

# Promises to Keep

## Subsistence in Alaska's National Parks

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of Interior



Lake Minchumina, early 1900s.

Stephen Foster Collection,  
University of Alaska Fairbanks, Archives #69-27-28

*"Subsistence defines us. We battle the elements and sometimes risk our life to get the foods we crave. It is not an easy life, but it is ours."*

**Arthur Lake,**  
Kwigillingok Tribal Member

Alaska's abundance of natural resources form the backbone of life and economy of many people of Alaska. Today, as in the past, many Alaskans live off the land, relying on fish, wildlife and other wild resources. Alaska Natives have used these subsistence resources for food, shelter, clothing, transportation, handicrafts and trade for thousands of years. Subsistence, and all it entails, is critical to sustaining both the physical and spiritual culture of Alaska Native peoples. It is an important tradition for many non-Natives as well.

When the first Europeans visited Alaska's shores during the 1740s, all the local residents they met were engaged in a subsistence lifestyle. As the population grew through the territorial days, many new and conflicting demands were made on Alaska's natural and cultural resources. Development in various forms, such as harvesting marine and inland furbearers, commercial fisheries, mining operations, agriculture, development of military bases, along with establishment of cities and towns often impacted local resources and subsistence activities. By the time Alaska gained statehood in 1959, subsistence patterns in some of Alaska's more populated areas had been greatly affected.

In the years that followed statehood, the pace of change accelerated and developments abounded in Alaska's remote areas. In response, rural residents began to organize, and before long they petitioned government officials in hopes of retaining some protection for their land base and their subsistence way of life. In deliberations leading to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971, the U.S. Congress acknowl-

edged the importance of subsistence hunting and fishing to Alaska Natives, but provided no specific protection on federal public lands.

Nine years later, Congress formally recognized the social and cultural importance of protecting subsistence uses by both Native and non-Native rural residents when it passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). This legislation created millions of acres of new national park and preserve additions in Alaska.

Subsistence users have a unique connection to the land, fostered by tradition and lifelong experience. National Park Service Native Liaison and Heritage Specialist Herbert Anungazuk elegantly describes the cultural importance and relationship of traditional ecological knowledge to Native cultures. "Since dawn immemorial, the land and the sea was our classroom of survival, and it was the observant elder and hunter who shared the knowledge they gained from their special moments with the

elders and from their observations as a hunter. These stories of the people and the land and the sea are inseparable. They are part of the quest to survive."

Subsistence resource commissions have been established for most national parks and monuments in Alaska to provide meaningful participation and involvement of local subsistence users in planning and management decisions affecting subsistence. With the passage of ANILCA, the American people made a promise

that is imperative to keep: to preserve and protect some of our nation's most splendid natural ecosystems and treasured landscapes while providing the opportunity for those engaged in a traditional subsistence way of life to continue to do so. As Carol Jorgensen, Tlingit Indian and former Subsistence Regional Advisory Council Coordinator stated, "Subsistence... is the very blueprint within our souls that describes who we are as a people, and how we depend on our brothers and sisters of earth, air and water."



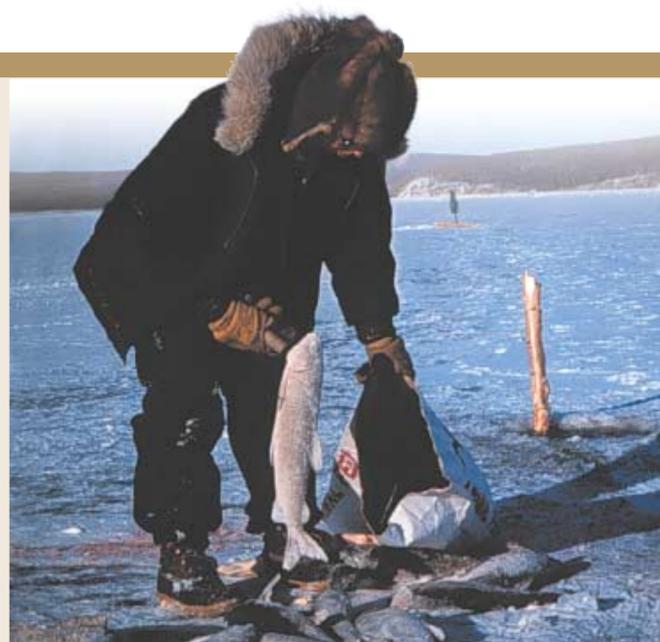
The subsistence lifestyle calls on all members of the community to participate and share the natural resources harvested.



Seasonal cabins are commonly used when trapping.



Berries are used to make juice, jam and syrup.



Some methods of harvest have changed over the years but many remain intact. Nets and hand lines are efficient means of harvesting fish.

