

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Visiting and Listening

*Meaningful Participation for Alaska
Native Peoples in Conservation Projects*

A Resource Guide for Agency Employees and Partners

Appendix III - Introduction to Alaska Native Cultures

Alaska Native peoples are culturally diverse. They embrace customs and traditions that are rooted in quintessential values of community and a deep respect for nature. Many Alaska Native peoples believe that all living beings have spirits and animals are revered. Historically, they have inhabited almost every part of the state and traditionally, they moved seasonally to hunting and fishing grounds to support their subsistence ways of life. Alaska Native peoples have protected their lands for thousands of years and, over time, have developed the valuable ability to detect anomalies in nature before anyone else can. Although Alaska Native people may resemble each other in the tools that they use and the English language that they speak, each Alaska Native group is a separate ethno-linguistic society and distinct in its use of the land's resources, their social interactions with other groups, and how their culture changed after contact with Europeans. Like with any other culture, Alaska Native cultures are constantly changing. People continually reshape their lives, identities, and actions in their daily course of experiences¹⁵. It is important to note that although their methods and practices may have changed from the past, they are still rooted in an idea of respect for nature, elders, and communal values.

Many Alaska Natives today live in major cities throughout Alaska. In addition to maintaining their subsistence ways of life, many Alaska Native peoples today have jobs in different fields and work as federal and state employees, corporate leaders, teachers, and in law enforcement, to name a few.

The following descriptions are of the five major cultural groups recognized by the Alaska Native Heritage Center and are based on similar traditions and subsistence patterns.

Athabascan

Athabascan peoples traditionally occupied a large part of Interior Alaska¹⁰. They inhabited the region from the Brooks Range in the North to Cook Inlet in South-central Alaska and from Norton Sound in the west to the Canadian border¹¹. They were highly mobile peoples who frequently traveled in small groups to hunt and fish along the banks of the Yukon, Tanana, Kuskokwim, Sustina, Copper, and Kenai Rivers. They built winter base camps and summer dwellings for easy access to resources like fish. Different

house types were used depending on the season and resources. People who took on leadership roles varied among the different groups of Athabascan peoples. Some groups, like the Ahtna and Dena'ina, had appointed chiefs. The Deg Hit'an had men and women elders who helped resolve disputes¹⁹. For some Athabascans, the core family unit was composed of a woman, her brother, and their families.

An important feature of traditional Athabascan life was that the mother's brother

was responsible for training and socializing his sister's children. He would be tasked with teaching his nieces and nephews the clan's history and customs¹⁰. Athabascans traded important food resources and tools for other goods that were seasonally unavailable. Athabascans are also well known for their elaborate beadwork¹⁹.



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A. Athabascan Beadwork

Contact with Euro-Americans did not occur until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century when trading companies and Russian Orthodox priests arrived in the Cook Inlet area. Many traditional customs and languages still exist today¹⁹. Athabascans still schedule social and subsistence events according to the season. During the fall, they may hunt caribou and moose. In the spring they hunt geese and ducks, set beaver traps, and practice dog-sledding. In the summer, many Athabascans go fishing, berry-picking, and hunting¹⁴.

Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik

The Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik lived in the regions from St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea to the northern Canadian border. The extreme Arctic environment was not a barrier for the Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik peoples, but rather a habitat rich in marine and land mammals, birds, fish, and fruits that were used to support the peoples' ways of living¹². Traditional dwellings varied in design and were constructed from different materials depending on the available resources. Some common key features of the winter dwellings included an underground tunnel entrance, a subterranean structure made from sod blocks and supported by driftwood, whale or walrus bone, and seal-oil lamps for lighting, cooking, and heating¹². There were many distinct Inupiaq societies with boundaries for hunting, trapping, and settlement. Each group had a major settlement with permanent dwellings and a qarigi, or house for men's activities and meetings. In Inupiaq societies, the chief attained his position through inheritance¹⁹. The mode of transportation varied across the different regions. The umiaq, or large open skin boat, was used for hunting walrus and whale and for transporting materials for barter. The kayak, or closed skin boat, was used for hunting and transportation. The basket sled was used for land travel¹². Inupiat people are well known for their intricate ivory carvings and engravings.



