages.

The legal thread

What happened in Alaska in the period 1959-1980 was this: A great federal commons, the territory of Alaska—one-fifth of the nation's land base—was divided up into multiple ownerships. It was a variation on the progression from open to fenced range in the trans-Mississippi West.

But further back in history had been the Russians, and much further back in history—at least 12,000 years back—came the First Americans. Over the millennia, in their many tribes and culture groups, these early people settled into the country and evolved as the country evolved. By the time the Russians came in the mid-1700s, the basic patterns of native settlement and culture had been established: Athabaskan Indians in the Interior; Eskimo peoples along the coasts and lower rivers of "mainland" Alaska; Aleuts on the Alaska Peninsula and spanning the Aleutian Chain; Tlingit and Haida Indians in Southeast Alaska.

The first Russians were rough, plundering fur traders. In time, Orthodox Russian missionaries would reform the Russians and convert the natives. Given more time, and much intermarriage, Russian America mellowed into an isolated, rather easy-going colony. With the near-extinction of sea otters, whose pelts had been the colony's economic mainstay, Russian America became, in effect, a missionary colony of no great value to Mother Russia. So Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867.

The treaty of purchase stipulated that the native peoples would be allowed to continue their traditional ways of life, i.e., they could live off the land as they always had.

With the statehood proclamation of 1959, the state of Alaska began selecting its land bequest from the federal domain—which constituted 99% of the former territory. Alaska's land grant totaled 104 million acres—larger than all of California. State land selections impinged in native traditional-use areas, which mobilized Native Alaskans to seek their own land claims, resulting in ANCSA, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. It was understood that the 44-million-acre native land settlement did not comprehend the extensive traditional-use areas, but rather constituted a core settlement and economic land base. Thus came, in ANILCA, the subsistence title, which did recognize and provide for ongoing traditional uses in most of the national interest lands designated in the act. ANILCA further declared that the cultural values of these traditional uses are of national significance as part of the nation's cultural heritage.

That, in brief, is the legal trail: from ancient possession and occupation, to treaty obligation, to the recent three interacting and structuring laws—statehood, native claims, ANILCA.

The moral imperative

There was some flesh on these legal bones as well. In part, ANILCA's subsistence title responds to the modern plight of indigenous peoples all over the world. Anthropologists, such as Colin Turnbull in Africa, and environmental conservationists, such as Raymond Dasmann in the USA, had mobilized concern around the world to halt the remorseless destruction of indigenous cultures. They said that the careless invasions and extractive havoc imposed by the industrialized nations on remote cultural homelands and habitats—as well as the outright removal of indigenous peoples attendant on establishment of national parks and wildlife preserves—constituted genocide.

Not only was this morally repugnant, it also meant immense loss of traditional knowledge to the world at large: knowledge of plants, animals, and the innumerable intricate relationships between humankind and nature that living-off-the-land peoples have accumulated over the millennia. Modern people, insulated from the real world by encapsulating built environments, have lost these bodies of knowledge and relationships, which all of us, in our ancestral cultures, shared not so long ago.

So, said people such as Turnbull and Dasmann, and organizations such as IUCN, and doctors seeking plant medicines in a world overwhelmed by rapidly mutating bacteria and viruses, the loss of a culture should be equated with the extinction of a biological species. Each culture that disappears takes with it to oblivion mental and material toolkits acquired over thousands of years of specific-place adaptation—each history as unique as a genome, and never to be replicated.

Each of these losses, then, can be equated with the sacking and burning of a culture-specific Alexandrian library. And each such loss is a combined moral and pragmatic disaster for the world at large, and forever down the generations.

This is why the ANILCA subsistence title is important. For the daily activities, methods, and decisions that subsistence encompasses are the milieu, the defining properties, of the culture in question. To put it another way, the demands of living off the land—that particular combination of ecosystems that makes up the homeland—define the culture. Without access to traditional landscapes, traditional activities cannot occur and traditional cultures die.

ANILCA is as much sociocultural law as it is conventional conservation and preservation law.

But of course NPS, and other ANILCA-mandated agencies, are not keepers of cultures. We have enough problems running efficient motor pools. We are, in cooperation with the people whose homelands the parklands overlay, the keepers of cultural landscapes. These cultural habitats, in terms of our function, are landscapes of

cultural choice. The strength of local tradition will, in the long run, determine the choice. All we can officially and competently do is preserve the natural and cultural habitats. The option, and the fullness, of cultural perpetuation—consistent with the legally prescribed purposes of the parklands—is up to the homeland people themselves.

The how of subsistence

Subsistence, as an operating program, is based on broad premises and principles derived from ANILCA, and must be in consonance with the statutory purposes of parks and other conservation units.

Experience has shown us that tight regulatory modes—the finished regulatory package, boxed and beribboned—do not work. Subsistence comprises multiple, shifting factors—social, biological, and geophysical. Examples: (1) A sequence of severe winters brings on a caribou-herd crash. (2) Commercial-fishing interdictions on the high seas (or, as recently, on the lower river) wipe out Yukon River salmon runs.

In old times, Caribou Eskimos would hunt more sheep in the Brooks Range, or they would migrate to the coast so they could hunt seals until the caribou came back.

Deprived of the annual bounty of salmon biomass from the ocean, Upper Yukon Athabaskans would make similar adjustments—compensating by hunting more sheep, more moose, and more small game, plus more fishing for white fish, pike, etc. Or if—as is often the case in that hungry country—these secondary and tertiary food sources were scarce also, the people would have to quickly migrate to avoid starvation.

These days, given permanent villages with schools and medical centers, migration is possible only for a select few. Thus, the compensatory shift to secondary and tertiary food sources can be more urgent. Such resource shifts inevitably require new and expanded hunting zones. These sorts of considerations tend to compound, day by day. It's sort of like a kaleidoscope: each turn of the lens produces a new design.

Subsistence management, then, requires ongoing adjustments to square with the shifting specifics of subsistence resources, within the general parameters and purposes of the parkland. This is why hard-set regulations and inflexible lines on maps are anathema to subsisters.

What we need to further develop and perfect 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, wherever 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. (For my money, a good model for this personnel setup is in place at Lake Clark, with Mary McBurney and Karen Stickman carrying the flame. I'm sure others exist, but I had the chance to see these folks in action at the GWS Conference.)

From the subsisters' end, the Regional Subsistence Resource Councils, made up of local people, act as information clearinghouses and self-regulators, and as the negotiators on the other side of the table. Their interest is to assure that park management and subsistence uses are in perpetual, sustainable balance.

The joint monitoring by park management and the resource councils aims at a dynamic balance involving both resources and the negotiation process. The goal is the sort of enlightened self-interest shared by managers and councils alike that brings

them together. For both need healthy habitats—healthy parks, healthy homelands. These two designations may be distinctive in purpose, but they share the same reality, the common ground itself.

This commonality, with distinctions of purpose, is more than nice. It is necessary in the political and resource-economics climate of Alaska. If we hang together, we can prevent the predation of Alaska's brand of resource politics. Otherwise, we could well hang separately as Alaska's oil boom falls further toward bust.