

Native People and Wilderness Values at Denali

BY HOLLIS TWITCHELL

Gudgel-Holmes (1999), summarizes early Native occupation of the Denali area, stating that for more than 12,000 years the resources of what is now Denali National Park and Preserve have supported human occupation (see figure 1). The earliest evidence of human occupation is found in the surviving stone tools that were used to kill large mammals on the steppe tundra. More complex technologies appearing in the archaeological record about 6,000 years ago heralded the advance of the boreal forest and post-ice age animal populations. The appearance of forest, however, required adaptation. People developed new ways of living based on large game hunting, but with fewer species than before. Survival was the reward for making appropriate responses to environmental or resource fluctuations. Distinctive archaeological artifacts suggest that the ancestors of current interior Alaskan Native people were present in the Denali Park region at least 1,000 years ago. The cultures were never static, but always in the process of changing, just as they are today.

Athabaskan Culture

Collins (1998) suggests that the mountainous areas of Denali National Park and Preserve were often used by more than one band of Athabaskans. The Athabaskan people adapted to this country by organizing themselves into small bands of 25 to 100 people who maintained kinship ties with surrounding bands. Each band had the exclusive use of an area that often stretched along major rivers to the distant mountains. In order to survive, they had to have an extensive knowledge of large areas of land, knowledge of the seasonal presence of fish and wildlife, and the skills to make the necessary tools to harvest them.

Athabaskan people moved frequently to locate and harvest seasonally available resources as a matter of survival. Over time, people identified dependable food sources and

their locations in the upper Kuskokwim and upper Kantishna River areas and they returned to those places repeatedly. The Alaska Range played a key role in the yearly cycle. The mountainous regions were inhabited by Dall sheep, and the foothills were occupied by caribou and grizzly bears in the summer and fall, and more recently have become important habitat for moose. There were other advantages to hunting in the mountains of what is now Denali National Park and Preserve. The firm ground of the

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mountains and foothills made traveling cross-country less challenging than in the lowlands and boreal forested areas where numerous swamps and bogs drain into small streams that flow into creeks and major rivers. The rivers are the main highways for travel both in summer and winter.

A yearly cycle for these people might begin with relocating to a fishing site in the late spring to take advantage of the fish runs that began moving upriver at breakup (Collins 2004). Chinook (king salmon) was one of the prime fish sought because of its large size and nutritional value. The original method for catching these fish was by constructing a fence and weir in a shallow side stream that was utilized for spawning. Nets were made of babiche or willow bark and required substantial maintenance. If left in the water for very long they would rot and fall apart, so they had to be taken out and dried frequently.



Figure 1—More than 10,000 years ago people followed caribou trails through what is now Denali National Park and Preserve. Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute photo.

After a good supply of fish was cut, dried, and stored for the winter, the men, women without small children, and children old enough for the walk headed for the park area to hunt. After upstream travel by canoe was constrained, each person would proceed with just what they could carry in a pack, walking the river bars of the then-braided stream toward the mountains. There they would hunt and dry meat until they had enough hides to make a skin boat and enough meat to fill it up, then rejoin those who had remained in other camps downriver. After freeze-up the young men would be sent back out to the foothills to hunt for meat for the entire village (Collins 2004).

At times there were periods of starvation in the late winter when resources were depleted. Some food was obtained by snaring rabbits around the camp and hunting grouse and ptarmigan. In spring, when the fish and other meat supplies ran low,

beaver and muskrat provided some food as well as fur. By midspring, the rivers would begin to thaw and ducks and geese returned, fat from a winter of feeding in the south. The Athabaskan people knew the lands intimately. Their total dependence on the land and its resources gave them a powerful bond to it that was both physical and spiritual. Traditionally, they are taught respect for all living things, taking only what is needed and sharing with family and friends.

Athabaskan cultures of Denali underwent a period of immense change after Western contact, with the arrival of explorers; missionaries; traders and trade goods such as firearms; trappers and the fur industry; prospectors and gold rush boomtowns; new permanent settlements and mandatory attendance at schools; development of the Alaska railroad; establishment of Mt. McKinley National Park; and experiencing firsthand the ravages of epidemic disease in their homeland.