B. Many Inupiat people use the hide, meat and bones of their hunt like these boys skinning a reindeer in Penny River, AK (between 1896 and 1913).

The Inupiat were not drastically affected by Euro-Americans until the whalers arrived in the 1850s. Hundreds of commercial whaling ships sailed through the Arctic Ocean and Bering Strait, taking whales and walrus for their oil and ivory, drastically depleting the subsistence resources in the process¹⁹. Whaling crews and miners introduced alcohol and disease that devastated entire communities¹³. Today, most Inupiat people speak both English and Inupiaq. The St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik culture was transformed by the arrival of the first missionaries in 1894 who replaced Native religion with Christianity. St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik peoples today speak English and Siberian Yup'ik, a language they share with Natives on the Chukotsk Peninsula in

C. This Inupiaq artist carves walrus tusks.



Inupiaq & St. Lawrence Island Yupik



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Russia¹⁹. Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik peoples still practice subsistence hunting and fishing with marine mammals and fish typically comprising a majority of the harvest.

D. Local residents can still be found fishing for whitefish using traditional methods.



Yup'ik and Cup'ik

The Yup'ik and Cup'ik peoples lived in the inland and coastal regions of Bristol Bay along the Bering Sea coast to Norton Sound. The location of seasonal villages was determined by the availability of food and plant resources. Nomadic hunting and gathering dominated summer and fall activities and ceremonies and cultural festivities took place during winter¹⁰. Traditional houses were subterranean structures shared by close family¹². In some Yup'ik and Cup'ik communities, boys old enough to leave their mothers lived in a large community center where they learned to be men¹². Women had a separate structure where they gathered to cook and care for their children¹¹. Social rank was determined by the skill set an individual offered to the community and by gender. Men were in charge of hunting and fishing and a successful hunter often became a village leader. Women were responsible for child-rearing, preparing food, and sewing¹³. Important resources to the Yup'ik and Cup'ik peoples included marine mammals, walrus, various kinds of fish, and fur-bearing animals which they used for food, insulation, waterproof gear, and

tools. Yup'ik peoples are known for their mask making, grass baskets, and dance fans¹⁹.

Today, many Yup'ik and Cup'ik peoples still live in the same villages that their ancestors inhabited for many centuries¹². Over time, non-Native contact has changed the Yup'ik and Cup'ik culture. Today, various forms of media bring English into many households, but Yup'ik remains one of the most viable of all Alaska Native languages.



F. A Yup'ik Eskimo woman picks berries on the tundra.



E. Examples of Yup'ik Masks



G. Fish are an important resource for Yup'ik and Cup'ik peoples. Pictured here are women cutting fish on the beach with fish drying on the racks behind them in Tununak, AK between 1939 and 1959.

Aleut and Alutiiq

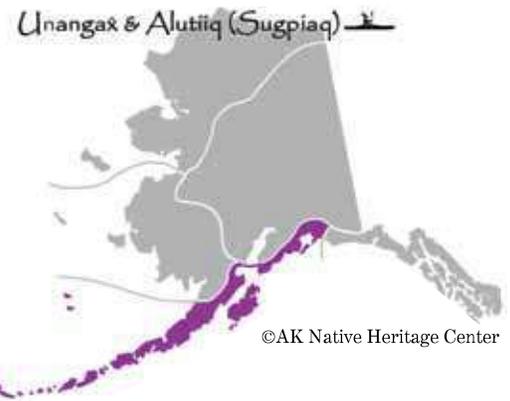
Historically, the Aleut, or Unangax, and Alutiiq, or Sugpiaq, territory extended from Prince William Sound West along the Gulf of Alaska to the tip of the Aleutian Islands and included the Pribilof Islands. They settled along the coast and inland by rivers and lakes to take advantage of the plentiful resources. The traditional dwellings of both cultures were semi-subterranean and often hard to distinguish from the surrounding terrain¹². Traditional Aleut houses were pit dwellings supported by whale bone or wooden frames and topped with a layer of sod and grass¹³. Important foods for both groups included seals, sea

from Bristol Bay, Athabascan peoples from Cook Inlet and the Copper River, and the Eyak and Tlingit peoples.

