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SUBSISTENCE IN ALASKA WILDERNESS

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Abstract. The subsistence use of renewable natural resources in the wildlands and waters of Alaska is the historical foundation of the physical and cultural existence of Alaska Natives. Federal legislation and land stewardship combines with Alaska state regulation of wildlife and fish as a continuous direct affect on the pursuit of a subsistence lifestyle by Alaska Natives. The 1964 Wilderness Act, and the designation of more than 123 million hectares (50 million acres) of Alaska as wilderness by the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) have not definitively insured that subsistence resources will continue to be available to Alaska Natives and other rural Alaskans. Instead, the preservation of traditional subsistence activities in Alaska's wilderness and wildlands has resulted more from general subsistence provisions in ANILCA and from the 1972 Marine Mammals Protection Act. Nevertheless, these provisions for subsistence activities by Native and rural Alaskans are a primary factor differentiating Alaska wilderness from wilderness elsewhere in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two centuries, exploitation and development of Alaska has often polarized the cultural interests of its indigenous peoples against the economic interests of Europe and the United States. One of the longest running conflicts has been over the use of Alaska's wildland renewable natural resources, wildlife, and fish used for subsistence purposes by Alaska Natives.

Prior to oil development and statehood in the late 1950s, the population of Alaska was relatively small. Wildlife and fish appeared infinite. In comparison to today, conflicts between subsistence, commercial, and sport uses were few and were restricted to comparatively few areas. The protection of renewable resources was not a major issue in Alaska, and only embryonic nationwide.

By the time the Wilderness Act (PL 88-577) passed in 1964, Alaska was beginning to experience a surge in population growth, fueled

by the influx of petroleum-related industry workers and their families from the lower 48 states. Throughout this period, Alaska retained, and even enhanced, its image as the last frontier and haven of the independent and entrepreneurial-minded (Haycox, 1991). However, designation of large amounts of Alaska as wilderness itself was still years away.

The focus on contemporary subsistence and land ownership issues had materialized by the 1970s and the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (PL 92-203) attempted to resolve them once and for all. Still, independent, political and economic development interests continued to plague true implementation of subsistence rights. Finally, Congress passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) (PL 96-487) in 1980. Along with sweeping changes in federal land administration, ANILCA once again addressed subsistence, insuring subsistence use for all rural Alaskans—Native and non-Native alike. ANILCA also designated approximately 138 million hectares (56 million acres) of federal land as wilderness, thereby

generally precluding activities there such as logging, mining, oil and gas development, permanent structures, and widespread motorized access. At last it appeared that there might be some real teeth in the law and that Alaska Natives could carry on traditional subsistence activities in wildlands as they once had.

Today, however, misunderstandings about subsistence and the role of wilderness in protecting or preserving subsistence opportunities in Alaska still continue. We contend that wilderness designation and management under provisions of the Wilderness Act alone might not be in the best interests of preserving Alaska Native cultures as manifested through subsistence activities. In order to understand this and subsequent points, it is useful to first briefly examine the institutions of subsistence and wilderness.

SUBSISTENCE

For more than 11,000 years the Indians, Aleuts, and Eskimos of Alaska have relied upon the region's rich lands, waters, and renewable resources as the foundation of their physical and social existence. The personal gathering and sharing of food and shelter in this way of life met not only their day-to-day sustenance needs, but also served to structure and perpetuate their sense of self-identification, customs, and culture. Further, it substituted for contemporary notions of land ownership and market economic systems (Case 1984).

The perspective of Alaska Natives towards a subsistence lifestyle has changed little over the centuries, although the majority of other Americans continue to misunderstand the nature and importance of this lifestyle.

A Native Perspective of Subsistence

As Carol Jorgensen (1993), the federal Subsistence Council Coordinator for Southeast

Alaska, and a Tlingit woman, explains the problem:

People want to use the word "subsistence," but that is such a very narrow term, and cannot begin to cover who we really are. . . . Some people, who are non-Native and live in the rural area, see it as food on the table, the ability to provide for one's family and to make it in a world they have chosen to live in. Some see it in pure economics and the ability to save money, trade or make and earn a living. Native people see it as the very essence of their souls, the tapestry of their culture. It is how we communicate to one another, how we take care of each other, how we set up relationships between clans or groups of different villages. It goes far beyond food. . . . Native People in Southeast [Alaska] may look, dress, talk and have some semblance of living like the western culture, and in fact we have acculturated to a great degree, but there are basic principles not obvious to people outside the culture.

