

The Relationship between Qikiktagrugmiut (Kotzebue Tribal Members) and the Western Arctic Parklands, Alaska, United States

BY ALEX WHITING



Article author Alex Whiting. Photo by Siikauraq Whiting.

Introduction

Stadel, Taniton, and Heder (2002) suggest that educating the public about the diversity of values associated with wilderness is critical for reaching an understanding of how wilderness areas are defined, used, and managed in the future. Studies of attitudes, opinions, and values of visitors to wilderness and national park areas, however, have typically focused on people visiting these areas for recreation, the embodiment of the definition included in the

U.S. Wilderness Act is humans as visitors who do not remain. One group missing from this research are those people for whom wilderness areas are homelands, which they rely on for their nutritional, spiritual, and cultural needs (Watson, Alessa, and Glaspell 2003). While there are non-Natives in this category, Native peoples with cultural ties going back generations are the focus of this investigation.

At European contact, northwestern Alaska was composed of several Inupiaq national homelands (Burch, Jr. 2003).

The Qikiktagrugmiut were and are one of these nations (see Figure 1). The area they call home is from central Kotzebue Sound north and now includes portions of the Noatak National Preserve/Wilderness, and the Cape Krusenstern National Monument. Unlike most Native Americans, the Qikiktagrugmiut's relationship with the land and associated cultural activities have remained essentially the same, and the Qikiktagrugmiut continue to utilize their homeland to meet many of their basic needs.

In 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) was enacted as part of the implementation of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). The purpose of section d (2) of ANCSA was to set aside large areas in Alaska to be federally protected from development and other deleterious impacts. In northwestern Alaska, four National Park Service (NPS)–managed National Conservation Units were created. They include the Noatak National Preserve, Cape Krusenstern National Monument, Kobuk Valley National Park, and the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve (see Figure 2). These are collectively managed as the Western Arctic National Parklands (WEAR) by the NPS offices located in Kotzebue, Nome, and Fairbanks. Of these units, two have official wilderness classifications, the Noatak Wilderness and the Kobuk Valley Wilderness areas.

(PEER REVIEWED)

Although the designations are the same as “traditional” parks (e.g., Park, monument, preserve), people living in or near WEAR are allowed to use the land in a manner representative of historical practices, a variance from traditional park policy. In order to better articulate the values and threats their members associate with WEAR, the Native village of Kotzebue decided to explore the issue with tribal members.

Methods

Thirty users of the park units in the 30-something age bracket, out of 77 households that fall into a heavy harvest category from the tribes’ harvest-monitoring program, were interviewed. This group will be using the parklands for the next few decades and their children are likely to comprise the most active future user group. Although arguably they have the most to lose, this group has had very little participation in park public meetings. In addition, most were too young during the passage of ANILCA to have played an active role in shaping that legislation. All participants, except one, were male. Open-ended interviews were conducted using a predetermined set of questions about values, park management, and threats associated with WEAR. The author, a tribal employee, conducted all 30 interviews during September 2003.

Results

The average number of years’ experience on the land during the participants’ lifetimes was 36. The average maximum time spent out on the land during any single year was 9.3 months, with a few having spent their entire lives living out on the land. From September 2002 to September 2003, the average time spent on the land was 4.7 months.

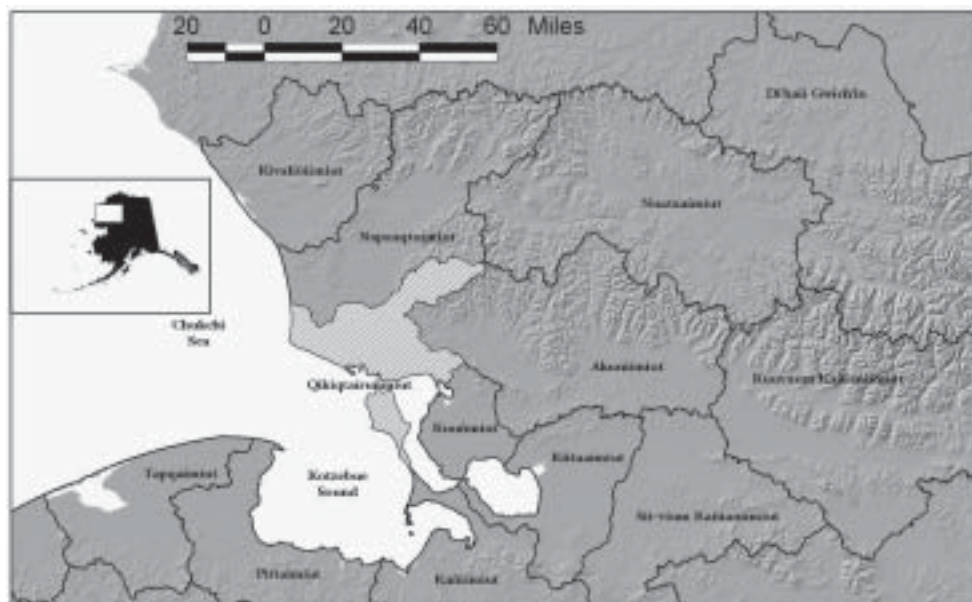


Figure 1—Illustration of Qikiktagrugmiut homelands in the western Arctic. Courtesy of Chris Young, archaeologist, WEAR.

