

Alaska Natives and Conservation Planning: A Recipe for Meaningful Participation¹

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This paper was presented at the 17th Annual Conference of the Wildlife Society on October 6, 2010 at Snowbird, Utah.

¹This discussion paper is under review and revision; it may be cited with permission of the authors as:

Jacobs, M. B. and Brooks, J. J. 2010. Alaska Natives and conservation planning: A recipe for meaningful participation. Discussion Paper DCPD-DP-10-01. Division of Conservation Planning and Policy, National Wildlife Refuge System, Anchorage, AK.

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Abstract

Participation by Alaska Natives in conservation planning for public lands often is inadequate, both in terms of quality and quantity. Increasing the amount and effectiveness of Native participation in conservation planning should be of paramount importance to land managers in Alaska. The authors' purpose was to better understand and improve participation in conservation planning for Alaska Natives. The objectives were to (1) inductively develop a conceptual model of Alaska Native participation using grounded theory, (2) identify and describe factors that impede and facilitate meaningful participation, and (3) formulate recommendations for agency planners and managers. The core analytic theme, *cultural appropriateness*, reflects a lingering divide between Alaska Native culture and society and agency culture and practice. Findings were discussed in terms of barriers, facilitators, and logistics related to communications, relations, and involvement. The authors formulated six working propositions that highlight implications and recommendations for improving Alaska Native participation in conservation planning. The recipe for meaningful participation requires agencies to develop and maintain capacities for greater cultural awareness and sensitivity and flexibility in methods of intercultural communication and public involvement.

Key Words: Alaska Natives, intercultural communication, land use planning, natural resource management, public participation, public relations

Introduction

The state of Alaska is divided into a patchwork of land ownerships and legal management jurisdictions (Figure 1). In a highly politicized atmosphere, Alaska Native tribes compete for position and access rights alongside the state and federal governments, corporations, commercial interests, and individuals (e.g., Case 1989, 1998; Gallagher and Gasbarro 1989). Much of the federal land in Alaska has conservation status and is protected and managed by a variety of agencies that use a comprehensive planning document as the general vehicle to direct resource conservation and land use management (Gallagher 1988). Comprehensive area plans for agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are often rooted in differing missions and distinct enabling legislation, which can complicate conservation planning and create public confusion. To meet requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and other laws that establish federal planning processes (e.g., the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act), federal agencies in Alaska must conduct meaningful public participation during the development of comprehensive plans and other projects that propose major actions or changes on federal lands—actions that could impact the environment and affect human communities.¹

The subsistence way of life, well-studied and documented in Alaska (e.g., Wheeler and Thornton 2005), is integral to the cultures, societies, and economies of most, if not all, Alaska Natives and their communities, both materially and spiritually (Brown and Burch 1992; Case 1989; Thériault et al. 2005; Thornton

1998, 2001). Maintaining this lifestyle requires continual access to the resources present on vast tracts of undeveloped and remote lands not owned by Alaska Natives. Access to these lands and resources may become more difficult to obtain in the future if populations and competition for resources increase (Case 1998). Ensuring access and retaining the essential link to the land and subsistence resources is vital to the survival of Alaska Natives and absolutely requires that tribes and other Native groups be able to meaningfully take part in the decision-making processes used by these agencies.

Land management decisions made by agencies can and do impact Alaska Natives' subsistence lifestyles. Accordingly, it should be of paramount importance to the federal agencies to increase the amount and effectiveness of Alaska Natives' participation in and influence on these decisions. Alaska Native involvement in planning and management of the state's vast territory and abundant resources has been described as inadequate for affecting the real changes that are needed to ensure complete protection of the subsistence lifestyle in Alaska (e.g., Case 1989; Flanders 1998; Hensel and Morrow 1998; Thornton 2001). There remains an important need for researchers and managers to determine the extent and nature of this inadequacy and to improve the practice of public participation with Alaska Natives (Gallagher 1988).

Using a broad lens, our purpose was to better understand and help improve, in a general and preliminary sense, Alaska Natives' participation in federal land use and conservation planning. Our research objectives were to (1) inductively develop a conceptual model (i.e., emerging theory) of Alaska Native

participation, (2) explicitly identify and describe factors that impede or facilitate Alaska Native participation, and (3) develop recommendations for how agency planners and managers can enhance the quality and quantity of Alaska Natives' participation.

Alaska Native peoples are culturally diverse and have a long history of interacting with agency land managers. This paper does not necessarily capture the full and nuanced details of their participation in conservation planning. In the general context of public relations between Alaska Native groups and agency land managers, this paper may best be evaluated as to its contribution to increasing the influence that Alaska Natives have on the future of the land that is so closely linked to their diverse cultures, histories, and lifestyles.

Method

We employed Grounded Theory, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1965, 1967). Grounded theory is an approach to social science that is used to uncover concepts and categories, not to test hypotheses or replicate theory (Glaser 1992). Analysts who use grounded theory describe and conceptually organize textual data into categories based on their properties and dimensions—the precursors to theorizing (Cunningham 2006). We believe that this inductive study design is appropriate for describing conditions that facilitate or impede meaningful participation by Alaska Natives in agency planning processes, arguably a complex social phenomenon. We chose this approach to discover meaning in the data and to generate an understanding of the situation (e.g., Cunningham 2006; Davenport et al. 2007).

We used semi-structured interviews with 31 key informants.² We selected informants who have extensive knowledge of land use and conservation planning in Alaska, and who have experience working with Alaska Native groups and communities. Our informants understood the research topic and were pleased to discuss it with us, often at length. We used snowball sampling, or peer referral, to locate informants and asked them to name others who would be likely informants for the study (Bernard 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994). The interviews were conducted by one researcher, who followed a flexible format with a set of open-ended questions designed to inspire in-depth discussions on a range of issues related to Alaska Native participation in land use and conservation planning.

Analysis

We studied the transcripts and interview notes in detail and *open* coded the data based on the themes that emerged (Glaser 1992).³ Throughout analysis, themes were identified and compared to data emerging from subsequent interviews (Cunningham 2006; Dick 2005; Glaser 1992; Pidgeon and Henwood 2004).⁴ We grouped the emergent themes identified in the early stage of coding (Table 1) into four main categories discussed in the next section (Table 2). The themes presented in Table 1 provided the basic properties and dimensions for defining and describing the categories presented in Table 2. The four main categories are interrelated and form the foundation of a preliminary conceptual model, or theory, of Alaska Native participation in land use and conservation planning. To bring together the recurrent themes in the data, we formulated six working propositions based on insights drawn from the categories (Cunningham

2006), including implications of each proposition and recommendations for improving agency practice.

