

Passing on Traditional Knowledge

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“The way we share traditional knowledge has changed. The importance of maintaining traditional knowledge has not changed.”

A problem many indigenous peoples face in the modern context is how to continue to pass on their cultural group’s traditional knowledge in a manner that respects their values and helps maintain cultural identity in current lifestyles. This presentation is a discussion of the Alaska native people’s efforts to continue to maintain their cultural values and guide modern lifestyles, and could be viewed as a general description of other indigenous cultures’ efforts.



Frank Hill (left).

We recognize indigenous Elders as the culture-bearers of their specific groups. Elders accept their responsibility to share traditional knowledge with succeeding generations, just as their own Elders did for them. The Alaska Federation of Natives and the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative greatly appreciate the contribution of Elders for their key role in developing school curricula and teaching practices whose foundations are the cultural knowledge of the different indigenous cultural areas of Alaska.

Passing on traditional knowledge in earlier times was based on certain parameters:

Cultural values and beliefs:

Each indigenous cultural group in Alaska based its lifestyle, customs, and life ways on value systems and beliefs unique to it, and that have been maintained for thousands of years. Without such values, Alaska’s indigenous peoples would not have been able to survive as distinct cultures in the sometimes harsh environments in which they chose to live. And, in the face of increasing encroachment of European/Western resource extraction and colonizing activities, maintenance of their own cultural values systems and world views by Alaska’s indigenous people became even more important to their cultural survival. Values such as sharing, knowledge of one’s own family and cultural group history, respect(for all life), and spirituality as interpreted by Elders are among the statements of values and worldview that have sustained Alaska’s indigenous people.

Cultural social structures:

Like most of the world’s indigenous peoples, Alaska’s native people depended on certain social and family structures that allowed the sharing of traditional knowledge to take place in the course of their daily lives. Multi-generational family units of children, parents, and grandparents provided ample opportunity for sharing traditional knowledge. Grandparents

provided the historical aspect and global views of the culture—including traditions, family history, songs, dances, stories, legends, knowledge of animals, plants, weather, clothing, etc. Parents practiced what they learned from their own parents, as they provided most of the energy to maintain daily livelihood and survival. Children were essentially students of the culture and the other two generations of the household. As their maturity allowed, children were encouraged to become involved in the daily life activities of the family, and as dictated by their gender and position among their siblings. Uncles, aunts, cousins, and others outside the immediate family unit also played important roles in passing on traditional knowledge. For instance, uncles were often responsible for training their nephews how to be successful hunters, warriors, family and group members, and leaders.

Indigenous language:

Sharing of traditional knowledge among indigenous people was primarily done orally. Therefore, knowledge of the indigenous language was essential to teaching and learning. Without fluency in their language, it would be impossible to share with succeeding generations the deep philosophical and spiritual beliefs held by indigenous people about their specific culture and environment. Elders told us frequently that much of the accuracy and richness of traditional knowledge was lost when it was translated to English. Some specific groups' deep philosophical knowledge and concepts were not even possible to describe in a language other than their own. Most Alaska indigenous languages require much more knowledge than just the description of an action; for instance, in Dena'ina Athabascan, the verb used to describe someone carrying something changes depending on what the person is carrying. You must know in great detail the environment surrounding the situation you are speaking about in order to correctly describe an action. Intimate, detailed knowledge of the surrounding environment and activity is required in order to communicate effectively. You can't do this without being a constant student of your environment and situation in order to share traditional knowledge.

Situation-specific:

Most traditional knowledge sharing is reliant on specific situations and actions. While abstract sharing actions and concepts do exist, the knowledge takes on value when applied to certain actions or activities. Rare is the situation where traditional knowledge is shared in a setting apart or abstract from the action or venue where the traditional knowledge would be utilized. Learning traditional knowledge in this “applied setting” is much more likely to be retained than if taught in the abstract.

Rituals and customs:

Ceremonial rituals and customs provide the opportunity to share traditional knowledge that may not have immediate application or may depict activities no longer used; these sharing activities deal with subjects that are more historical in nature, that are of spiritual value and validate the group's history. Songs, dances, legends, costumes, heroes, taboos, wars, etc., all add to the development of a catalog of traditional knowledge that would be deemed necessary for a person to be culturally knowledgeable.

Alaska Native Values and Worldview

Passing on traditional knowledge is dependent on understanding the values and worldviews of Alaska's indigenous people.