Aleut and Alutiiq peoples are well known for their skill in building kayaks. The split bow made their kayaks faster and more efficient for hunting. It prevented kayaks from sinking under a wave and made the kayak a unique craft among the Native groups¹². Aleut and Alutiiq hunters wore bentwood visors for protection from the sun, to shield the eyes from glare, for navigation, and to protect against spray in the rough seas.

The detail in the design of the visor signified the skill set of the hunter. Aleut people also had vast knowledge of the human body and they embalmed their dead before burying them¹⁹.

The Aleut and Alutiiq culture, social and political organizations were almost decimated by Russian and



American contact. Their success in hunting attracted fur traders to their settlements, including the Russians who greatly influenced their culture and language. Aleut and Alutiiq men were enslaved and forced to procure pelts for the fur trade. Leadership positions in the villages were often determined by the Russian traders or priests, and Creoles, or mixed Russian and Aleut peoples or mixed Russian and Alutiiq people, were given superior treatment in education and employment to full-blooded Aleuts and Alutiiqs¹⁹. Within fifty years of Russian contact, the population of both groups was reduced by more than 80% by disease, enslavement, and killings¹³. To this day, the Russian Orthodox Church plays an important role in the Aleut and Alutiiq peoples' lives. Russian foods are incorporated into their meals and Russian words are present in their vocabulary¹⁰.



H. Peg calendars were developed to help Native people keep track of Orthodox holidays.

lions, halibut, cod, birds, and plants¹². In Aleut culture, there were two social classes, the “free” people and the war captives or slaves. Each Aleut village had a dominant family that provided the chief. The Alutiiq peoples belong to two major groups, the Koniaq and Chugach. The Koniaq peoples lived in small groups with a leader in every village. Leadership was attained by inheritance. Each group of the Chugach peoples had a chief and assistant chief. In both cultures, the chief acted as the primary counselor or advisor in decision-making¹⁹. The Aleut and Alutiiq peoples traded among themselves as well as with Yup'ik peoples

I. An Aleut visor used for hunting and ceremonies.



Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Eyak

The Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian and Eyak peoples share a similar culture and depended upon the ocean and rivers for food and travel. The Haida, an Indian group that emigrated from

and migrated to Annette Island in 1887, establishing Metlakatla, which later became a reservation. Eyak traditionally occupied the lands in south-central Alaska from Copper River Delta to Icy Bay¹². These groups were comprised of accomplished boatmen and built large canoes for hunting, fishing, and transportation. Tlingit and Haida peoples relied on a diet of salmon as the primary staple; game, including bear, moose, and small mammals from bow and arrow hunting; and berries and clams¹³. They built permanent winter dwellings and seasonal homes along river banks or saltwater beaches¹¹. Traditional homes were built from red cedar, hemlock, and spruce and were designed with a central fire pit for cooking¹². All four groups had a clan system in which children inherited all rights from their mothers including hunting, fishing, and harvesting rights to the land and the privilege to wear certain clan crests and regalia¹¹.

Eyak, Tlingit, Haida & Tsimshian



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The two reciprocating groups are the Raven clan and the Eagle clan¹⁴. Their totem poles are unique among Alaska Native cultural groups.

The Tlingit resisted colonization by Russians and destroyed the Russian forts at Sitka and Yakutat. Contact with Americans was also unfriendly. Americans destroyed the village of Angoon in 1882. These groups were greatly affected by missionary schools, commercial fisheries, mining and timber companies, and the establishment of the Tongass National Forest. These groups are still organized by the traditional clan system and are continually working to revive their languages¹⁹.

K. *Many Tlingit women were expert basket weavers. Photo taken in Southeast Alaska between 1896 and 1913.*



J. *This totem pole represents respect for culture.*

the Queen Charlotte Islands of Canada, settled in Southeast Alaska and Prince of Wales Island. The Tlingit were among the first groups to migrate to Alaska¹¹. They settled on the southeast panhandle between Icy Bay and the Dixon Entrance. Traditionally, Tsimshian people inhabited the area between Skeena and Nass Rivers in Canada