Discussion

The emergent theory of Alaska Native participation grounded in these data is encompassed by an umbrella theme, or core category, that we labeled *cultural appropriateness* (Figure 2). An informant explained, “Alaska Native culture isn’t the same as western culture, and this point isn’t taken into account as much as it should be when it comes to both attitudes and [meeting] formats; things that work for western society won’t necessarily be successful with Alaska Natives.” The continued use of western formats could be interpreted as an indifference towards the traditions and preferences of Alaska Native audiences and may damage the relationships and connections that agency planners and managers are trying to establish. The very notion of long-range planning, as practiced in the West, is foreign to and historically absent from many cultures and languages of Alaska Native peoples (Gallagher 1993), and thus, the practice itself may be culturally inappropriate in many cases.

Embedded within the core category of cultural appropriateness, we discovered four categories: *communications*, *relations*, *involvement*, and *logistics* (Table 2). Logistics describes the physical issues of time and place. Logistical considerations play a central role in the success of communications, the ability of people to get involved, and the creation and maintenance of relationships (Figure 2). Logistics, including funding, determine the methods of public participation, and thus indirectly impact the success of all related agency endeavors.

The categories of communications, relations, and involvement are more abstract than logistics and have overlapping boundaries: They are inextricably linked and connected on many levels, so that most aspects discussed by informants in the context of any one of these three categories also influence and are influenced by the other two in a cyclical way (Figure 2).

Communications

Similar to Gallagher (1993), we found that establishing clear two-way communication is essential for effective Alaska Native participation in agency planning and decision making. Within the general category of communications, two specific subcategories emerged: one details the information contained in discussions and exchanges, and the other describes the interactions between people and groups during communications (Table 2).

How information is presented to Native audiences, including the type of language and methods used by the agencies, is crucial to success. To improve comprehension on the part of Native audiences, informants advised agency employees to eliminate technical jargon and bureaucratic terms: “Native communities have the same abilities to understand as other communities, including a general lack of knowledge of governmental and technical terms.” The method of delivery and format of messages must conform to life in rural Alaska:

Last year, I was able to help with the endangered species program.

They wanted a different way of outreach in one of the communities, so they wanted to ... purchase such things as t-shirts and caps and give them out with a conservation message. ... I

looked at their [request] and I said, ‘you have to tell them what real life is in village Alaska: there’s no road system, no billboards or graphic neon signs. You have to be creative. The locals probably know the best way of getting the word out. ... With a conservation message, if you put it on t-shirts, people use them every day; it’s always there.’ Expecting that word is going to get out by posting notices or posters—they’ll just move on and forget it. You have to do things that really catch the eye and have meaning.

Our findings agree with Vaudrin (1974) that deciding how to present or collect information requires careful consideration of audiences’ various levels of education, ethnic and language backgrounds, and expectations for taking part in discussions with federal agencies.

The content of communications or lack thereof is important. We found a lack of clear and adequate explanations to be an impediment, as informants cited confusion on the part of Native audiences about agency regulations and a lack of understanding of the reasons behind various projects and plans:

Things the government tries to enforce are often counter-intuitive rules that do not make sense to the people, like the ban on shooting cow moose. Reasons are generally not explained well or not well understood; there needs to be basic explanations of reasons.

A failure to concretely explain to Alaska Native audiences the reasons for actions or regulations proposed in a plan may also lead those audiences to interpret the plan as irrelevant to their lifestyles or immediate situations:

The problem with public participation is that much is irrelevant ... many government plans are very abstract. This abstractness makes it inherently difficult to get a lot of participation, especially among peoples ... dealing with every day fundamental needs, like food and water. ... There are lots of other things to worry about in villages.

Information must be communicated in ways that allow tribes and communities to see both the large-scale importance of issues and how they personally would benefit from the proposed actions. When this occurs, agencies are more likely to garner the support and willingness of Alaska Natives to participate in projects and thereby obtain more complete and accurate data.

In return, agencies need to provide tribes and communities with useful information such as clear and concise summaries of management plans or research results. Sharing results and reports from projects helps to establish a two-way flow of information—something that is, by many accounts, currently lacking. Few communities see the results of projects in which they participate, and most remain uninformed of the reasons for changes in federal management regulations, even when those regulations impact lands owned by Native individuals or corporations. This creates Native perceptions that the agencies act in arbitrary ways. An informant described, “As much as the resource might be protected, that communication gap became bigger because the people think, ‘You just arbitrarily changed my way of life ... my culture, with no communication.’”

The format of interactions can facilitate or prevent successful intercultural communications. Formal public meetings or hearings are popular forums for public participation commonly used by agencies in much of the United States; an informant explained, “In our white culture ... we are just big into meetings.” However, this format is not compatible with the structures of most Alaska Native societies, and thus, will limit discussions and may yield inaccurate information:

It’s a cooperative society [that of Alaska Natives]; it’s not a rising as individuals kind of thing, and people don’t speak up in a meeting and contradict. Some people do, but those people are usually not ... favored, let’s say, and a lot of times ... will end up off the council, because ... they dominate. [Natives] don’t like that kind of behavior, and what you’ll see happening is that everybody else gets really quiet.

Public meetings do not provide a comfortable setting for most Alaska Natives and will not produce satisfactory results because formality discourages participation. Several informants mentioned that the best way to be effective when working with Alaska Natives is to make the process informal and socially engaging.

Differences in communication styles, which are linked to culture, are one of the main factors preventing effective communication between Alaska Natives and agencies (Gallagher 1988; Morford et al. 2003; Schaubert 2002). Failure to understand the communication styles of Alaska Natives or unawareness of the role of style in generating stereotypes may lead to misunderstandings, perceived disrespect or insult, and frustration for all parties (Schaubert 2002; Scollon 1980).

It can also lead to Alaska Natives not getting a chance to speak when in the company of non-Natives. An informant, speaking of a Native coworker, said, “You can tell sometimes he is about ready to say something, but he waits so long that by that time, someone else is talking.”

The communication style of Alaska Natives is interspersed with long silences, which can be uncomfortable for non-Natives who are “afraid to give open awkward time.” Alaska Natives tend to use an indirect manner of speaking, using stories or metaphors to imply a point without explicitly stating it. Non-native agency employees tend to do the opposite when speaking, spending less time. An informant explained the need for agency workers to adapt to such differences: “... At meetings, we try to put too much discussion into a short time, and when you cover too much ground, you don’t get participation because you don’t allow for engagements on their terms; you need to let them finish and get it off their chests.”

