



Learning more through collaborative archeology

Coastal erosion is threatening archeological resources in Bering Land Bridge National Preserve. Can collaborative archeology help?

For millennia, Indigenous Iñupiaq people have lived on and around the barrier islands, beach ridges and dunes of what is now Bering Land Bridge National Preserve in Northwest Alaska. The remains of past villages, houses, activity areas, and caches have the potential to tell a vivid story of past and present life, technology, subsistence practices, and climate change.

Today, however, these sites—most of which haven't been well studied by archeologists—are at risk of being lost. Increasing coastal erosion, driven by sea level rise and sea ice retreat, threatens to damage or wash away the remaining structures and objects. Kawerak, the region-

al Alaska Native non-profit corporation for the Bering Straits Region, and the National Park Service are collaborating to assess, catalog, and learn from these sites—before it's too late.

This summer, an archeological team began initial assessments of the site. Using low-impact techniques, they seek to better understand past lifeways of Iñupiaq families in the area while keeping the sites and objects intact. Ultimately, they will use what they learn to determine whether any of the sites are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, a status that could support future preservation efforts.



Coastal erosion is evident where a sandy bank cuts into vegetated dunes in this aerial image of the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve coastline. NPS photo.



Three archeology technicians search for evidence of past human occupation on a deflated beach dune ridge along the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve coast. NPS/Justin Junge.

Kawerak and archeologist Justin Junge (Western Arctic National Parklands and Bering Land Bridge National Preserve) recently finalized a multi-year agreement to partner on the project and support paid internships for individuals from local Iñupiaq communities. Their goal is two-fold: to help interns build skills and knowledge through hands-on experience and training, and to facilitate reciprocal sharing of knowledge between local Iñupiaq communities and National Park Service staff.

Many Iñupiaq people residing in communities surrounding Bering Land Bridge National Preserve are direct descendants of those that lived on these lands hundreds or thousands of years ago. They have deep knowledge of the land that has been passed down through generations: who lived there, when they lived there, and what their homes, tools, and subsistence practices were like. This generational knowledge complements and extends beyond what we can learn from contemporary archeological studies.

Kawerak and Junge are figuring out ways to make the

project as inclusive and collaborative as possible. For example, they plan to house collections from the project in Nome, AK, where Iñupiaq people with direct ancestral ties to the sites can see and interact with objects collected during the field season. They also plan to engage Iñupiaq Elders in the process of identifying traditional uses of objects, thereby connecting deep place-based relationships and multi-generational knowledge with the scientific process.

By working together, Junge says, everyone can help each other—and get more out of the project in it in the long-term.

Everyone, he says, can learn more.

Learn More

Ocean Alaska Science and Learning Center
<https://www.nps.gov/rlc/oceanalaska/index.htm>

Bering Land Bridge National Preserve
<https://www.nps.gov/bela/index.htm>