

Increasing Value of Wilderness: Protecting Cultural Heritage

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Abstract—The land and the sea have been direct links to survival to a hardy group of people in the northern extremes of the Earth. Each group is separate to its own domain, and their land and sea differ even if the distance between them is not great. The rules of the land and the sea are unwritten, and they have been presented to the new generations by Elders through the stories of the land and the sea since dawn immemorial. Cultural heritage is a virtue in itself; it is a value so profound that it continues to be imbedded deeply in the hearts, minds, and souls of the people who have weathered change despite overwhelming odds.

Wilderness Is Land

Wilderness is land; land is **nuna**. Our definition of land is identical to how land is defined by others, but in our way, we are people of the land, people of specific places. Some of us are coastal people, some of us are mountain people, others are river people. Some are islanders. My people are the **Kingikmiut**. We are people of **Kingigan**, whom outsiders today know as Wales, Alaska. **Kingigan** has supported vast numbers of people with its renewable and very natural resources since dawn immemorial. A large portion of our territory is the sea, and the sea is the reason **Kingigan** is situated where it is. The Bering Strait is the gateway for all species of marine mammals, birds, and fish, and their return is eagerly anticipated each spring when the northward migration begins. Weather, although it is still susceptible to sudden change, is at its most tranquil stage during this period, and the hunter takes full advantage of these favorable conditions. Sleep is forgotten, but even a hunter needs rest. You sleep on the move or atop ice floes and let the cold wake you. This is the time of the hunter, and these are the most memorable moments in his life as a provider for his family and community. He is following in the footsteps of his ancestors.

Behind us is the wilderness of tundra consisting of a small mountain chain, a lagoon, ponds, and streams that empty into the Bering Strait, and from this point, the land swoops into other nations, environments, and other seas far from our own. We are Earth people with very strong ties to the sea. We can be identified as ice people because we follow or head into the ice in pursuit of the animals of the sea that we harvest to sustain ourselves. The land and the sea are our substance. When we are asked where we are going, we say to others we are going “into the land” or “into the ice or sea.” In the ways of our prey, the ice and the sea are beyond our natural limits, yet we have learned to hear the land and the sea beckon to us.

The call of the wilderness is strong, and it is this call that has been heard by the people of the region since the first dawn. It is a very strong call that man and woman, young and old, respond to in very earnest expectation, especially at certain times of the year. The call is infectious. This is a time when people as a nation heal from the wounds of want after a winter of using up food stores gathered at the last season. As a nation of people, they must heal into togetherness because the animals they rely on for their sustenance are far larger than they are, and require the effort of a unified boat crew and also the complete community. And it is a time of learning for everyone.

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Cultural Heritage Is Vital

Whenever a discussion of our infinite ways surfaces through the teachings and testimonies of the Elder, awestruck ears listen. There is a profound beauty in cultural heritage, and to want to know more and learn about your culture and heritage is overwhelming. Many times what others hear is unexpected, and to have heard what was not expected is stunning even to those who have matured under the guiding hands of the Elders. It is an extremely important experience to hear the Elder relate the ways of the people to you. It is reality of the highest caliber, and it has kept and continues to keep the flame of survival alive. Culture and heritage are the fabric of the people.

Morals, values, or virtue—they are all unique elements of any society. They are vital components of every group of people on earth, and they are very much a part of indigenous man. They are much a part of our ethics, but so much has gotten in their way. Formerly, a Council of Elders paved the path to solidarity. This system formed a solid unit, and it became the way of the people. Several Native corporations, formed with the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971, have unique reminders to their members that they are a part of a society that has few equals in the western world. **Inupiat Ilitqusiat** is the guideline followed by the Northwest Arctic Native Association based in Kotzebue. **Inupiat Ilitqusiat** is the spiritual trail of our ancestors, as it portrays a lasting image of the wisdom of the Inupiat of the Kotzebue region and the rest of the indigenous world, and it is a baseline that is observed and followed by every indigenous group represented in North and South America. The reindeer people and sea mammal hunters of the Russian Far East are a part of this unique group.

Inupiat Ilitqusiat: Every Inupiaq is responsible to all other Inupiat for the survival of our cultural spirit, and the values and traditions through which it survives. Through our extended family, we retain, teach, and live our Inupiaq way. With guidance and support from Elders, we must teach our children Inupiaq values; knowledge of language; sharing; respect for others; cooperation; respect for Elders; love for children; hard work; knowledge of family tree; avoidance of conflict; respect for nature; spirituality; humor; family roles; hunter success; domestic skills; humility; and responsibility to tribe. Our understanding of our universe and our place in it is a belief in God and a respect for all his creations.