To effectively communicate, both parties need to know who to talk with and have ready access to authorities and decision makers. An informant explained, “A general rule that is important is accessibility; they need to know that the refuge manager is going to be glad to see them anytime they come to visit. They need to feel comfortable. They need to know that if there is an issue, they can talk about it.” Likewise, agency employees need to know whether they should be talking to elders, tribal council leaders, or Native corporation leaders and how to obtain access to Native leaders.

Western society tends to pride itself on its basis in democracy, which follows a “majority rules” philosophy, and thus, utilizes representation as a manner of governance and decision making. The use of a small number of Alaska Native representatives to make decisions for larger groups may present an unfamiliar practice not traditionally used by some Alaska Native peoples, who, unlike many individualistic westerners, are generally cooperative and community oriented, operating on consensus. Having one person selected to speak for everyone can present a problem for some Alaska Native groups, as described by an informant:

[Alaska Natives and the government] commune back and forth through a representative form of communication; the rural advisory council has members that meet, they talk with [Subsistence] Board members in the government, and they talk with village members. The village communities don't talk with the Board, and the Board's ... technical reviewers don't talk to the villages. ... Functionally, that interface is fractured; at best, disconnected ... dead in some cases. ... Representative organization really doesn't work.

People with different cultural worldviews or organizations with different agendas frame problems in different ways. Many conservation planners and managers view the land from a “national perspective,” whereas many Alaska Natives “look at it as their backyard.” Different viewpoints and ways of knowing

produce different information, which needs to be integrated for successful intercultural communication:

So we [government scientists and managers] keep getting this series of snapshots, whereas Alaska Natives—let's say somebody who goes out and hunts for subsistence or fishes—they may cover a smaller area in their day-to-day activities, but they have the benefit of a longer time scale. Their observations cover more than just a snapshot in time. ... The things that you might learn from a broad scale survey are one part of the story; the thing you might learn from repeated observations over time may be a different part of the story. ... If we could train Alaska Natives in wildlife management and biology, they would be that third person who could see both perspectives and help with the communication between the two.

A complete picture of a particular planning or management issue requires the reconciliation of differing points of view and effective management of interactions between groups (e.g., Natcher, Davis, and Hickey 2005). To achieve this reconciliation, agencies need to work toward capacity building, where members of both parties are trained and acquire skills to understand and effectively communicate diverse cultural perspectives on management issues (Leech, Wiensczyk, and Turner 2009) and create “bi-cultural standards” that bridge worldviews and focus on common ground (Lertzman 2010:120).

Relations

We discuss the main category of relations in the context of barriers and facilitators (Table 2). Barriers are conditions or practices that impede positive relations between parties, including the dimensions of trust, perceptions, attitudes, and differences in culture and lifestyle. Facilitators of positive relations are situations, conditions, and practices that create and maintain trust and positive attitudes.

Lack of trust was repeatedly described in interviews as a barrier to creating and maintaining positive relations between Alaska Native communities and agency employees. Native populations tend to have an historic mistrust of the government, dating back to cases of unfair treatment and outright suppression of Native cultural practices and languages, which continues to create cynicism:

That history leads to barriers on the part of Native outreach, but it also lends to the distrust when a federal agency reaches out, because there's this look of skepticism ... 'Okay what are you looking for?' ... 'How are we going to get screwed this time?'

Distrust prevents cooperation and the free flow of information and can lead to serious misunderstandings. An informant gave an example of a time when, due to lack of trust, the details of a particular planning map were misinterpreted:

There was an effort to look at all the lands within a refuge as to which lands we would be interested in, if people were willing to sell them. Those lands were put in red. The color red became an issue ...because it looked like [the agency] wanted, in the verbiage

... to take over those lands, no matter that the staff and others repeatedly said, 'No, no, no, this is not a hit list; we're not saying that your allotment, in such and such location, is number three on our list; we're going to get your land.' ... Even the color red became an issue, because people are taking it, 'wait a minute: I've lived there. That's my allotment' and that was a hassle to get, for one, and that's probably also where they did a lot of subsistence activities for their family for generations. ... Then they see this list of 'Oh, we'd like that because it's got a lot of whatever habitat.' ... Now, what was behind those two issues is the issue of trust: the trust was not high enough that people are going 'Oh, I know those guys; they're just making up a map, and they need to prioritize if they get money.' The trust was not there.

Some Alaska Natives may hesitate to participate in harvest surveys because they do not trust the government and fear being cited for violating harvest rules or regulations, and they do not expect productive outcomes from projects or surveys. Natives generally fear that any information they share may be used against their interests by the agency (Gallagher 1993). Under these conditions, management agencies do not receive complete and accurate information, which can lead planners to produce ineffective plans and managers to set regulations that fail to reflect true conditions. The end result is that Alaska Natives and others have to deal with regulations or other management decisions that are based on incorrect or incomplete information:

People doing harvest surveys often get false numbers, because people don't want to report taking animals out of season; they're afraid of enforcement. Alaska Natives harvest according to family needs and traditions, and animals are taken at much higher numbers than people know. Current wildlife management systems don't work because the counts are not accurate.

Alaska Natives may often feel that agency planners and managers do not respect, or have a negative and patronizing attitude towards, their cultures, lifestyles, and traditional ways of knowing, which prevents cooperation. Traditional knowledge held by Natives tends to be seen as anecdotal by agency professionals unless it has been independently verified using western science (Ellis 2005; Hensel and Morrow 1998; Natcher, Davis, and Hickey 2005). When western science discredits Native traditional knowledge, feelings of disrespect are perpetuated. In return, agency workers may feel that Alaska Natives disrespect and do not follow their regulations; this may be because Natives do not have confidence in western sources of information, and feel that the agency planners and managers are disconnected from their subsistence lifestyles and do not really comprehend what is happening on the land (Case 1998).

Alaska Natives and western managers and scientists each interpret their observations of the natural world in terms of very different assumptions about reality (Lertzman 2010). These differing environmental worldviews often conflict and can lead to misunderstandings. Alaska Natives believe that humanity and nature are conjoined (Thornton 2001). The environment as a whole, and all

activities conducted within it, including hunting, fishing, and berry picking, have substantial meaning, spiritual and otherwise, within Alaska Native societies (Nelson 1983). Alaska Natives believe that the relationship between animals and people is social, moral, and reciprocal and improper behaviors by humans will cause animals to withhold themselves from being harvested (Hensel and Morrow 1998; Natcher, Davis, and Hickey 2005). The western worldview generally holds that humanity and nature are separate and often is at odds with more holistic Alaska Native perspectives about wildlife. Federal and state agencies put into practice the western scientific perspective when formulating management policies and regulations (Thornton 2001). An informant described, “Hunting has a deeply spiritual meaning for a lot of people; it’s how people live, and so kind of just boiling it all down to a little wire tag that you stick [on the harvested animal], and then a number is very western, very non-Native.”

