

NPS documents Lake Clark cultural history

by Joan Nockels
for the Tundra Times

The National Park Service is undertaking a major ethnographic study, documenting Tanaina Indian use of Lake Clark, currently part of the Lake Clark National Park and Preserve.

The four-year study is a precedent not only in Park Service ethnographic work, but also in its documentation of the little explored area of the culture and history of the Athabaskan people in Alaska.

Ted Birkedal, chief archeologist for the Park Service, said the research is a "holistic study of the Dena'ina people through time" — spanning issues important to the Dena'ina from economics to spirituality.

The Lake Clark socio-cultural study includes:

- A major ethnography, directed by Linda J. Ellanna, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks.

- An ethnobotany, the work of Priscilla Kari, documenting past and present Native use of traditional plants.

- A videotape displaying the building of a Dena'ina fish cache.

Ellanna said that her work includes a description of the subsistence economy, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region, kinship patterns among the people and maps of traditional hunting and fishing grounds.

She explained that the work on kinship patterns in the Nondalton community will be particularly useful.

"We have collected life histories of all the people in the community," she said.

To further link today's community with the past, the researchers translated Russian Orthodox Church documents dating from 1810 to 1867. Ellanna said this had never been done before.

Kari's work focuses on the use of plants, from the building of boats and houses to the extraction of medicines and teas.

According to Birkedal, both Ellanna's and Kari's work are written with an aim of being easy to understand. And he said the project was not in the business of offering recommendations on Park Service or Native concerns about subsistence use in the park or access to Native allotments.

However, both Birkedal and Ellanna said the study would definitely provide the Park Service the opportunity to better understand the Lake Clark residents and Dena'ina culture. They said this increased understanding will play a role in the development of park management policy.

The Lake Clark Sociocultural Study is a product of cooperation between the Park Service and the Tanaina Indians.

Ellanna credited its success to the work of Andrew Balluta, a village elder. He is a full-time Alaska Native park ranger and a co-author of the study.

Balluta's presence and efforts were key to gaining the confidence of Nondalton, Lime Village and Port Alsworth residents, she said. In addition, his familiarity with the Dena'ina language and culture, together with his grasp of contemporary concerns, complemented Ellanna's background in anthropology.

The project is to be completed next winter. The published work is expected to benefit the general public by providing an opportunity for appreciation of Native culture. Another benefit will be having much of the area's



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On the shore of Iliamna Lake near Nondalton, National Park Service ranger Andrew Balluta, left, digs a pit to reconstruct a traditional Dena'ina fish cache. Agnes Cusma watches. Below, Balluta, Marcy Hobson, right foreground, Sophia Austin and Agnes Cusma, background left and right, prepare bark to line the cache. The cache is being reconstructed and filmed as part of the socio-cultural work the federal agency is doing at Lake Clark.

photos courtesy of NPS



Dena'ina history in a permanent record.

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Ellanna said that the work will establish a model for other Park Service ethnographies, especially in Alaska parks.

The Park Service is currently developing a 20-year cultural resources research plan that slates the Northwest parks and monuments of Cape Krusenstern, Noatak and Kobuk for investigation next. Following these will be the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve and the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve. Studies are planned for every Alaska

park unit.

Ellanna and Birkedal stressed that part of the success of the project in Lake Clark also is due to the efforts of Park Superintendent Paul Haertel.

"He favored the research 100 percent," Ellanna said. "The study of the people using the land was just as important to him as any study of any other park resource."