Haynes, Andersen, and Simeone (2001) describe the Native cultural changes that have taken place since Western contact:

Amazingly, survivors [Native peoples] of this era coped with these challenges by concentrating at or near settlement locations, integrating into the market economy by participating in wage employment opportunities, and utilizing technological innovations such as the fishwheel and outboard motors to maintain resource harvesting activities and traditional ties to the land. What emerged from these decades of remarkable change is the village-based framework of contemporary Athabaskan culture and society in Interior Alaska is still present today.

Athabaskan Views on Nature

Changing economic and social opportunities in some communities have influenced the level of use and dependence on subsistence resources. Still, for many Native residents these natural resources ensure more than survival, they sustain a traditional way of life. Athabaskan understanding of the wilderness and its fellow inhabitants often runs counter to Western ways of thinking about the world. Father Oleska (2002) gives us an interesting Native cultural perspective regarding wilderness. He writes:

Most of us learned in grade school about the hunting techniques and prowess of Native Americans. We were told that Indians could move silently and stealthily through the forest, and I'm sure they assumed that was necessary for them to succeed in surprising and overpowering their prey. Noisy hunters would scare all the game away.

But Father Oleska (2002) quickly learned in rural Alaska that this is not why traditional tribal peoples tried to move silently into the wilderness.

Traditional hunters believe that the animals are smart. They see things humans can't see. They hear things humans can't hear. They smell things humans can't smell. They therefore know things humans don't know. And besides this, they are in cahoots. They understand one another's languages, so that if the moose with his huge nose and ears did not somehow detect the presence of a human predator, the sparrows or squirrels warned him. Nowadays, hunters make no pretense of sneaking up on animals. They drive four-wheelers and snowmachines. In summer their outboard motors can be heard miles away. Only deaf animals could be surprised when encountering a hunter in this century. But in the traditional perspective, deceiving them was never an option.

According to Father Oleska, Native American hunters enter the wilderness silently not because they are trying to trick their prey but because they are aware that they are entering their home. The forest and tundra are their birthplace, and humans come only as closely watched guests—who all too often misbehave. Ungrateful, wasteful humans cannot succeed in locating or harvesting game. The animals will withhold themselves from such disrespectful creatures. And hunters believed that without the cooperation, the self-offering and sacrifice of the animals, they had no chance of success.

Father Oleska also describes the European view of animals as inferior life-forms, of lesser sensitivity and intelligence than humans. To be turned into an animal is often described as a

curse from which the victim can escape only with the magic of true love. But in Native American stories, being able to change into an animal is often viewed as a positive transformation. To become an animal is a promotion. For Europeans, conquering the wilderness and putting it to human use is a God-given right, but for traditional tribal peoples, trying to subdue or control the earth constitutes the height of arrogance. The appropriate human relationship to the ecosystem, in their view, is not one of dominance but of cooperation and mutual respect.

So what about roads into the Alaskan wilderness? Oleska (2002) relates,

To Europeans, a road is a social and economic path way established by humans for their convenience, prosperity and pleasure. They have every right to carve a road anytime, anywhere, as their needs and desires dictate. But for Native peoples, a road is a threat to the ecosystem that has nourished and sustained them for millennia. A road brings humans into an area they otherwise would not have had access to, and therefore noise, disruption and, potentially, the destruction of the plant and animal species. A road scatters the game, drives animals from their natural home, and destroys their habitat. And if the animals leave, those who depend on their self-offering cannot survive there any longer either.

Oleska concludes:

To city residents, roads may be a great blessing, the means by which you are linked to the rest of the world and to the frontier up to which the roads extend. But, if you live in a village, the idea of connecting your community to a city frightens and torments you. A road could

mean the end of your culture and possibly your life. Not only outside culture, but many of its least desirable products—specifically cheaper alcohol and illicit drugs—will flow into your town like poison into blood along that highway.