Informants described how to build relationships with members of Alaska Native communities by making personal connections, being accessible, listening and responding, and doing things to benefit a community: “There is no secret. They call; you call back. They ask; you answer. You listen and respond, and realizing when I travel to these different villages, I’m bringing in what they don’t want” (e.g., regulations). In the culture of Alaska Natives, relationships are not purely business oriented. Successful agency employees build connections with Alaska Natives by sharing information about themselves and their families; what is important is “who you are in context: who’s your family, tribe, region, who do you know.” Friendly relations and personal connections need to be built, in part,

in contexts other than business; doing activities or making visits not related to a specific agency project can greatly increase the quality of relationships (Shearer 2007). Agencies, however, do not have the means to directly reward employees for creating and maintaining personal relationships on the job. Agencies value and maintain business relationships, which can conflict with Alaska Native culture, and employees frequently move from one duty station to another, which discourages continuity and long-term relationships.

Involvement

We discuss the main category of involvement in the context of barriers and facilitators (Table 2). Barriers to Native involvement in land use and conservation planning include real or perceived lack of authority for tribes and Native groups, lack of influence or impact on decision making by Alaska Natives, real or perceived lack of qualifications to be able to participate in meaningful ways, and real or perceived irrelevancy of agency issues and projects. Facilitators are conditions or practices that create roles and opportunities for Alaska Natives to directly participate in agency projects.

There remains dissatisfaction among Alaska Natives regarding their current status and authority. Tribes want government-to-government status, to be on equal footing with the agencies, and to be treated as real partners and co-managers. The fact that Alaska Natives are often merely in an advisory role is detrimental to relationships and negatively impacts communications and involvement. Tribes and other groups that are unhappy with the way they are being treated by federal agencies generally are not willing to cooperate:

Some of the tribes realize that their goal may be to actually end up becoming Indian country in their terminology. And they're saying, 'Well, we're willing to work in this world now until that may happen.' Others just say, 'no, we're not going to talk, because we are a sovereign nation. ... We've lived here for thousands of years, and until we're recognized as a sovereign nation and have authority ... we'll be polite to you, but we're not going to really work with you.' And that makes it difficult on [the agency] because we have to move forward in planning and management. ... We would like their support, but then they're saying, 'Well, we're not giving it until we're recognized fully as a government.'

Despite having legal status, some Alaska Native tribes and other Native groups feel they have little power or influence, resulting in sense of disillusionment and frustration. While Alaska Natives may sit at the table, there is usually no ability to have a real impact: agencies tend to "ask tribes to simply concur with agency decisions" (Shearer 2007:103). This is not a recent development. As informants explained, the Native peoples have a long history of "decisions being forced on them." People on both sides of an issue often view Alaska Native participation as token involvement, intended to satisfy legislative and public demands with little real interest in Native input, opinions, or knowledge:

Native people experience process fatigue: they have spoken up a lot, but their points are continually ignored, so they get tired of it. This disillusionment is very prevalent. The government says that Natives will be involved, but they are just a token part of the process, and their input is usually discounted and excluded.

Indirectly discouraging or directly denying Alaska Natives true involvement reinforces the perception of Native peoples that the government is disrespectful and discredits their traditional knowledge. Natives feel excluded and discouraged, and relationships are further damaged.

Most federal agency jobs in conservation planning and management currently require a western-style, university education, which severely limits the options of anyone without a degree in biology or another specialized discipline. An informant explained, “You have to be a biologist to get promoted in management here; with those kinds of restrictions, people can’t compete for jobs, and they can only go so far.” Alaska Natives tend to view such educational requirements as a lack of agency faith in their systems of traditional knowledge. This situation is also frustrating for agency managers who wish to hire Alaska Natives:

Native and non-Natives from rural communities have local expertise but may not always rate very highly. ... Many of these position descriptions are written ... for [people in] the lower-48 [states], so in many cases, people in local communities don’t have the education ... haven’t attained higher degrees ... They

may have incredible expertise, but again, they just don't rate

highly on a formal, standardized sort of government application.

Rigid educational requirements work to the disadvantage of the agencies, denying them opportunities to form personal and professional connections with individuals in rural villages and access to a large and rich bank of local knowledge.

The relevancy of the issues brought before Alaska Natives is another factor that affects participation. Informants said that *who* participates depends on the issue—if it is important to them, they will come: “Amount of participation is at least partially dependant on the current relevance of the issues being discussed: if it's spring and the issue is fishing, everyone will come; if it's spring and the issue is moose, no one will come.” Agencies can encourage maximum involvement by targeting meetings and public events on issues of greatest importance to the subsistence lifestyle and at times that coincide with the subsistence calendar.

Capacity building through training can be used to increase opportunities for Alaska Native involvement. Informants cited the agency-supported Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP) housed at the University of Alaska as an excellent example of capacity building with Native students. Informants wished that the program was stronger in wildlife management and conservation:

If there were an educational program or initiative like ANSEP ...

to train Alaska Natives to learn about wildlife biology and wildlife management, then you'd actually have more people who would

have a foot in both worlds: they understand the perspective as an Alaska Native, as someone in a village, but they also understand from a wildlife management perspective. If we could maybe bridge that gap, I think that would be very helpful.

Informants discussed another opportunity for Alaska Natives to become more directly involved: the Refuge Information Technician (RIT) program used by wildlife refuges in Alaska as a means to help raise trust, create personal connections, and facilitate effective communication:

We hire ... refuge information technicians, and that is our link with the community. And what success we have had ... because that RIT is in the village, and we pay for them to come out, and ... they go to the meetings, and they go back into the villages. When we go into the village, we work with the RITs ... [as liaisons] to walk around, whether it is knocking on doors or that whole interface.

Individuals working as RITs provide a valuable link to the community by helping agency employees establish contacts and relationships with key leaders and often acting as a bridge between Alaska Natives and the refuges. When a planner or outreach person from the agency is seen working alongside a local resident, an RIT or otherwise, other residents may feel more comfortable asking questions about the work and perhaps getting involved. Establishing local contacts or liaisons is one of the most important factors in creating trust, building relationships, and invoking public participation.

It is paramount that agencies directly and concretely involve Alaska Native leaders in projects whenever possible. An informant advised: [We need to] “have communities become full partners by taking on roles themselves, doing their own surveys, and collecting their own data, so they can ... show changes on the issues important to [the people].” The opportunity to participate in or conduct a survey or sit on a planning team allows for integration into the process by giving Alaska Natives a chance to see for themselves where the data and numbers originate. Participants develop a sense of ownership, commitment, and satisfaction and have more control, becoming full partners, both personally and professionally. After a long period of things being done *to* the people, rather than *with* the people, any chance to place control in the hands of village residents is beneficial:

I think in dealing with rural people and rural communities, the more you can give them a sense of rural control, that they are in charge ... their village has the rules ... the more they can rely on the government not as a source of fear or ... capricious action, but as a partner, someone who’s accessible ... someone with a human face and a personality; then, you can get things done.