Uses and Values Associated with the Land

When asked how they use the land, responses included hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering firewood, and traveling. Some responses were more philosophical, focusing on relaxation, enjoyment, survival, and “my way of life.”

When asked what the land means to them, respondents provided answers that identify a range of values not com-

monly articulated within the purpose of federally protected wilderness:

- Identity (personal and community): “[The country] defines who I am and who we are as a people, very important to me.”
- Traditional way of life: “[This is] a way of life—just the way I was brought up to live off the country.”
- Survival of individuals and families: “Being able to get out there

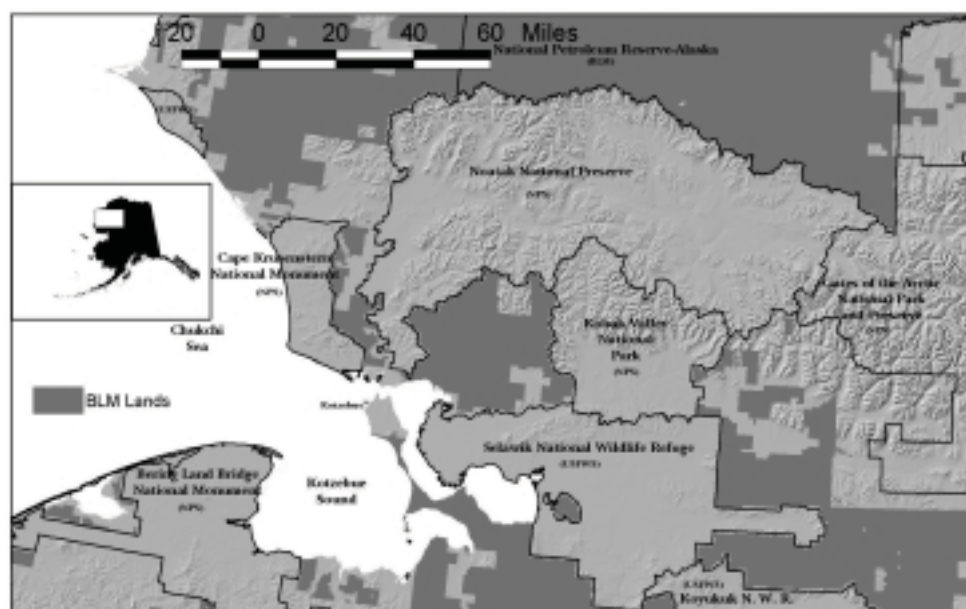


Figure 2—Illustration of the location of Western Arctic Parklands. Courtesy of Chris Young, archaeologist, WEAR.



Figure 3—Self-sufficiency is one value Qikiktagrugmiut realize from obtaining food in the Western Arctic wilderness. Photo by Siikauraq Whiting.

and show my kids how they can use the land to provide what they need to survive.”

- Opportunities for personal growth: “[When in the country, I am] practicing traditional arts.”
- Expression of humility: “[Spend-ing time in the country] reminds me of how weak and small we are compared to the powers of the land and ocean.”
- Maintain mental and physical health: “[Being in the country] keeps my spirit alive like a vitamin for my inner strength and spirit.” and
- Expression of independence associated with self-sufficiency: “[The country provides] my own source of food, camping, firewood, ice, water—just living.”

Most (23) of the respondents reported that their land relationship has remained largely the same over time. One commented on how his relationship with the land has become more important to counter western influences and keep the traditions of living off the land alive. Along these same lines, another said his relationship with the land has become more spiritual.

Unlike traditional park visitors, his appreciation includes not only the grandeur of nature that nurtures the soul, but also the spiritual connection to past generations for whom the land provided the necessary nutritional and cultural elements that continue to sustain his family. One respondent, however, mentioned that using the land has become more recreational for him.

When asked what land attributes provide these values, half mentioned the presence of wild animals for food and fur and another half mentioned a clean, healthy country. Open space and no development also ranked high, and about half the respondents mentioned freedom to travel anywhere to carry on traditional activities. Respondents emphasized the importance of being left alone and the desire to leave the land the way it is.

Threats to Values Attached to the Land

Participants were asked to identify threats to the values they had identified for these lands. They included agency restrictions and regulations, the NPS not understanding the Qikiktagrugmiut “way of life,” modern technology, global warming,

competition with NPS for land inholdings, passage of time, globalization, development pressure, trash, lack of respect by outsiders, lack of teaching land ethics to the young people, the NPS camping nearby when Native people are on the land, airplanes, sport hunting (i.e., for trophies), and the increasing number of visitors.

When probed about land use regulations, half were aware of many of the regulations, while the rest had no knowledge of any regulations. The majority of respondents cited “restrictions in general” on hunting as a widespread concern, including the need for licensing, enforcement of “unnecessary” rules, and fears of closing park areas to subsistence hunting. A few mentioned that they would like to learn about regulations and that regulations were needed to keep out development and control nonlocals in the parklands, but they should not unreasonably restrict local use. Respondents emphasized that Qikiktagrugmiut have been brought up to use common sense in taking care of the land (see Figure 3).

