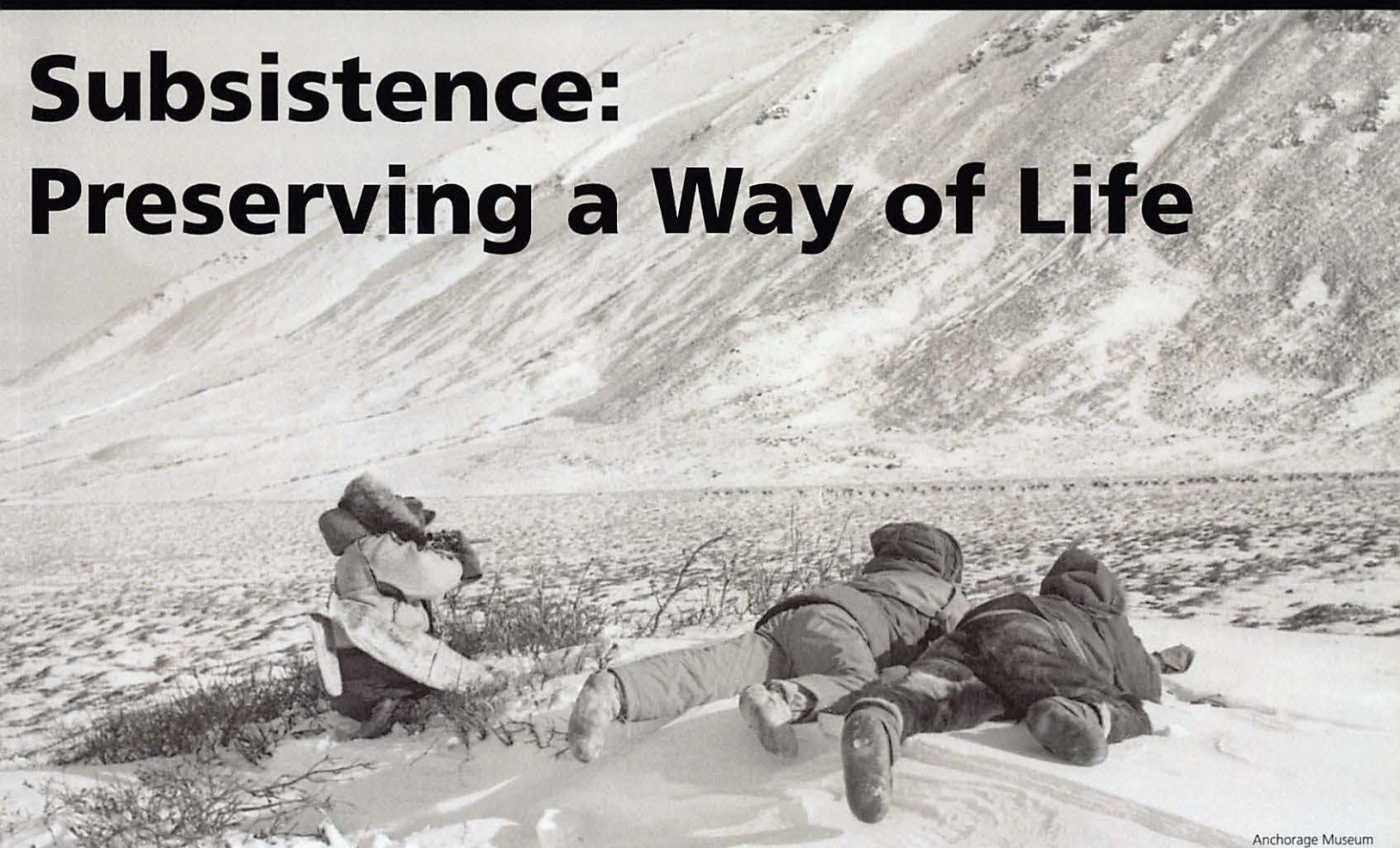




# Subsistence: Preserving a Way of Life



Anchorage Museum

Nunamiut Eskimo men from Anaktuvuk Pass in the central Brooks Range pursue a herd of caribou in the distance, 1962. Today the residents of Anaktuvuk Pass and other 'resident zone communities' continue to harvest animals and plants in traditional ways. Their access to national park lands is protected under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

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*We need that land to subsist, we need that land to find our food, we need that land for our children someday, so that they may use it.*

—Zacharias Hugo, Anaktuvuk Pass  
*Village Journey* (1985)

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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 marine and inland mammals, 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, 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

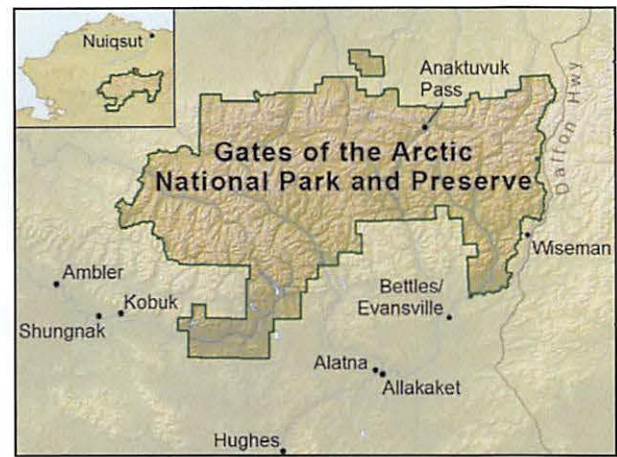
In 1980, Congress formally recognized the social and cultural importance of protecting subsistence for both Native and non-Native rural residents when it passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). This legislation created millions of acres of new national park and national preserve 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 Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve nomadic peoples have used and occupied the area for thousands of years, following caribou herds and traveling to regional trading areas to meet with other Native groups. These peoples eventually formed three distinct regional Alaska Native cultures occupying the central Brooks Range in the 1800s: Koyukon Athapaskan Indians, Kuuvaniit Eskimos, and Nunamiut Eskimos. Today local rural residents in established communities and remote homesteads continue to depend upon resources in the park to sustain a subsistence way of life and maintain cultural traditions. Subsistence activities occur throughout the year and are usually concentrated in the northern and eastern portions of the park and along rivers flowing out of the mountains that connect low-lying communities. Winter trapping efforts concentrate on the harvest of lynx, wolverine, wolves, marten, and fox. Hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering in repeated seasonal cycles remains a vital part of evolving subsistence lifeways and an unbroken link to the past for local residents in this region.



Birch bark basket from Shungnak, 2011.

### For more information

Marcy Okada, Subsistence Coordinator  
Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve  
[marcy\\_okada@nps.gov](mailto:marcy_okada@nps.gov)  
[www.nps.gov/gaar/historyculture](http://www.nps.gov/gaar/historyculture)



Clockwise: transporting a freshly killed moose with to-boggans; food cache along the Alatna River; weathered caribou antlers at the headwaters of the Alatna; blueberries and cranberries from Walker Lake. Courtesy of Chris Allan and Heidi Schoppenhorst.