Logistics

The fourth main category, logistics, includes tangible dimensions such as schedules and flexibility, volume, location, and funding (Table 2). Flexibility in scheduling and the timing of public meetings and other events are important considerations for those working in rural Alaska. Volume refers to the observation

that agencies tend to schedule a large amount of meetings in a relatively short period, covering many issues that are framed from an agency perspective and unfamiliar or irrelevant to most rural residents. Location indicates the nearly ubiquitous difficulties presented by physical distance in Alaska. Funding relates to the financial side of public participation, especially barriers that are monetary in nature. Logistical issues differ in relationship to the other main categories. Logistics affect, but are largely unaffected by, communications, relations, and involvement (Figure 2).

Similar to the other main categories, logistics is subsumed by issues of cultural appropriateness and sensitivity. Alaska Native culture should be taken into account when scheduling meetings and other activities for public participation. Short, hurried, and to the point visits by agency employees are viewed negatively by the people in Native villages because these send a message of business only: “They are in and out, with no time on the ground and not enough interactions.” The decision-making styles of Alaska Natives often differ in pace from that of non-Natives:

Natives need to mull over issues. A lot of federal and state representatives who go out come back disappointed because they do not get what they want right away. [Agency people] are in a society that is used to meeting and making decisions and moving on—that’s not the same in Alaska Native society.

Short visits with full schedules do not allow time for “mulling over,” resulting in dissatisfaction for both parties. Longer visits enable visitors to get a more accurate

sense of life in rural Alaska and allow for flexibility, which is important in communities that run on “village time” and generally do not follow rigid schedules. The subsistence lifestyle requires people to be opportunistic and take chances as they arise, meaning that plans for meetings and discussions may have to be changed on short notice.

Location is more problematic in Alaska than in most other places. Circumstances are further exacerbated by sheer geographical distance, remoteness, and the absence of roads in many parts of the state. Attempting to establish and maintain relationships by telephone, and over hundreds of miles, offers countless opportunities for misinterpretations, miscommunications, and mistrust. Rural Alaskans often do not have the time or the financial means to travel outside of their communities to attend agency meetings, and it is often seen as cost prohibitive by agencies to hold events in rural villages.

Funding can influence Alaska Native participation in planning processes. Lack of funding often closes various lines of communication and reduces opportunities to interact face-to-face. Reducing the number of personal interactions is detrimental to relationships, and a lack of funding may contribute to the perception that an issue is not important to the government. An informant described, “It doesn’t show much interest in making a successful program, if there’s no funding. The government wants so much, and yet we don’t have the resources to get there.” Funding determines what events and activities are held, where they are held, and who is able to participate. Other logistical dimensions are heavily influenced by the financial side of affairs: visits to villages are short

and schedules packed to save money, and only a few Alaska Native representatives are available to deal with a myriad of issues because there is not money to hire more.

Propositions and Implications

Drawing on insights from the analysis of the interviews we formulated six working propositions, which serve as broad statements of our findings. With these, we show connections between the emergent themes and categories and open a discussion of implications and recommendations in a variety of areas.

Proposition 1: The use of methods and practices that are not culturally appropriate substantially impedes Alaska Native participation in agency planning processes.

Although work with Native groups has improved over the years, federal agencies are often guilty of conducting public participation in Alaska in the same manner as they do in the rest of the country. These formats and techniques, while suited for the western-based society of the lower-48 states, are ineffective when transplanted into a culture with radically different values, norms, and worldviews. The use of formats that are familiar to Native audiences would be more comfortable for them and likely draw more participation.

This has implications for how federal agencies and their employees approach their work with Alaska Natives and what practices they use, especially in the collection and sharing of information. For example, when collecting input for public scoping or data for surveys, in addition to a public meeting, the lead agency employees should also visit and talk with people in their homes. Placing

the emphasis on building personal relationships *before* dealing with business is another way in which agency employees could conduct themselves differently to be more culturally appropriate. Planners and outreach specialists need to first learn what formats are familiar to the audience, and then learn how to adopt these formats in their work. In short, the agencies need to figure out how to integrate non-western methods into a western process, and/or adopt Alaska Native processes of engagement on a more regular basis.

This has implications for the role of Alaska Natives in organizing outreach and other public participation efforts: if Alaska Natives, who understand the target audiences, are allowed to help plan and direct activities, these efforts would be more appropriate and attuned to those audiences. Agencies must involve more Alaska Natives in the early pre-planning phases where work plans and public involvement plans for projects are developed to steer projects in the right direction from the outset. Agency planners would also better account for differences in communication styles by allowing Alaska Natives to decide conditions of Native participation on their own terms.

Proposition 2: Greater opportunity for Alaska Native involvement and participation strengthens relations and increases ownership.

Alaska Natives must be given more ownership in the planning process. People who are personally involved in a plan or a project are more invested in its success and thus more likely to support and assist with various endeavors. When Alaska Natives feel that they are being listened to and actively involved, they will have a vested interest in the success of projects because it reflects, in part, their

own success. This sense of a common goal can increase trust and willingness to cooperate, which will result in better and more fully rounded participation.

Agency employees should increase the number of relevant opportunities available for Alaska Natives. Contracting and hiring for work in rural villages would boost trust and improve relationships between the parties, while also enhancing the economy of rural Alaska (Shearer 2007). Hiring more Alaska Natives would also allow the agencies to directly build more checks into their operations against projects or ideas that are unsuitable for or irrelevant to life in rural Alaska.

The agencies in Alaska should have more roles and jobs available for Alaska Natives without a western-oriented education in the biological sciences. Not all of these have to be formal employment opportunities: outreach efforts could include more specific opportunities aimed at public involvement and information sharing. For example, volunteers from Native communities could be asked to teach school children about local patterns of bird migration in relation to the subsistence calendar, or agency biologists could take village leaders along in the airplane while conducting wildlife population surveys.

In particular, recruiting and hiring more Native-agency liaisons (e.g., RIT positions) would directly improve attitudes, build positive relations, and open the door for meaningful involvement and participation. Unfortunately, the RIT program is limited by funding; for example, there is only one RIT working with nine villages in the Yukon Flats refuge. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska should direct more resources toward funding and maintaining its RIT

program, which has proven to be successful despite its limitations. New programs should be created by the other federal agencies that provide Alaska Natives with direct roles and responsibilities in land use and conservation planning.