A Western Perspective of Subsistence

Prior to the "development" of Alaska in the 20th Century, subsistence was a viable, practical, and preferred way of life for Alaska Natives. However, it rapidly became increasingly incompatible with the thinking of contemporary Alaskan policy makers for several reasons. First, traditional subsistence was perceived as an anachronism—an unfortunate, if not pitiable way of life—a primitive welfare system for the impoverished and uneducated, an inconceivable lifestyle of choice given the advantages of modern market systems (Lonner, 1984).

Second, acknowledging the validity of a subsistence lifestyle necessitated according it privileges which seemed to discriminate against the growing number of non-Native residents, many of whom were being courted and counted upon to develop Alaska and its economic foundation. In particular, it meant conceding

ownership or access to lands that might otherwise be used for commerce through the production of mineral, timber, fish, recreation opportunities and for commercial development. It also meant that non-Native residents could be restricted in their historically inalienable right to hunt and fish in the state that correctly or incorrectly prided itself on individualism, self-reliance, and disdain for government regulation (Haycox, 1991).

According to Title VIII of ANILCA, "subsistence" was legally defined as:

the customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild, renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools, or transportation; for the making and selling of handicraft articles out of nonedible by-products of fish and wildlife resources taken for personal or family consumption; for barter, or sharing for personal or family consumption; and for customary trade.

This definition may be an improvement over the past lack of comprehensive definition but still seems to have missed several important points. The meaning of subsistence for Alaska Natives is different from that of the federal regulators. Subsistence is a cultural imperative, a lifestyle of choice for many Alaska Natives. Rather than an absence of culture it is an alternative culture, and one that best perpetuates Alaska Native customs and traditions. Alaska Natives feel a strong bond with wildland resources. Because they prefer to continue a direct relationship with nature they find it not in their own best long-term interest to over-harvest for quick economic gain, something quite common in the non-Native economic system.

WILDERNESS

A universal definition of wilderness probably does not exist. Perceptions of wilderness are a function of culture, and cultures are constantly

changing. In fact, many of the world's cultures do not distinguish between "wilderness" and "non-wilderness" settings. In the United States, like many other countries, wilderness is an evolving concept. In the United States since the 17th century, wilderness has been viewed in turn as an evil and alien barrier to the civilization of the frontier, a romantic and ethereal inspiration to art, literature, and philosophy; a scarce and diminishing resource in need of legal protection; and more currently, a reservoir of relatively unaltered ecosystems that can provide a multitude of biological and social benefits (Nash, 1982).

A Native Perspective of Wilderness

The interconnectedness of the natural and human worlds is an integral part of the Alaska Native life, understanding, and religion. This interconnectedness manifests itself in a variety of forms but runs as a common thread throughout their cultures. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that there is a word in any of the Native Alaskan languages that translates directly to the Wilderness Act definition of wilderness, even though these Native cultures have forever been intimately interwoven with the natural environment. The concept—which implies preservation of a natural environment that existed prior to human influence—is illogical to people whose lives cannot theoretically or physically be separated from the land in which they have always lived (Ulvi, 1993).

A Western Perspective of Wilderness

The Wilderness Act captured what was at the time the current Euro-American philosophy of wilderness quite poetically. The Act's intent was

to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated

for preservation and protection in their natural conditions (Wilderness Act, Section 2(a)).

The Wilderness Act further defined wilderness as an area

in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape . . . ; where the earth and community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain . . . ; retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation . . . ; generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable . . . ; [and] may contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value (Wilderness Act, Section 2(c)).

