National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve

Subsistence: Traditional Ways of Living

Chris Allan, NPS

A fish-wheel at a Yukon River homestead is stored on land until the beginning of another salmon fishing season. Wheels much like this one have been used by local people since the early 1900s. Woven weirs and gill nets have been used for centuries.

If you are a subsistence person, you have to utilize what is available around you . . . Subsistence means your ability to survive in this harsh climate with what you've got.

—Isaac Juneby, 2010
Han elder from Eagle Village

Today, as in the past, many Alaskans live off the land, relying on fish, wildlife and other wild resources. Alaska's natural abundance forms the backbone of life and economy for many people in the state, and indigenous people in Alaska have used these subsistence resources for food, shelter, clothing, transportation, handicrafts and trade for thousands of years. Subsistence, and all it entails, is critical to sustaining the physical and spiritual culture of Alaska Native peoples and to making life on the land possible for many of Alaska's rural residents.

First Alaskans

When Europeans first visited Alaska's shores, all the people they met were engaged in subsistence lifeways. As the population grew through the territorial days, many new and conflicting demands were placed on Alaska's natural and cultural resources. Development of various kinds, like the harvest of inland furbearers, commercial fisheries, mining operations, agriculture, the development of military bases, and the establishment of cities and towns impacted local resources and subsistence activities. By the time Alaska gained statehood in 1959, subsistence patterns in some of Alaska's more populated areas were greatly diminished.

In the years that followed statehood, the pace of change accelerated and development abounded in Alaska's remote areas. In response, rural residents began to organize, and before long they petitioned government officials in hopes of retaining some protection for their land base and their subsistence way of life. In deliberations leading to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, the U.S. Congress acknowledged the importance of subsistence hunting and fishing to Alaska Natives but provided no specific protection on federal public lands.

Subsistence legislation

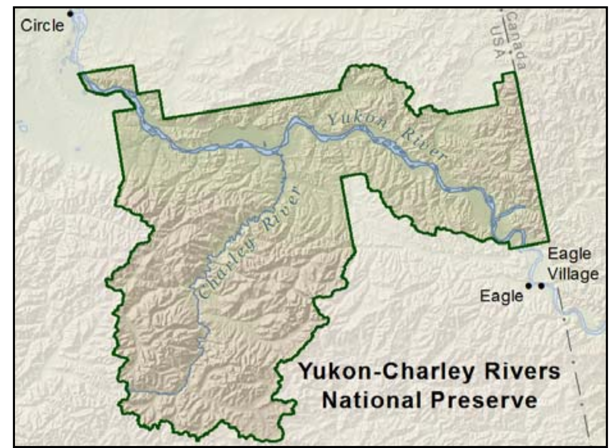
In 1980, Congress formally recognized the social and cultural importance of protecting subsistence for both Native and non-Native rural residents when it passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). This legislation created millions of acres of new national park and national preserve lands in Alaska and helped to preserve subsistence use and a unique connection to the land fostered by tradition and lifelong experience. The new law defined subsistence as:

> *Customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild, renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools or transportation; for the making and selling of handicraft articles out of non-edible by-products of fish and wildlife resources taken for personal or family consumption; for barter, or sharing for personal or family consumption; and for customary trade.*

With the passage of ANILCA, the American people made a promise: to 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. In this way, the landmark law that created many of Alaska's national park units confirms the strong connection between local residents and the land.

Preserving traditions

In Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve subsistence users, sport hunters, and fishers coexist. Local residents from Eagle, Eagle Village, Central, and Circle, as well as those living on remote homesteads, enter the Preserve to hunt moose and caribou; to trap lynx, marten and wolf; and to catch salmon and other northern fish species. Visitors to the Preserve will likely see floating fish wheels near the river's edge and local residents boating to their favorite hunting areas. Living so far from major population centers makes these seasonal harvests important not only to put food on the table but also as a means of preserving a traditional way of life that dates back hundreds and thousands of years.



An Athabascan family from Circle City, 1900.

For more information

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Clockwise: Sled dogs greeting visitors; salmon processing; peppers growing in a greenhouse; Chinook salmon drying in a smokehouse; a log cache at a historic cabin on the Yukon River. Courtesy of Marcy Okada, Chris Allan, Chris Houlette, and National Park Service.