In brief, every group has a set standard so that everyone can pursue life as a whole person and as a part of a whole community. The Council of Elders decided everything, and this system has seen some grave reviews from present day authority in communities that continue to follow the ancient ways of their ancestors.

Our Culture Has Been Threatened

We are a generous culture, and generosity is one of the special traits of our people. The message of survival provided by the ancient hunter survives to this day, but the culture has been impacted by so many barriers that it is remarkable that the culture and its identities have survived at all. Our learning becomes a connection with our inner self. Only recently our Elders sat freely with our children without so much as a thought that something may be amiss, and taught the children what they have learned since they too were children. In only less than a century, many children who were born to us were taken away and ravaged of their ancestral ways by authority and raised in the ways of another world that is not ours. The way of teaching was an ancient proven way, but in a short period it was driven away by the dominance of western education. The rituals and the ceremonies disappeared, but fortunately they were only driven underground, as they are coming back among some people.

Mass death to unknown diseases, social ills, and imbalances, and breakdown of the family unit are encounters that have brought unbearable pain to all groups of indigenous people. We have been susceptible for only a brief period, yet we have lost so many. The Elder is a firm part of the profoundness of indigenous culture, and there is intense pain when the Elder passes into the sunset through death. The Elder is the person who is in possession of our cultural heritage, and more than a life is gone if they have not been given the opportunity to share their knowledge that

has been given them of our culture. Since dawn immemorial, we as descendants of the ancient hunter have learned and caused others to learn about our rich cultural heritage without so much as a thought of compensation, because to ask for something in return is not our way. Northern culture is boundless. The culture remains boundless even with unlimited barriers that it has faced in such a short period. You name it, we have faced it. Religion, education, even our intellectuals have been derided and called illiterate, not realizing that the newcomer himself is illiterate in our ways.

The trail of life for the descendant of the ancient hunter has been extraordinary where despite innumerable barriers the new generations have fared very well. We look at wilderness with respect, as the wilderness has been there since the dawn of time. The wilderness is the home of many animals that we prey upon. Ice, snow, winter, and summer are a part of this wilderness. We are taught to always be prepared. We are all hunters. The best. How many are the millenniums that the Kingikmiut have been on their land? We are told that the people departed our land at one point in time, but we returned when the new world we went to did not have the abundance of sea mammal oils that is seemingly always available in Kingigan. Our story does not say if we had to take the land away from another people, but I assume that we had to because you do not wantonly leave a place and expect someone to not be there. Why we left is no longer known. Could it be the constant winds of the Bering Strait? That is hardly likely, because even the most inert or sluggish individual can withstand the discomforts of storms and icy cold once he realizes that the land will provide for his sustenance.

The period of immeasurable losses for many, many groups of people began with the arrival of scores of outsiders in the last decade of the 19th century. With this intrusion began loss of language, culture, and heritage. Many groups are no longer with us because they have fallen to disease, needless bloodshed, or outright oppression. Our story tells us that man and animal lived together in our land without want of food or need of shelter. Forests abounded in our land until the land burned and took them away. Today, you will find trees that have been petrified over the countless eons, attesting that our lands were once woodlands and not the tundra you are familiar with today. Surely, the land was an Eden then, and remains in many, many ways an Eden today.

My father's generation is a generation of orphans. Their mothers and their fathers fell suddenly to an unknown disease in one painful, sudden period. How terrible it must have been, because they tell us so little of what they went through, except only during brief, painful moments. Many of us do not ask them how that time of loss was for them because to relive those painful moments would be too much for them to bear. We would like to hear more, but it is not for us to ask, and now many of those who could have told the story are gone. For each and every generation since that period, there have been painful moments that have tested the will of the people, but we have persevered, and since the first cries of grief began, every generation has cried deep, dry, silent tears because they have lost someone very dear to them. Many from my generation do not know the commanding presence of a grandfather or a grandmother.

Not all of our history is sad and forlorn. We have family that despite sadness, loss, and addiction remain intact. Each group of people, each family unit is different. We have many incarcerated in prisons. Many, many hunters. Many of them are in for the barest of crimes, and very few are beyond help. The life history of our people, of special individuals and events, is being revealed slowly. In part, a lot of our story has yet to be discovered even by our own people, myself included. It is not because of ignorance that someone may believe some of us know so little of ourselves.