Proposition 3: Low levels of trust between Alaska Native groups and the government impede cooperation and success.

Undeniably, there is a long history of distrust and bad relations between the U.S. government and Alaska Natives. Many Alaska Natives hold a certain skepticism regarding the intentions of the agencies and are hesitant to participate in projects or contribute information to surveys. Distrust and lack of participation by Alaska Natives may lead to one-sided or incomplete conservation plans and study reports that do not take into account factors that are important for Native subsistence. Gaps in agency knowledge and unreliable information can, in part, lead to ineffective decision making by agency managers, perpetuating Native distrust of the government.

In their roles as stewards of public lands and resources, agencies must prioritize building trust with Natives as a first step in doing any type of cooperation or coordination activities with communities (Davenport et al. 2007; Lachapelle, McCool, and Patterson 2003). The actions of individual agency employees who directly interact with Alaska Natives have great potential to either increase or decrease trust (Lijebald, Borrie, and Watson 2009). It is imperative for agency workers to always keep promises and do everything they say they are going to do, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. To build trust, it becomes essential for agency planners, if something cannot be done as planned, to

carefully and consistently explain to the people why this is the case and make specific efforts to keep people informed as changes arise.

Trust is established through building personal relationships, which requires time. One important implication is the need for continuity in an agency's *personal presence* in a community or region. A strong personal presence can only be established if employees stay at their duty stations in their same or similar roles for long periods. When long-term employees do need to move on in an agency, substantial overlap between them and their replacements should be required for training and face-to-face introductions and interactions with established community contacts. This would help to both initiate new relationships and carry over some existing trust from previously established relationships.

Agencies should pay greater attention to levels of public trust and follow up on their efforts to build it with community residents. Agencies should work with their community counterparts and research associates to monitor levels of public trust through time as an indicator of their success in keeping Alaska Natives connected to the public lands and subsistence resources on which they rely (Lijebald, Borrie, and Watson 2009).

Proposition 4: Agency employees who are culturally sensitive and effectively build personal relationships are more successful and efficient.

Every aspect of public participation happens in the context of culture (Figure 2). Just as practices and methods used with the public need to be culturally suitable, the employees who conduct them need to be suitable. A culturally competent individual is able to conduct his or her professional work in

a way that is congruent with the behaviors and expectations that members of Alaska Native cultural groups recognize as appropriate among themselves (Dahl 1993:150; Shearer 2007; Simcox and Hodgson 1993). Increased cultural awareness on the part of agency employees would reduce misunderstandings, convey genuine interest in and respect for Native cultures, and show commitment to both projects and relationships.

We recommend that agency workers make sure, upon their arrival in a village or community in rural Alaska, to explain basic things, including who they are and what are they doing there. To make lasting connections, establish trust, and increase the probability of success, agency employees must be willing to put forth the necessary time and effort (Davenport et al. 2007). This includes making informal visits to communities in addition to business-oriented trips. We recommend doing things that are purely for the benefit of the community such as speaking at schools, hosting or supporting science and culture camps, or helping with youth activities to keep relationships and trust on a positive level.

Workers who are trained in intercultural communication and Alaska Native history, cultures, and languages will prove most successful (Shearer 2007). Federal agencies in Alaska should recruit and hire employees with demonstrated interest in or skills and experience with cultures different from their own, or those who have completed coursework in cultural awareness and sensitivity, for outreach positions (Leech, Wiensczyk, and Turner 2009). Agencies should provide more training opportunities that are focused on cultural competence to

help agency employees acquire the skills needed for effective public participation with Alaska Natives.

Proposition 5: Lack of understanding of issues and proposed projects among the Native/rural populations prevents participation.

Agencies often do not provide to Alaska Native communities adequate explanations of the reasons behind project proposals and planning decisions. This results in a lack of understanding on the part of Alaska Natives, and thus, a lack of participation. Like many other people, Alaska Natives are hesitant to publicly comment or participate in a process to resolve a public issue if they do not really understand the issue at hand. Better explanations and more effort on the part of the agencies to inform Native peoples about the intent and implications of federal proposals would lead to greater comprehension and an increase in both the quality and quantity of participation.

Agency planners should conduct both listening and information sessions with Alaska Native groups and communities early in the planning process and often enough to keep themselves and residents updated on issues, changes, and progress. Agency workers should allow community members the chance to give input in the form of spoken or written opinions and comments to facilitate a two-way flow of information. Agency planners should use clear explanations that are free of technical or bureaucratic jargon to increase audience comprehension.

Proposition 6: Logistical issues, including the location and scheduling of meetings, greatly affect participation.

Agency employees should carefully plan the logistics of public participation to make sure they get the mechanics correct at the earliest stages of a project. For example, who attends a meeting or other event is highly dependant on location. Many rural Alaskans, Native or otherwise, lack the financial means or the free time to travel to urban areas or regional hubs for agency-sponsored planning meetings. The agencies should hold more meetings and events in rural villages and shoulder more of the cost burden for Natives who travel outside of their communities (Shearer 2007). This would increase the quantity and variety of rural participants and the quality of their input—more meaningful consultation usually occurs on Native turf (Shearer 2007).

Another implication concerns the flexibility of meeting schedules. For maximum participation, the timing of meetings on certain issues needs to correspond to the lifestyle of Alaska Natives. Agency planners need to be attuned to the subsistence calendar because rural people are busy, and they are likely to only attend meetings about issues that are immediately relevant. To more effectively address this reality, agency planners and managers should ask Alaska Natives to help schedule village visits and meetings so these can be timely and relevant. Agency planners and managers should be highly flexible in scheduling public participation activities.

Of equal concern is the hurried manner in which agency employees tend to operate. The short time commitment demonstrated by agency workers tends to

be perceived by Natives as a lack of dedication or as an interest in getting the job done and getting home. Village or tribal councils do not operate in a hurried manner and prefer to make decisions within their traditional cultural frameworks, which usually allow for longer deliberations. Agency planners should spend more time with Alaska Natives in their communities to show real commitment and dedication to their projects, the issues, and the people.

Conclusion

We used a broad lens to examine Alaska Native participation in land use and conservation planning processes used by federal agencies. Working with a methodology based in grounded theory, we interviewed agency employees, both Alaska Natives and non-Natives, and other key informants who work in natural resource management and conservation planning in Alaska.

