



Subsistence

Denali National Park and Preserve
Alaska

National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

A Vital Connection to the Land

"We live with this world in a very special way. It means living with the land, with the animals and with the birds and fish as though they were your brothers and sisters. It means saying the land is an old friend, an old friend that your father knew and your grandfather knew...indeed, a friend that your people have always known."

- Richard Nerysoo, Native Elder

Allen Prier Photo

Near the geographic center of Alaska rises Denali, or the "High One," as neighboring Athabaskans call it. Denali National Park and Preserve, renowned today for its scenic beauty and wildlife, has been the homeland of Alaska Natives for countless generations. Several Athabaskan cultural groups have depended on resources in this area for food, shelter, clothing, transportation, handicrafts and trade for thousands of years. In more recent times,

other non-Native rural residents have adopted this traditional subsistence way of life.

As Alaska's population grew after statehood, new and conflicting demands were made on the state's natural resources and landscapes. Resource allocations between the state, federal and private interests eventually led to the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980,

which set aside approximately 100 million acres of Alaska for enduring protection. As part of this landmark legislation, four million acres were added to the former Mt. McKinley National Park and the area renamed Denali National Park and Preserve.

Unique to this legislation is recognition of the importance of the connection between people and the land. Within the park and preserve additions the

opportunity for continued traditional subsistence uses by local rural residents is allowed. For many rural residents these natural resources ensure more than survival; they sustain a traditional way of life. Athabaskan people and their ancestors, bound to a strict code of respect toward nature, have been the land's stewards and caretakers. Much of Denali's legacy exists today largely because they have nurtured it so well.



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Chief Deaphon (tallest figure and Telida Native) and some of his tribe of 50 Athabaskans, March 10, 1919.

A Rich Past

"People made a living hunting, always moving."

- Robert and Elsie Titus, from Minto

From the earliest times humans have been seasonally attracted to Denali's remote and elevated country because of the concentrations of wildlife and resources near the Alaska Range. Archeological sites in and adjacent to the park and preserve document Native occupation and use for as long as 11,000 years. Through succeeding generations, a family of peoples evolved who would be culturally and linguistically identified as Athabaskan.

Five Athabaskan language groups have traditional use territories surrounding and extending into Denali National Park and Preserve. To the east are the Ahtna, to the south are the Dena'ina, to the west the Upper Kuskokwim, Koyukon to the north and Lower Tanana to the northeast.

Athabaskans have adapted to this country by utilizing extremely flexible lifestyles. The seasonal availability of certain resources and geographical abundance of resources in some regions and not in others made it necessary for people to travel long distances and range over large territories in their yearly subsistence cycle.

They formed smaller or larger bands of people as circumstances demanded. They hunted in the lowlands hills, drainages and mountains of the Alaska Range for caribou, sheep, moose, bear and other small animals. They preserved berries, gathered edible plants and harvested fish. As winter approached they moved to lower river valleys, which provided better protection from severe weather.

The rugged, strenuous life made Athabaskans strong. Their total dependence on the land and its resources gave them a powerful bond to it that was both physical and spiritual.



Julie Collins Photo

Miki Collins unloading her sled after running her dog team on their trapline, Lake Minchumina 1992.

A Lasting Legacy

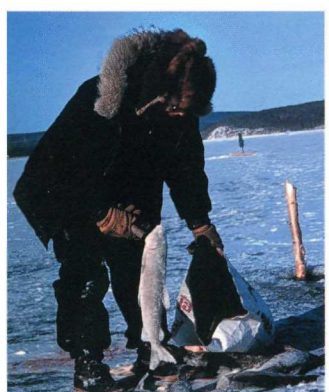
"We see land as much, much more than others see it. Land is life. Without our land, and the way of life it has always provided, we can no longer exist as people. If the relationship is destroyed, we too are destroyed."

- Richard Nerysoo, Native Elder

Traditionally, Athabaskans are taught respect for all living things, taking only what is needed and sharing with family and friends. As time passed Athabaskans developed a more sedentary lifestyle, and villages that were once only seasonally occupied became permanent places of residence. During the 20th century many non-Native people moved into the area around Denali and adopted the subsistence pattern of harvest from the land. While subsistence use today is an outgrowth of Native cultural use, Congress clearly understood the vital connection between subsistence users and the land regardless of race. Provisions within the Alaska National

Interest Land Conservation Act provided for the opportunity to continue customary and traditional subsistence use by local rural residents. Today the villages of Cantwell, Lake Minchumina, Nikolai and Telida are recognized as subsistence use communities for Denali. Other families with traditional use patterns within Denali, but who reside in other villages are also recognized as subsistence users.

Changing economic and social opportunities in some communities have influenced the level of use and dependence on subsistence resources. Still many subsistence users depend upon this land for nearly every aspect of their lives. Each summer and fall they plant gardens, fish, harvest moose or caribou, and gather berries. During winter months they travel by dog team, snowmachine, skis and snowshoes. They catch wild fur animals for income, meat, and clothing to ward off severe cold. The land provides wood for firewood, drying racks and cabin logs, as well as for making sleds and snowshoes. It also provides sod and mosses for insulation, and bark for baskets, dyes and handicrafts.