If you enter my country over land you will find that my land is guarded by the remains of my ancestors. The aboveground burials on the mountainside are old. They are ancient. So many of them have been absorbed into the earth, but as a child, I remember many we passed by as we went onto the mountain to gather green leaves with Momma. I was afraid of them because of my absence of understanding reality. Just in the last century our beliefs of including the implements of survival that were traditionally placed in the graves of the deceased was no longer observed because the insistent missionary declared that the dead did not need the material wealth that they had on Earth with them on their final journey. The mountainside surrounding Wales is our burial ground. Omiaks, kayaks, weapons, and stone lamps

are visible, as are driftwood and whalebone that will be used to construct new homes in the land beyond. Kingigan has not followed the ways of a traditional burial in over six decades.

My friend, and the friend of many, the late Bill Tall Bull of Montana, related a story to several of us toward the last years of his life in Oregon. He stated that prior to the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), he and members of his people, the Northern Cheyenne, journeyed to the Smithsonian Institution to prepare for the return of their ancestors' remains, which had been removed from their places of rest and brought to a distant place far from their land. The men began their day with a blessing ceremony at sunrise, and ended with another ceremony at the end of the day. As the men came nearer to their country they began to hear laughter and happiness coming from the boxes in the van; the ancestors, in their spirit, knew they were going home. The journey took several days, and on arrival every home was visited by the ancestors who returned in clothing no longer used by the people, and speaking an old dialect because theirs had changed with the times. Hearing their voices was a step back into time, but the new generations who received them could understand them as they said, "Look! They still sound like us." "They still look like us." Chilling? Perhaps, but not to indigenous people. I am sure that several others who have heard this story related by Mr. Tall Bull have told this story to others because stories like these are a distinct part of our unique ways and our observances with reality.

The NAGPRA is an important tool to all Native Americans, and this Act has assisted them in the return of their ancestors' remains to their places of origin from where they were wantonly removed. Both sides need to be very careful when they commemorate themselves to the explicit words of NAGPRA. In the Inupiaq universe you will find identical place names a great distance apart. A mistake occurred with ancestral remains being prepared for return to their places of origin that my community had taken responsibility for, and the Smithsonian Institution had prepared them for their return to the community of Wainwright in the arctic slope instead of Wales. On a site visit to Wales in 1996, the person responsible for human remains for the Alaska region at the Smithsonian was informed by me of the possibilities of identical Inupiaq place names occurring in the Inupiaq world hundreds of miles apart. Fortunately, an embarrassment was averted to the Smithsonian when it was found that the coordinates did not match the site of removal to the point of return of the human remains taken from Mithlitaqvig.

Today, you will find photographs of our ancient dead in publications that were most possibly acquired without the permission of entities who handle affairs for the communities around the State. Many communities have rules posted that you cannot wander in tribal lands without a guide, but it is difficult to enforce the rule because of the lack of funding to support enforcement. Mithlitaqvig, mentioned above, is an ancient village situated 30 miles from Wales that was wiped out as a community during the 1918 influenza pandemic. From this site were removed 75 human remains. The traditional council of Wales, as a surviving community, declared responsibility for the repatriation of the remains from Mithlitaqvig. Some villages became extinct as communities, and of those who survived, mostly orphans, Wales vested responsibility and did not place the children in orphanages as authorities declared. My father's generation was raised by the grandfathers and grandmothers of that period, and my father's generation did very well to continue the traditions of our ancestors, the same traditions that many of us share with continuing descendants today. Recently the National Park Service did very well in honoring the ancestors of my people with a video titled "**Siulipta Paitaat, Our Ancestor's Heritage.**" The title means "a gift that is given to you," in this case, a gift from the ancestors. "Siulipta" is a very unique word, as it defines our ancestors as "the first," or very simply, "the first people."

Someone who does not know us will say we have names for everything. We do. Names of places are very important to indigenous people. We are Earth people, and as everything is associated with the Earth, everything has names. Place names identify us to our former nomadic culture, as we were indeed nomads until time in the form of rules and regulations, foreign laws, schools, and churches caught up with us and seemingly locked us away into villages, towns, and cities, but our lifestyles

continue to draw us away to gather the seal, the caribou, leaves, and berries at certain times of the year.

All animals have names. The whale and walrus have been honored with several names because they have played an important role in our survival since dawn immemorial. The oogrük pup gains another name after his brother or sister is born in the spring. Plants, insects, and the four directions have names. It is said that snow has multiple names, and it does, but some of the names have “sunk,” as some Elders would describe loss. Most indigenous groups have not subjected themselves to naming landforms after individuals purely because the people are known as being from a specific place, and land has always been associated with certain groups of people. We identify ourselves to a certain place and over the ages being of a certain place, and belonging to a certain group has become very, very important. Some of us have names identical to names of specific places, but the honor of being named after place rests on your parents, as usually they honor you by naming you after the place of your birth. Namesakes who identify, in jest, with ownership of lands that bear their name are looked at with quiet mirth.