National Park Service and Subsistence Use

With the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) in 1980, the American people made a promise that is imperative to keep: to preserve and protect some of our nation's most splendid natural ecosystems and treasured landscapes while providing the opportunity for those engaged in a traditional subsistence way of life to continue to do so. ANILCA also directed the establishment of Subsistence Resource Commissions for most national parks and monuments in Alaska to provide meaningful participation and involvement of local subsistence users in planning and management decisions affecting subsistence.

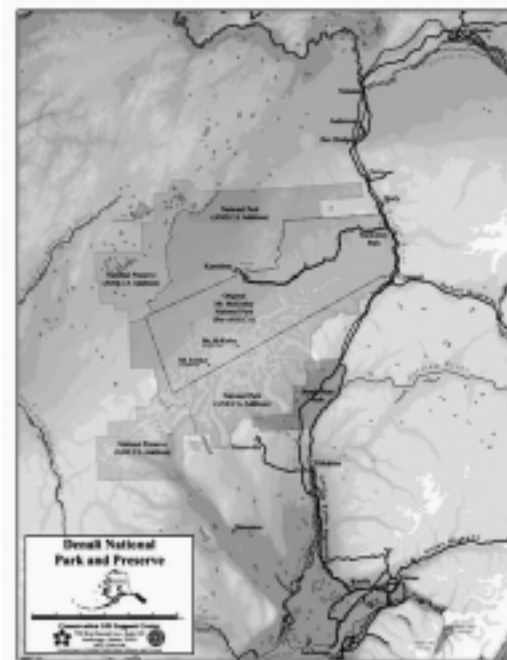


Figure 2—The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) created new additions to the park and designated 2 million acres (0.8 million ha) of wilderness.

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Denali's National Park Subsistence Resource Commission, made up of both Native and non-Native subsistence users, have addressed their concerns about new roads or railroads in Denali National Park and Preserve (see figure 2) and have stated their concerns in a letter to the secretary of the interior of the United States. The commission met on February 21, 2003, and once again discussed North Access proposals to build either a railroad or a road from the George Parks Highway near Healy to Kantishna within Denali National Park. The commission has expressed strong opposition to any new roads within Denali National Park and Preserve through a formal Hunting Plan recommendation passed in 1986. The commission reviewed North Access issues in 1993 and 1995 and passed motions to oppose any new access roads or railroads through Denali National Park.

The commission is concerned that developing new access routes and roads into areas traditionally used for subsistence purposes would alter the character of traditional use patterns and could negatively impact important subsistence resources. Specifically, the commission members are concerned about moose, caribou, furbearers, and chum salmon populations and habitats in the North Access area. Increased access could open areas, presently used by local subsistence

users, to resource impacts or vandalism, which could result in hardship to subsistence users.

The commission is also concerned about impacts to Denali's natural landscapes. Even if such an access route were open only seasonally, it would bring such an increase in the human population that the object of the visit—to see wildlife and experience wild landscapes for which the park was established—would be diminished. Development of a North Access route would be extremely expensive, not only to construct, but to maintain, and would require additional management responsibilities on the part of the National Park Service. Members of the commission believe that a new road is not necessary and would be a permanent, irreversible feature of the landscape, with a potential to impact customary and traditional subsistence uses.

Collins (1998, 2004) sums up the Native land use ethic. The Athabaskans were able to live here for thousands of years with minimal impact on their environment. Both their tools and the items they made with them were from local materials, and the harvest was very selective. In spite of use by traditional Athabaskans for the last few thousand years, the natural landscapes and ecosystems of the park have remained much the same, showing little trace of their presence.

One of the aspects of Denali National Park and Preserve that should be remembered and honored by those who currently use and appreciate the park is that it is part of the heritage of the Interior Athabaskan people. Their recent relatives and their ancestors used these lands for hundreds, if not thousands, of years but left a very light footprint. The park retains much of its original wilderness character, not because it has been protected from human use, but because the people who used it for thousands of years did not attempt to change its basic nature. **IJW**

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