

An Alaska Native's Perspective

by Fred Armstrong, Jr.



A Native Alaskan makes a traditional basket for gathering wild berries during the brief Alaska growing season.

USFWS photo

*H*ow does the Endangered Species Act (ESA) affect tribes in Alaska? What are the benefits of tribal involvement in the ESA? Will the ESA impact subsistence activities in Alaska? Will it impede the cultural and traditional lifestyle Alaska Natives cherish? These are some of the questions that came to me when I first heard of the ESA. To answer some of these questions, one must first understand the unique laws that affect the livelihoods of Alaska Natives and determine the course that resource managers must take to implement wildlife conservation regulations.

When oil was discovered on the North Slope, the State of Alaska needed to settle a land claims issue with Alaska Natives in order for the trans-Alaska pipeline to be built. It looked to Congress to settle the issue. In hopes of changing the way the Federal Government worked with Native Americans, Congress wanted an alternate solution to creating reservations throughout Alaska. At the same time, Congress wanted Alaska Natives to forge their own destiny and become self-reliant. Hearings were conducted and legislation acceptable to both Alaska Natives and the State of Alaska slowly developed. In 1971, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). This law provided for the creation of 13 Native regional, for-profit corporations. The corporation boundaries were created along cultural diversity lines, with the exception of one corporation that represents Alaska Natives living outside of Alaska. (That corporation did not receive a land entitlement but instead received a cash settlement.) Congress authorized the 12 remaining corporations to select land

from 44 million acres (18 million hectares). This land, along with a cash settlement, would be used to pursue economic development ventures to sustain and support their shareholders. Congress also increased the number and size of national parks, preserves, and refuges in Alaska, and the Secretary of the Interior selected a total of 227 million acres (92 million ha) for these purposes. The authority for this was the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). ANILCA also provided for the protection of subsistence hunting and fishing activities by rural residents of Alaska. Title VIII of ANILCA gives authority for the Federal Government to implement a subsistence hunting and fishing program for rural residents on Federal lands.

One important aspect of ANILCA for tribes in Alaska was the extinguishment of aboriginal hunting and fishing rights. This action paved the way for the State of Alaska to manage fish and wildlife resources throughout Alaska. The passage of ANCSA also revoked the Alaska Native Allotment Act and all reserves for Native purposes, except for one at Annette Island (Metlakatla). Tribes within reservations were given the option of receiving title to their land, but without reservation status. The 44 million acres that the regional corporations selected were based on traditional use and occupancy patterns within each geographic area. These 12 regional corporations represent the diverse cultures within the three ethnic races: Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut.

In 1993, Ada Deer, then Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, announced the recognition of 226 Alaskan tribes by the Federal

Government. However, an important distinction is that they are tribes without a sovereign land base. This is significantly different from the situation in the lower 48 States, where Native Americans have reservations with sovereign powers to govern their people and land. Within the 226 Alaska tribes are 15 language groups. The Eskimo dialects are Inupiaq, Yupik, Siberian Yupik, Jupik, Cupik, and Central Yupik. The Indian languages consists of Athabascan, Eyak, Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit. Finally, the Aleuts consists of Aleut, Alutiiq and a mixture group from the St. Matthew and Middleton Islands.

The existence of many languages within ethnic groups suggests that there are significant differences among the indigenous peoples in Alaska. The lifestyle of Alaska Natives is patterned around subsistence activities within their geographic areas. Cultural and traditional ways differ somewhat; however, the spirituality that is involved in hunting and gathering remains the same. Many people do not understand the connection that Alaska Natives have with the environment in which they live. Alaska Natives have a strong respect for the animals that provide sustenance to them. It shows in the ways that they prepare for hunts and in the ways they prepare and preserve the game. Cultural values are very strong and are passed on through generations.

Resource management by State or Federal agencies is usually based on research and an accumulation of scientific data. The Alaska Native community, however, traditionally relied on word of mouth, visual observation, and information handed down from generation to generation. Observations about animal patterns, density or scarcity, and general health were passed along to other tribal members. This information usually determined whether or not to hunt for certain species. In other words, the Alaska Native community has had its own method of practicing resource management that can be just as effective, if not more so, than

management guided strictly by research and scientific analyses.

In order for truly cooperative management to succeed in Alaska, a blending of the two different styles of resource management is needed. The scientific community must be able to incorporate traditional environmental



knowledge that Alaska Natives provide. Likewise, the Native community must be willing to embrace a management plan that incorporates science as well as their views and ideas.

The ESA is not new to Alaska. The FWS has been implementing this important law effectively in Alaska for a long time. It shows in the way some of the State's endangered species have improved in status toward the ultimate goal of recovery. However, the ways in which activities such as ESA consultation, coordination, and implementation are carried out may change as the involvement of Alaska Natives grows. Outreach efforts need to increase so that Alaska Natives remain informed and become more active partners in endangered species recovery.

Fred Armstrong, Jr., is the FWS Alaska Native Issues Advisor.

The return of spawning salmon is a much-anticipated event. Many Native Alaskan communities depend on salmon as an important food source. Here a temporary "fish camp" has been set up to process the catch.

USFWS photo