So much of our land has changed in one short period. Although the influx of Christianity, western education, and rules and regulations span only a century in many parts of the north, their influences are seen daily in all parts of the land, and felt by all walks of life. One of our distinguished Elders related, “I wonder what ‘they’ took from our land,” when the subject of the return of group-specific items from a museum was mentioned. Concerning this subject, it was learned that the **inugaguthlungit**, or what has been referred to as the “little people,” were seen again when spirit masks of Yupig origin were returned briefly to the **Nanukauyarmiut** or people of Toksook Bay in Southwest Alaska.

Our gravesites, many as old as time itself, have been pilfered since others began going into our lands unannounced. Gone from their final resting places are vast numbers of human remains and cultural items. The possibilities are extremely high that legions of former servicemen of the Cold War era are responsible for the removal of human remains and burial items from many gravesites throughout this great land. It must be revealed to them that their wanton acts may be responsible for needless suffering, family strife, and even death among their families. Removing human remains and grave offerings was very possibly an innocent act to them. The placement of burial items on gravesites is not done wantonly and without reason among many people in the indigenous world. They are placed during the final burial ceremony so that the grave offerings will accompany the departed into the land beyond.

Wilderness as Rival and Ally

Rivals and allies can be perfectly paired if intertwined within the natural realm of the northern world and perfect adversaries when natural forces show their awesome power to those who must live in the environment along with the animals that support them. Ice, wind, and fog are natural elements of the Bering Strait, and each one of them can be deadly if the hunter is not properly prepared to meet them on even terms. The forming of clouds on both sides of the Bering Strait is an indicator that you must head for home, posthaste. You will still get caught by the wind, but it will not be nearly as bad as leaving a half hour later. You want to cross the gauntlet of ocean currents only once because you feel that you have used up all your chances once you have reached the safety of the shore. One can never forget the experience of wind-driven 9-foot seas once you have reached safety. The waters of the Bering Strait can be tranquil one moment, then the waters will gnash with the winds the next. Change is that fast in the Bering Strait, yet in this day and age, rivals and allies have added new forms never expected by our ancestors.

Time flies fast in this day and age. Tonight you will see the Big Dipper fill with the tranquil lights of the Aurora Borealis, and tomorrow you will see the dipper empty into the dark, starlit skies of the Tohono O’odham Nation of Arizona. Our Elders tell of becoming a hunter when only the winds and the paddles of men moved the boats across the sea, and that was only yesterday. The young hunters then, now

old and gone, told of using the bolas and failing miserably in their efforts to learn the ways of providing for a family. The nuwithkiq (sandpiper) or the opilitungiq (red phalarope) are usually the first harvest of young boys, and the small birds are eagerly sought by them to show future hunting prowess. With the seal, they are graduating into the first stages of manhood, yet the first sea mammal harvest he takes home does not belong to him and his family, and only after he has taken an oogruk (bearded seal) can he marry. In the mind of the hunter, the oogruk is a powerful being, and the hunter knows to be careful with him.

“Wilderness” can be a difficult word to attempt to explain because there is no term to actually define it. At the beginning of this paper, it was stated that wilderness is land, and in every reality it is. An attempt to place an identity to the term by our western counterparts usually leaves an empty void if some effort is done to understand wilderness. In all cases, wilderness will simply always remain land.

Let me end by telling a very short story on an observance placed into print by a man who taught for many years in the community of Ambler, Alaska, on the Kobuk River. Nick Jans has written three very inspiring books on his association with the people of Ambler, the Kobuk River, and survival in the northland. In his second book, Mr. Jans related a very special observance in our relationship with the land. In this case, he tells of thanks being expressed continually by one of the Elders he had an opportunity to work with on the Kobuk harvesting fish. In the book, one of the women is expressing thanks, and Mr. Jans thought that the thanks were being expressed to him. The lady was saying, “taiku” (thank you), and just before Mr. Jans answered, she added again, “One more time we come here—taiku.” (Adapted from “Black River Autumn” in: *The Last Light Breaking, Living Among Alaska's Inupait Eskimos*, by Nick Jans, Alaska Northwest Books. 1993.) If that does not make you cry or whimper, I don't know what will. That is our sincere relationship with our land.

Quyana.