Most of the respondents reported that they do not recognize boundaries, treating the land as all green, brown, or white, as the season dictates. Only one said he thinks about boundaries, and that this sometimes affects his actions. Another respondent admitted that he is aware of the boundaries, but that this does not influence his actions. During the discussion of boundaries, many respondents stated a belief that park managers view the country as place-names on a map or GPS coordinates, removed from human activity and the intricate knowledge of the nuances of place. However, the respondents’ intergenerational and lifelong familiarity with the land allows for the development of detailed mental maps of the country, organized on the basis of a history of known places to camp, travel, harvest plants, and find animals.

When questioned about the relationship between themselves and WEAR staff, the influences respondents reported included professional relationships, running into park rangers out in the country, enforcement, and lack of trust. When asked about improving the relationship, slightly more than half said it's good the way it is. The remaining suggested more involvement of Inupiaq people in management and policy roles, and relationship and trust building with WEAR managers. Others focused on the need for rangers to use more common sense and get away from a by-the-book mentality. A few would like to see increased enforcement, especially for outside hunters. At least one mentioned the need for stronger enforcement all around, including for locals.

Discussion

Although wilderness protection provides some benefits to users, the threat of an ongoing land use relationship being destroyed through dependence on legislative, administrative, and legal decision making is a source of anxiety in the Alaska Native community. ANILCA could have addressed this, in part, by developing new park designations and management regimes specifically for protecting traditional relationships, with other park objectives being equal or subordinate. This approach was proposed for the Nunamiut Wildlands in what is now Gates of the Arctic National Park, but was rejected (Norris 2002). Furthermore, the predominantly nonlocal, and in many ways transient, nature of WEAR staff makes it difficult for them to build relationships needed to establish trust with local users.

The mistrust and hostilities revealed by many respondents in these interviews can, in part, be explained by the natural reaction of a colonized

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people subject to regulation by a dominant society. There are also historical examples of regulators in northwestern Alaska acting in ways that are interpreted by locals as being overly oppressive, perpetuating opinions that enforcement efforts are unreasonable, that there is an "occupying army," or that the people are being babysat while on the land—all of which were mentioned by one or more respondents. Currently, perceptions of agency personnel carry the baggage of past injustices, real or perceived, perpetuated by representatives of their kind.

Aldo Leopold explained this dynamic, in regard to plants, like this:

It is evident that our plant biases are in part traditional. If your grandfather liked hickory nuts, you will like the hickory tree because your father told you to. If on the other hand, your grandfather burned a log carrying a poison ivy vine and recklessly stood in the smoke, you will dislike the species no matter with what crimson glories it warms your eyes each fall" (Leopold 1949, p. 72).

This observation of human nature is relevant to the discussion in that many Qikiktagrugmiut view as beneficial much of what the managers do in conserving resources, controlling nonlocals, and other management activities. Yet at the same time, the history of past conflicts feeds the flames of mistrust and animosity that still exist. Building on the former while reducing the latter is a major challenge for the relationship between the region's land managers and the Qikiktagrugmiut.

Conclusions

It must be remembered that the NPS management of traditional lands occurs in the midst of a landslide of threats to Alaska Natives and the future of their cultures. These threats combine to exert incredible pressure and influence over the shape of Qikiktagrugmiut society. Unfortunately, the Qikiktagrugmiut have little control over many, and no control over some, of the potentially most harmful, such as global warming and contamination of traditional foods.

Many respondents reported a belief that the long-term goal of the NPS is for them to relate to their homelands more as parklands, with a similar relationship to that of any other American to national parklands (i.e., as visitors who do not remain). This attitude does not mean that all managers and politicians are unsympathetic toward the relationship of Inupiaq to the land (e.g., the Alaska congressional delegation has introduced legislation over recent years to increase the role of Alaska Natives in managing WEAR), or that the importance of WEAR to the Inupiaq of northwestern Alaska cannot play a more prominent role in developing long-term protection of that land relationship (see Figure 4). It does mean, however, that the Qikiktagrugmiut have lost substantial control over whether that future relationship will resemble the one they have historically enjoyed and continues to define who they are now.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the tribal members who participated and the Aldo Leopold

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wilderness identified by The Wilderness Society. Often, Alaska's massive conservation system units consist of large areas of rock and ice punctuated by pockets of ecologically rich and valuable habitat. It is imperative that these ecologically rich areas, or biological hearts, retain their wilderness integrity. This action is necessary in order to maintain diverse wildlife populations, Alaskan subsistence cultures, and our natural and wild heritage for generations to come. 

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Figure 4—Respondents attach value to opportunities to show children how the land provides what they need to survive. Photo by Siikauraq Whiting.

Wilderness Research Institute which funded the project. Henry Huntington provided assistance with project and paper development. Siikauraq Whiting and Jeff Johnson provided editorial comments. 

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