

Subsistence in Alaska: An Enduring Way of Life

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Alaska Region



Imagine you live in a place where you travel by river instead of roads; where the forest, ocean, river, tundra, and lagoon is your grocery store; and where your home is in the same “neighborhood” as where your ancestors have lived for thousands of years. That’s what subsistence in Alaska is like, and what the National Park Service strives to protect in Alaska’s national parks and preserves.

“Subsistence is not a sentimental activity. It nurtures our soul and our bodies. If we can’t have [wild, traditional] food, it affects us psychologically and physically. We need to do it every season, every year. Our goal is not to deplete the very stock that nurtures our children and covers our boats.”

—John Waghiyi, Bering Straits Elders Conference, Nome, Alaska

Alaska’s natural abundance forms the backbone of life and economy for many people here. Today, as in the past, many Alaskans rely on fish, wildlife, and other wild resources for food, shelter, clothing, and income (for example, from the sale of handicrafts). Harvesting and processing of wild foods is critical to the culture of Alaska Natives as well as way of life for many non-Native people. The relative amounts and combination of different foods depend on the community, the culture, and the location. Wild food is vital to the everyday survival of many rural Alaskans. Lessons taught through the harvesting of wild foods sustains a traditional way of life and generations of accumulated knowledge. In Alaska’s parks, preserves, and monuments we maintain natural and healthy wildlife populations and habitats so that traditional harvest practices can continue.

[Subsistence uses are the] 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.

—definition of subsistence uses, Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (PL 96-487), Section 803

“Don’t kill it for nothing. It has spirit and if you disrespect it, your luck will change. If you need it to survive, you will not see it, or it will get away.”

—Pauline Hobson, Nondalton, Alaska

Traditional Values

At the heart of subsistence practices is a set of values passed down through generations about how to live off the land. Each culture provides values and ways to express them, but there are a number of sensibilities related to subsistence that Alaska Natives, and many non-Native people, have in common.

Self-sufficiency and sustainability. Stewardship of wild resources so that they can be accessed by future generations is a foundational value of subsistence. In remote areas of Alaska, where the supply of store-bought foods can be expensive and unreliable, access to wild foods helps provide food and self-reliance for local people.

Respect. All living things are to be respected. The mistreatment or waste of an animal is offensive, and in many cultural traditions is associated with the belief that a person who is disrespectful will have bad luck as a hunter and experience difficulty harvesting animals in the future. When an animal is harvested, the whole animal is used; waste is disrespectful to both the animal and the people who depend on it.

Sharing. Caring for others by providing for the family and community are widely shared values. Harvested wild foods are shared with elders and households without hunters throughout the community. There are cultural standards and traditions associated with harvesting and sharing wild foods. Family members who have moved to urban areas are often sent wild foods as a way to maintain cultural connections and familial ties.



Connection to place and culture. Harvesting and processing wild foods is a cultural cornerstone; it strengthens ties between people and the land and is intertwined with cultural practices and traditional skills. Nearly everyone in a community participates in harvesting and processing wild foods. Some activities, such as hunting, are more limited in participation; a few skilled hunters may share their harvest with the rest of the community. Other community members engage in fishing or gathering berries. The intergenerational interactions of working together to find, process, share, and store food keeps traditions and culture vibrant.

“For our children and their children, we know how important it is to feed from our land... Our foods define who we are, connect us to the land, and keep our culture alive.”

—Julia Jones Anausuk Stalker, Kotzebue, Alaska

Connection to the Land

People who rely on wild foods are keenly aware of how much they must harvest to feed their families over the year. They know where to find the plants and animals they need. They know the habits of the animals they hunt, how to be successful, and how to process an animal to make the most use of it. This information is rooted in place, passed down through instructions from elders, and honed through experience and observation.

People who rely on the land see themselves as part of the ecosystem; people are interdependent with their environment. Seasonal cycles of hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering remain a vital part of evolving lifeways and an unbroken link to the past for many Alaskan people. Many of the activities that connected people and the land in the past are the same today, such as moose hunting near Denali and fishing along the coast and rivers. As the world has changed, people have adapted. Subsistence hunters use new technology, participate in the management of fish and wildlife, and use western science in addition to traditional knowledge and practices.