## Living Cultures

In Alaska, areas that are now called national parks and wilderness areas encompass some of the oldest inhabited land in North America. Archeologists theorize that humans entered the North American continent between 25,000 and 28,000 years ago, crossing over the now submerged landmass called the Bering Land Bridge. More recently, radiocarbon dated sites put humans on the Alaska landscape 12,000 to 14,000 years

*"Subsistence is a way that Native peoples of Alaska have preserved their cultures. This way of life is not confined to the land. It stretches out to the sky and...the waters and rivers. The creatures of the earth give themselves to the people, who in turn share with family and friends, shaping relationships that celebrate life."*

**Helga Eakon,**  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Interagency Coordinator

ago. Most importantly, Alaska Natives have maintained an intricate and vital connection to the land for countless generations, and that connection continues to be essential for their cultural, spiritual and economic way of life.

Regardless where you go in Alaska, Native cultures have evolved as part of ecosystems and landscapes they inhabit. This relationship and connection to the land, water and resources has remained unbroken. ANILCA recognized the importance and significance of the cultural and subsistence components in Alaska's ecosystems and incorporated protections into the law to ensure the opportunity for both Native and non-Native Alaskans to engage in a subsistence way of life.

Traditional ecological knowledge is the system of knowledge gained by experience, observation and analysis of natural events that is shared among members of a community. In subsistence that knowledge is used to find, harvest, process, store and sustain natural resources that are needed for food, clothing and shelter. Subsistence users are taught at a very young age that they are not to waste subsistence resources, especially fish and wildlife. Alaska Natives are to take only what is needed and when it is needed. They are to treat all living things with respect, and they are not to damage the land without cause. Subsistence is a living tradition based on a deep respect for wildlife and for sharing resources with others in their community.



Above: An elder teaches young people how to prepare moose stomach, passing down time-honored traditions.

Left: Children get involved in subsistence harvest at an early age. Here these children are spotting for sheep.

# Subsistence in Alaska's National Parks



- National Park Units with Subsistence hunting and fishing
- National Park Units where Subsistence hunting and fishing are not permitted

*“Since dawn immemorial, the land and the sea was our classroom of survival, and it was the observant elder and hunter who shared the knowledge they gained from their special moments with the elders and from their observations as a hunter. These stories of the people and the land and the sea are inseparable. They are part of the quest to survive.”*

**Herbert Anungazuk,**  
National Park Service  
Native Liaison and Heritage Specialist



No part of an animal is wasted; hides are used for clothing, oil and meats for consumption.



Winter is also an active time for trapping.



Fish are harvested year-round in many parts of Alaska.



*“The subsistence lifestyle is a learned thing, and there’s quite a bit of knowledge of animals and seasons... watching the animals, if some population is low you don’t hunt those. I’m teaching my kids these things and they are learning this knowledge. Maybe only one will stay [in Wiseman], maybe both will. But that one will then pass that knowledge on, that’s the way the subsistence lifestyle is propagated.”*

**Jack Reakoff,**  
Wiseman Resident

## Seasonal Subsistence Uses

Changing economic and social opportunities in some communities have influenced the level of use and dependence on subsistence resources. Still, many subsistence users depend upon the land for nearly every aspect of their lives. Each summer and fall they plant gardens, fish, harvest moose or other game and gather berries. During winter months they travel by dog team, snowmachine and

snowshoes. They harvest wild fur animals for income, meat and clothing. Hides and fur can be sewn into comfortable and warm clothing to ward off the severe Alaska cold. The land provides wood for firewood, drying racks and cabin logs, as well as for making sleds and snowshoes. The land also provides sod and mosses to insulate shelters and bark for baskets, dyes and handicrafts.



Fishwheels, like this one on the Copper River, are an effective way to catch fish.



Fall is prime berry picking season.



Although dog teams are still used in some areas, most subsistence users prefer snowmachines for travel in winter.



Fur is used to make warm clothing.

## Timeline

**Pre-1867**

For thousands of years, Alaska Natives harvest fish and wildlife resources



Medfra fish camp in 1964.

**1959**

Alaska becomes a state.

**1867-1958**

Following the Alaska Purchase, the federal government manages Alaska's fish and wildlife resources. However, harvesting by Natives was specifically exempted from fish and game laws enacted in 1902, 1924 and 1925.

**1980**

Congress passes the **Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act**, creating 104 million acres of new parks, preserves and wildlife refuges. Title VIII of ANILCA protects subsistence needs of rural Alaskans.

**1990**

The federal government begins managing subsistence hunting and trapping on Alaska's federal public lands.

**1999**

Federal subsistence management expands to include fisheries on most federally managed waters