

Native Cultures and Language: Challenges for Land Managers in Alaska¹

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Abstract: Many of the Aleuts, Inuits, and Indians of Alaska continue to live a traditional lifestyle. Eighty-eight percent of the land they use for subsistence activities, however, is managed by federal or state agencies. Clear communication across cultures is essential if Native people are to be represented in agency land management decisions. Problems in communication relate to the differences between Native and Western cultures and language. Five solutions are proposed: defensible participation program, support of translator training, terminology workshops, term glossary, and use of Native terms on maps and in reports.

A majority of the Native people of Alaska — Aleuts, Inuits (Eskimos), and Indians — continue living traditional ways, at least in part. Before 1971 they occupied and used the expansive lands of Alaska without title or treaty. This changed in 1971 with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act which set aside 44 million acres, or about 12 percent of the state, for Native people; the remaining 320 million acres being distributed among state and federal agencies. Native people now find that, to continue their traditional ways, they must communicate their needs to agency land managers. This is not easy in a state where distance, terrain, and weather make communication difficult.

For Native people communication is complicated by language and culture differences. It is not possible to communicate effectively with Native people without some use of their language. This occurs in part because the Native languages are most often spoken by the elders, those most likely to be involved in decision making.

The problem is not as simple as hiring a translator because of cultural differences. Cultures determine what words a language has developed and uses. For example, among Yup'ik (Inuit) people there is no word for rich or poor — concepts not developed in their sharing culture. None of the Native cultures or languages have equivalent terms for such common Western concepts as park, refuge, and wilderness. "Environmental impact statement" makes no sense in Native cultures. A translation shows how difficult it is to find equivalent terms. One translation of the phrase in Inupiaq (Inuit) is *inuuniagvium irrusiata allannugniagniksranagu*. Which means, approximately, "a place where you live — the way it is — a statement of how it is going to be changed."

Adding another dimension to the problem of translation is the conflict of concepts. Wilderness, for example, conflicts directly with Natives' concept that people are part of the land. Wilderness designations threaten to eliminate Native access to land they have used for thousands of years. In recent debates over ANWAR, Native people have shown more fear of pro-

wilderness advocates than oil development advocates. Similarly, planning conflicts with the view of Native groups that to speak about the future with certainty is a form of boasting.

The conflict is significant because agencies are not the first threat to Native people. Agencies are the last in a long line of Western institutions — missionaries, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the public school systems — which have denied them their culture and language. The experience of denial is recent; many of today's Native leaders remember being punished for speaking their Native tongue in school. The relationship between agencies and Native people is tense and the role of agencies in the future of Native cultures is more important than either the agencies or Native people might wish.

To work in this situation, five strategies are proposed. First, agencies need to make cross-cultural communication a defensible part of their public participation programs. The program must be defensible: have clear goals, be based on the best information, use the most appropriate techniques. These techniques will probably require breaking away from the standard list. For example, many Native people do not use public meetings for decision making, but rather use a less formal style of "talking around."

Second, qualified language and culture translators are needed. Often agencies rely on local people who are bilingual to translate. But being bilingual doesn't necessarily mean that the person understands the cultural differences. Often, the translator's lack of familiarity with land management terms leads to errors. Agencies can be of service in supporting translator training and then hiring graduates and paying them a professional wage.

Third, to provide words for the translators, terminology workshops are needed. These workshops should be two-way, translating concepts from each language to the other. Agencies can play a direct role in hosting workshops. Excellent models exist from past legal workshops.

Fourth, agencies need to control their terminology or jargon. A common glossary of terms is needed that is shared by all agencies working with Native people in a region. Of particular concern are planning terms.

And last, to immediately demonstrate their concern for Native culture and language, agencies should begin to use traditional Native names for geographic features, wildlife and plants. The U.S. Geological Survey incorporates some Native names on maps, but the vast majority are missed. Native place names and plant and animal names often have special meaning or descriptive value. For example, the Yup'ik word for fish is *nega*, which is also the word for food. This relationship underscores the importance of fish to that culture. (An understanding of this double meaning helps understand why the Yup'ik people do not approve of "catch and release" fishing, which they consider equivalent to "playing with your food.") The descriptive power of Native words is found in the Yup'ik word for bear — *carayak*

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— which translates to "terrible, fearsome thing." And some words describe resources in a finer level of detail than found in English. The Yup'ik words *aciirturtet*, — "the first group of king salmon running under the smelt" — and *masseq* — "old salmon near spawning" — discriminate between salmon in a way not done with single English words. Native words can be added to agency plans and reports, just as biological (Latin) names are provided now.

In closing, Krauss (1980:89) writes, "Language is in my view the most essential part of culture." Since so much of Native ways is about land, land management agencies, whether they chose to be or not, are involved in Native language and culture. This year the major religious denominations in Alaska created a

special ceremony and invited Native leaders and people. At the ceremony the churches asked that they be forgiven for denying Native people their culture, and in particular their language. By acting now agencies can prevent themselves from such an apology in the future.

References

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