Julie Collins Photo

Fish are harvested all year long.



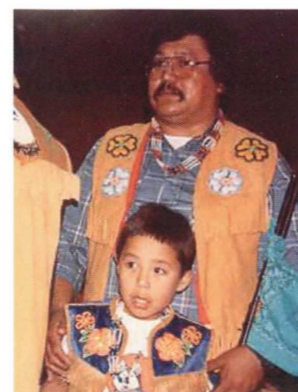
Paul Starr Photo

Paul Starr skins a beaver so its fur can be made into hats and gloves.



Julie Collins Photo

Miki Collins uses moss as chinking between logs on her subsistence trapline cabin.



Paul Starr Photo

Traditional moose skin clothing.



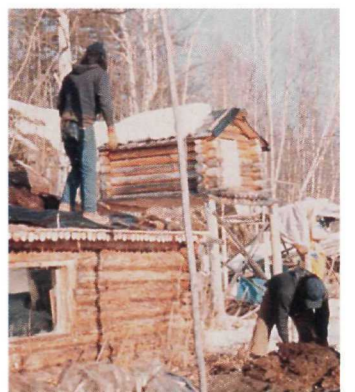
Tom Walker Photo

Moose provides a major source of food for our local subsistence users.



Julie Collins Photo

Berries make juice, jam, and syrup.



Paul Starr Photo

Resodding a cabin roof on Birch Creek.

Subsistence: Traditions Continue

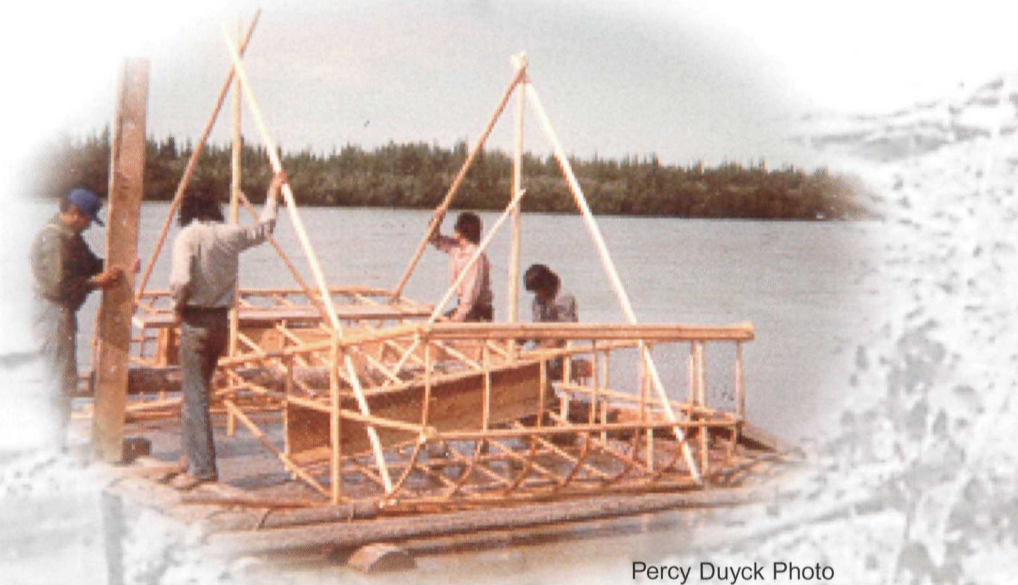
“Subsistence is a way that Native peoples of Alaska have preserved their cultures. This way of life is not confined to the land. It stretches out to the sky and...the waters and rivers. The creatures of the earth give themselves to the people, who in turn share with family and friends, shaping relationships that celebrate life.”



Whitefish drying in the winter.

NPS Photo

- Helga Eakon, Inupiaq Eskimo, and Subsistence Interagency/Policy Coordinator



Percy Duyck Photo

Percy Duyck (above) and his family construct a fish wheel for harvesting fish on the Tanana River. Summer fish camp on the river involves the entire family.



Julie Collins Photo

Collecting berries is an important summer and fall activity for subsistence families.

“Nobody likes regulations – even I don’t. But we need them. We’ve got to protect what we’ve got here. If you let this land get completely run over, there wouldn’t be room for man or beast.”

- Percy Duyck, Denali Subsistence Resource Commissions, from Nenana.

The Denali Subsistence Resource Commission has been established to provide meaningful participation and involvement of local users in planning and management decisions affecting subsistence.



Julie Collins Photo

In the winter some subsistence families still run dog teams for transportation and access to traplines.

Background Photo: Andrew drying fish near Lake Minchumina in the early 1900s. Copyright University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Rasmuson Library #69-92-584, Stephen Foster Collection