Wilderness designation appears to be very compatible with the preservation of traditional subsistence activities in Alaska. Both incorporate an ideal of a continuum of natural processes over time. Ironically, it is here that the Wilderness Act might actually hamper traditional subsistence activities in Alaska. The Act places more emphasis on flora, fauna, ecological processes, and past human culture than on existing human culture which might be historically tied to the resources. Put another way, it suggests more emphasis on humans apart from pristine nature than on humans as a part of pristine nature.

Traditional Alaskan Native subsistence, on the other hand, literally makes the resources and humans inseparable. Thus, the Wilderness Act is potentially unsympathetic to the exercise of subsistence activities—particularly if they should happen to involve the use of motorized or mechanical devices or permanent structures. Only if these activities could be demonstrated to be pre-existing uses could they be allowed to continue exactly as before the passage of the Act. Further, if humans are not an accepted part

of nature, then their impacts upon wildlife and fish would not be considered acceptable. Furthermore, these resources would not be in their "natural condition."

SUBSISTENCE PROTECTION

The passage of ANILCA, like that of the Wilderness Act itself, was the result of many years of political dispute and compromise. Even though the provisions of ANILCA only affect Alaska lands, the compromises made involved trade-offs between local and national goals and interest. In order to help resolve issues unsettled by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act—and to placate non-Native concerns over the perceived "lock-up" of wilderness, sport hunting and fishing opportunities, and commercial development—ANILCA provides specific direction that traditional subsistence activities, using mechanical or motorized devices, may continue to occur in wilderness. By 1980, many Alaskan Natives had incorporated snowmobiles, motorboats and all terrain vehicles in their subsistence taking of wildlife and fish. Without the special provisions in ANILCA those practices, involving mechanical and motorized devices, might not have been allowed to automatically continue in designated wilderness.

While ANILCA spoke to the terrestrial setting for subsistence and wilderness, the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act (PL 92-522) had previously addressed the subsistence taking of whales, walrus, seals, and sea otters along the coastal waters and estuarine areas of Alaska, including designated wilderness. It was no insignificant piece of legislation as far as subsistence use is concerned since marine mammals comprise about 15 percent of Alaska's statewide subsistence harvest by weight (Wolfe and Bosworth, 1990).

Accordingly, it is the ANILCA and Marine Mammal Protection Act provisions—and none of the Wilderness Act—that provide specific guarantees for traditional subsistence activities.

They, more than anything else, separate wilderness in Alaska from the 89 million hectares (36 million acres) of wilderness in the rest of the nation.

CONCLUSION

The topics of subsistence and wilderness, not to mention the political history of Alaska, are indeed rich and complex; they deserve more attention than possible here. Nevertheless, it appears that the Alaskan Native view of subsistence, and that of the western world, have come into conflict primarily because the regulation of subsistence has reflected western cultural biases and has been implemented according to western mechanisms of law and science. However, the conflict of Western and Native world views regarding subsistence is not likely to end in impasse. Subsistence management will continue to evolve as interactions between the two world views continue to improve. Hopefully, both the regulators and the regulated have, in the end, a compatible goal: a desire to perpetuate the existence of the many wildlife and fish species that are harvested under the rubric of subsistence. And, hopefully, both wish to continue subsistence and subsistence lifestyles, although the underlying meanings may not be the same to each.

Finally, the history of subsistence and designated wilderness in Alaska might give cause to re-examine the Wilderness Act. The role of indigenous cultures in wilderness is often viewed as a remnant of a static, historical footnote, just as wilderness itself is viewed as a remnant of our natural wealth. As we embrace the value of wilderness in providing naturally functioning ecosystems, we must also embrace the role of current Native cultures in that ecosystem. Like subsistence management, wilderness management is a reflection of an evolving interaction of changing cultures, at times a murky amalgamation of societal trends and regulations. In Alaska and elsewhere, the managers of both subsistence and wilderness would do well to learn from traditional human use of wilderness and the knowledge derived from millennia of subsistence. As Ulvi (1993) concludes:

True understanding of wildlands and the human condition are nowhere more tangible than in cultural traditions spawned of it. Perhaps allowing for the continuation of the rarest of natural relationships, the living expression of 3 million years of hunter-gatherer adaption in relatively unaltered landscapes, is the most precious purpose of all, and perhaps a saving grace, for these wilderness units in Alaska.

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