Communications, relations, and involvement are interconnected and cyclical in nature (Figure 2), with a failure in any one area amounting to a step backwards in the entire process of public participation. The ease and success of communications between Alaska Natives and agency employees depends, in part, on the relations between the parties. If there are negative feelings and distrust, even the most effective methods of communication will have limited success, whereas positive personal relations can create openness, honesty, and effectiveness in most communications between agency planners and Alaska Natives. Providing ample opportunity for involvement on the part of Alaska Natives improves relations, and improved relationships, in turn, allow for improved communications that are based on trust. In theory, this leads to more

meaningful participation in land use and conservation planning for Alaska Natives and the agencies.

The main ingredient in this recipe of meaningful public participation is respect for and understanding of Alaska Native culture on the part of agency planners and managers. In cases where agencies fail to successfully engage Alaska Natives in meaningful participation, we conclude that the failure can be attributed, in large part, to a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity as well as an inadequate amount of flexibility in the spirit and methods used by the agencies. Whether it be communicating in informal, one-to-one settings; establishing relationships that are personal as well as professional; or discussing issues at times when they are immediately relevant, practices that are more suited to the culture and society of Alaska Natives will be more likely to produce improved communications, better relations, increased involvement, and meaningful participation.

Relationships between groups with different cultural backgrounds and agendas are usually tenuous at first, vulnerable to faux pas or misunderstandings caused by cultural ignorance. Alaska Natives and federal land management agencies are no different. Cultural understanding, on both sides, is the underlying and overarching theme that pervades all aspects of our study findings. Increasing cultural knowledge and sensitivity among agency employees will substantially improve communications and interactions with Alaska Natives. We fully expect that satisfying the cultural requirements of public participation will have wide-reaching and positive repercussions.

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the people who agreed to be interviewed for this study and Mr. John Brewer for developing Figure 1. This study was supported by the National Wildlife Refuge System in Alaska and the Student Conservation Association.

Disclaimer

The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Table 1. Unordered Themes Initially Identified in Open Coding.

Emergent Themes
Presentation of information, including methods, diction, format of information
Content, including relevance of information and examples
Explanations and clarity of agency regulations, or lack thereof
Publicizing meetings and events and use of media formats
Flow of information: follow up and feedback
Interpretation of information by Natives
Styles, including rhythm, forms of questions and replies, eye contact, directness
Meeting formats
Ways of gathering information
Native access to the right people (i.e., key decision makers)
Communication interface: using representatives to speak for a larger group
Communication barriers and other difficulties
Negative/positive attitudes, disrespect/respect, distrust/trust
Differing worldviews, understandings of nature, and resulting lifestyles
Native perceptions of the government/agency workers perceptions of Natives
Building relationships
Roles, opportunities, or jobs available for locals, or lack thereof
Professional qualifications required by the government (e.g., formal education)
Local contacts and liaisons (e.g., Refuge Information Technicians)
Power/control at the local level
Stages and levels of Native involvement
Relevancy of issues
Sense of control, ability to make choices and decisions, or lack thereof
Tribal status and authority
Invoking participation
Impact/influence of Native input
Scheduling and flexibility
Location
Volume/amount of meetings and other time commitments
Funding

Table 2. Emergent Categories Defined in the Second Phase of Analysis.

Emergent Categories/ Subcategories	Dimensions	Definitions
<i>Communications</i>		
Information	Presentation	The way information is presented, including diction; use of examples; format of proof, evidence, data, or explanations.
	Methods	How information is gathered, practices and formats, including media formats used for outreach, spreading messages, or publicizing meetings or other events.
	Content	What communications contain or fail to contain, often in terms of reasons and explanations; is information useful or confusing?
	Interpretation	How the Alaska Natives understand statements, plans, or data in terms of its relevance to their lifestyles.
	Flow	Creating and maintaining a satisfactory flow of information (i.e., two-way flow).
Interactions	Format	How interactions are staged, including the setting, and formality.
	Style	Cultural or societal differences in styles or ways of communicating such as pauses when speaking, eye contact, directness, use of metaphors/stories.
	Access	Connections between parties; clearly knowing who are the key players and access to authority figures/decision makers.
	Representative	Using Native representatives to interact with agencies on behalf of larger groups (i.e., democratic principles).
	Coordination	Capacity to reconcile differing viewpoints; working to get people together and to organize and combine information from different sources.
<i>Relations</i>		
Barriers/Facilitators	Trust	Levels of trust or distrust between Alaska Natives and the agencies.
	Perceptions	How the parties view each other; mostly how Natives view the agencies in terms of goals, productivity, agenda, and purpose.
	Attitudes	How parties evaluate and act toward each other, including respect for and confidence in the different sources of information used by each; respect for differing lifestyles and cultures, or lack thereof.
	Worldview	Differences in culture, lifestyle, society, etc. that lead to different constructs and

Emergent Categories/ Subcategories	Dimensions	Definitions
		meanings of nature and humanity, views of reality, which can cause misunderstandings.
	Building relations	Methods and tactics for effectively establishing and maintaining relationships with Alaska Natives; informants' personal methods for doing this and views of success, or lack thereof.
<i>Involvement</i>		
Barriers/Facilitators	Authority	Confusing and wide distribution of agency authority; lack of authority, especially government-to-government status, for Alaska Native groups and tribes.
	Impact	The ability or lack thereof for natives to have any level of influence.
	Qualifications	The prevalence of requirements, educational and others, which are western-based and greatly limit formal opportunities for Alaska Natives to work in agencies.
	Issue Relevancy	Importance, relevance, and timeliness, especially immediate relevance, of the issues at hand for Alaska Natives and the subsistence lifestyle.
	Liaisons	Having local contacts and liaisons in rural Native communities, specifically Refuge Information Technicians (i.e., locally hired Native liaisons).
	Roles/Opportunities	The availability of meaningful jobs, roles, or opportunities for Natives to directly participate in and contribute to agency planning and management.
<i>Logistics</i>		
	Schedules/Flexibility	When meetings and events are scheduled; especially in relation to the subsistence calendar; the general lack of flexibility in scheduled trips and programs.
	Volume	The amount of meetings/planning efforts and other time commitments that happen (often simultaneously) and the large number of issues that exist.
	Location	Where meetings and events take place.
	Funding	The amount of monetary support given to certain groups, events, plans, or issues.

Figure 1. Land Ownership in Alaska.