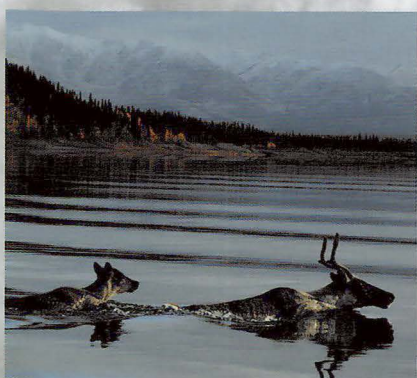


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The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act recognized the importance of the subsistence way of life and allows continued opportunity for rural Alaskans to hunt, trap, fish, and gather from federal lands. The following examples offer a glimpse of some of the important resources harvested throughout Alaska.



Caribou are an essential resource to many rural communities. There are several different herds that migrate between wintering grounds and summer ranges in various regions of Alaska. A common belief among Alaska Native people is that as caribou herds migrate to an area, it is important to let the leading caribou pass through unharmed. This is to ensure that the caribou following the leaders will continue on the same path and allow hunters to harvest them.

Trapping furbearing animals and using, bartering, or selling their furs has long been a customary and traditional activity and continues to be an important subsistence activity. Local people have strong informal norms associated with the use of large trapping areas and the use of cabins on public lands.



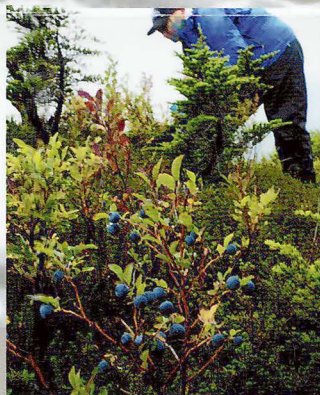
Fishing is conducted all year round, but is more prevalent in the summer. Salmon, whitefish, grayling, and pike are among fish caught by traps, nets, and fishwheels. They may be hung to dry, smoked, cured, canned, or frozen to be eaten all year.



Moose are one of the most important subsistence resources. Moose meat and fat are staple foods and the hide is made into clothing, such as jackets, pants, boots, hats, and mittens. Fall is an important time of year for moose hunting and many hunts occur along rivers.



USFWS photo



Blueberries, salmonberries, crowberries, and cranberries are particularly abundant and delicious in late summer and fall. They are eaten raw or cooked into other foods. Across Alaska Native cultures, berries are whipped to a creamy texture with animal fats and occasionally fish. Served cold, it has an ice-cream-like texture and high nutrient value from the animal fats and vitamins in the berries.

"When you step in tandem with nature's cycles of abundance and scarcity, you gain respect for and oneness with the land."

—Penny Green, Lake Minchumina, Alaska

Culture is Dynamic

The world is not static; things change. Ecosystems change, societies change, and cultures adapt. There is a balance between new practices and the continuity of tradition, between stability and change, with both occurring at the same time.

For example, the tools used to harvest food have changed with technology. While dog teams are still used in some places, snow machines are used more often and motorized boats have replaced seal-skin kayaks. But the knowledge of where to go, how the hunter approaches his or her quarry, the basic values, beliefs, and customs associated with hunting, more often than not, remain the same. Technological changes in subsistence tools are examples of adaptation needed for efficient and successful

harvest, particularly as hunting becomes more difficult due to changes in wildlife populations, their movement patterns, and competition from other hunters.

There is a valid concern to preserve cultural identity in the midst of transformation brought about by modern lifestyles. Cultures in Alaska have witnessed a decline of customary practices and, in some communities, the possibility of the disappearance of a Native dialect. Practicing the customs of their ancestors and connecting with the beliefs that make these customs meaningful sustains culture.

It can be challenging to teach the younger generation subsistence today, with busy school schedules, the distance to travel and the price of

gasoline, and like young people anywhere, competing with social media technology. It takes dedicated parents and elders, families and communities, to teach youth about subsistence practices. Although young people may leave their communities for college, employment opportunities, and other life experiences, they remain connected to their culture. Some come back and reconnect with their traditional practices in the community where they grew up.

The land is changing, too. Wildlife populations have changed. Caribou migration routes move, moose habitat is expanding northward, sea ice and access to marine mammals are decreasing, winter freeze-up is getting later, and spring break-up is getting earlier.

Changes in physical factors such as temperature, rainfall and snowfall, the water levels of rivers and lakes, and permafrost are connected to the abundance of berry patches, wildlife population numbers, the timing of waterfowl migrations, and the safety of hunters and trappers who are more likely to be caught in storms due to unpredictable weather. Many rural Alaska residents have seen significant changes in their lifetimes, even the last ten years—reduced populations of wildlife, shifts in the economy, and the impacts of climate change. Maintaining naturally functioning ecosystems is critical to allow wildlife and people to adapt to these changes and to continue a traditional way of life.

To learn more, go to www.nps.gov/alaskasubsistence/