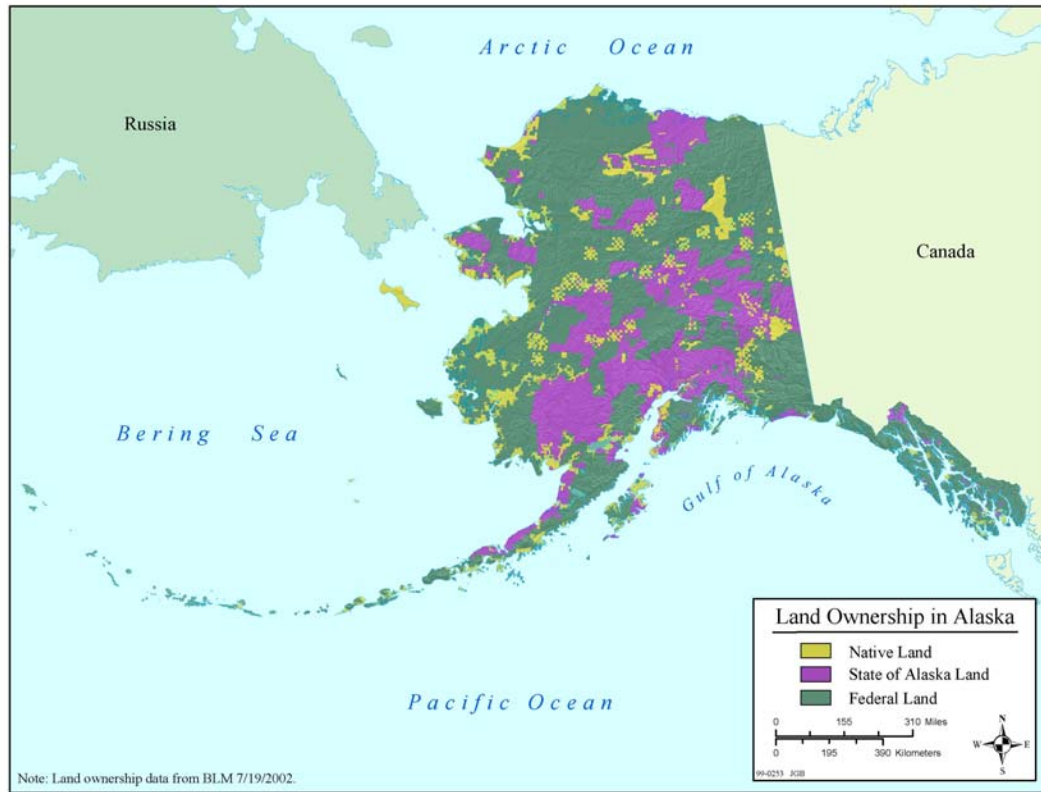
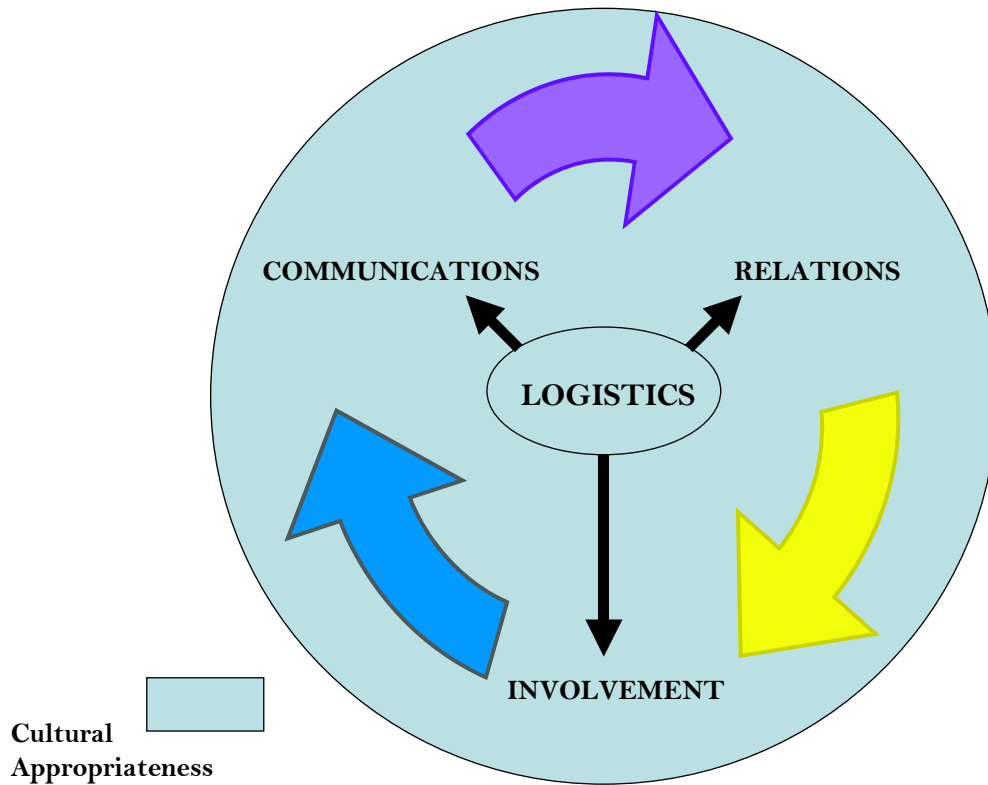


Figure 2. Model of Alaska Native Participation in Conservation Planning.



Notes

¹ Numerous laws direct federal agencies to conduct public participation in planning. A thorough discussion of *participatory planning* or other collaborative decision making processes in conservation and natural resource management is beyond the scope of this paper. For our broad purpose, participatory planning is defined as a social, ethical, and political practice in which individuals or groups, assisted by a set of tools, take part in varying degrees at the overlapping phases of the planning and decision-making cycle to bring forth outcomes that may be congruent with the participants' needs and interests (Hofelli 2002:611).

² Informants included 21 non-Alaska Natives and 10 Alaska Natives. The 31 informants represented government employees with the National Park Service and a variety of departments within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, such as the National Wildlife Refuge System, Office of Subsistence Management, Marine Mammals Management, and Migratory Bird Management. Five informants were employed at the University of Alaska Fairbanks: three as professors, one with the Cooperative Extension Service, and one as an advisor for Rural Student Services and the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP). Twenty-four informants were male and seven were female; an imbalance, but indicative of the gender representation within the vocation of natural resources management and these particular agencies.

³ A key tenant of grounded theory is the idea of emergence, defined as the process by which an analyst discovers patterns and synthesizes divergent elements in data

into new forms such as themes and categories. The concept of emergence has roots in the sociologic perspective of symbolic interaction in which scholars assume that the self and society constantly interact to produce new, or emergent, relationships and meanings. See Cunningham (2006) for a succinct discussion of the philosophical roots and the history of the development of grounded theory.

⁴ Throughout data collection and analysis, the questions, probes, themes, and categories were allowed to change and evolve in an iterative manner as we compared emergent elements discovered in earlier interviews to data emerging in subsequent interviews. As more data became available, more interrelations became evident among themes and categories, which allowed the refinement of an emergent and grounded theory based on new information, and thus, integration of all identifiable factors and aspects of the issue.