Each of the five major Alaska Native indigenous groups have identified and shared their values and world views with others. Elders from each group spent considerable time developing the list of values that they determined were most important in order to identify them as a specific group. These value statements also were determined to be long-standing, and have endured over their recollection of their cultural group's history. Elders told us that these values are what they have depended on in order to survive as a culture in the specific environment they have inhabited for thousands of years. Upon review of each of the cultural group's value statements, one will find some commonality:

- Sharing
- Respect for all living things
- Knowledge of language
- Honoring your Elders and Ancestors
- Self-sufficiency
- Humility
- Humor
- Honesty
- Caring for Family, etc.

But while there is commonality among groups with many of their closely-held values, each group believes that its interpretation of those value statements is unique. Different groups having common values also assist in the development of cordial relationships between groups, and establish protocols for interactions. For a complete listing of the different Alaska Native groups' values, look in the Alaska Native Knowledge website at www.ankn.uaf.edu.

Comparing Western and Indigenous World Views

Studying the contrast between Alaska's indigenous peoples' values and worldview with the Western/European worldview will enhance an understanding of why Alaska Native people have been able to succeed and survive in their unique area of the world. Examples of the differences of worldview between Western and Alaska/Indigenous peoples include:

Indigenous World View

Spirituality is embedded in all elements of the Cosmos.

Humans have responsibility for maintaining harmonious relationship with natural world.

Nature is honored routinely through daily spiritual practices.

Western World View

Spirituality is centered in a single Supreme Being.

Humans exercise dominion over nature to use it for personal and economic gain.

Spiritual practices are intermittent and set apart from daily life.

(adapted from Knutsen and Suzuki, 1992)

Upon reflection on these differing world views, one can more readily understand the differences in value systems of the two groups, especially as it relates to transferring of knowledge.

The public perception of Alaska's indigenous people's knowledge is often limited to what they see demonstrated by songs, dances, costumes, and traditional foods. While these aspects of traditional knowledge are important, other, deeper knowledge is not learned or seen. Among the ignored or unseen knowledges are:

- the detailed knowledge of animal habits, habitat, and behavior;
- edible and medicinal plants;
- knowledge of weather systems, stars, river currents;
- deep spiritual connections with the environment;
- seasonal cycles;
- numerical and counting systems;
- traditional medicine and healing practices;
- centuries-old histories;
- higher level linguistics;
- the sense of maintaining balance and harmony with the natural world;
- and many other aspects of their complete universe.

Passing on traditional knowledge among modern indigenous groups is made much more difficult due to changes in the traditional social structures, use and fluency of indigenous languages, and changes in lifestyles.

Modern indigenous groups' family and social structures are often quite different from those structures that formerly provided many opportunities to pass on traditional knowledge. Most households now are not made up of the three-generation households of the past. Often, separate housing is established for Elders and seniors, thereby removing them from the day-to-day opportunity to share traditional knowledge with their children and grandchildren. Mandatory schooling also has added to the diminishing of opportunity for parents and grandparents to interact culturally with their children and grandchildren.

Most oral communication between current indigenous children, their parents and grandparents is now conducted in English instead of the indigenous language. Again, the lack of the ability to share cultural/traditional knowledge in their cultural language diminishes the meaning, significance, and value of traditional knowledge.

Most modern indigenous peoples in Alaska do not live an entirely traditional lifestyle, outside the cash economy. Moving from one seasonal resource area to the next in accord with the natural seasonal cycles is not practiced to the degree it was only a few generations ago. School requirements and the need to remain in one place throughout all seasonal cycles due to jobs and the cash that is needed to maintain households have limited the ability to practice traditional cultural lifestyles. Elimination of the need to subsist and live in their traditional lifestyles, based on a knowledge of their environment and the natural cycles of the animals and plants they depended to stay alive, reduces the value of traditional knowledge and the ability to pass it on to future generations.

In spite of these limitations, there are ongoing efforts to pass on traditional knowledge. Adapting modern systems to their needs, some indigenous groups have been successful in:

- Establishing indigenous language immersion schools for early-elementary-age groups through adaptation of the charter schools movement. Children learn academic subjects in their indigenous language, and instructional modes. In this manner a reconnection is made between children and their Elders. In so doing, the value of traditional knowledge is placed on par with other school-related knowledge.
- Reinstating the practice of indigenous cultural celebrations that were repressed by missionary church groups and, to an extent, by the public schools. Cultural celebrations included participation in traditional songs, dances, and costumes. In most cases, sharing traditional foods is a major part of the celebrations.
- Traditional healing practices are now being encouraged by modern medical practitioners. Traditional medicines collected from the natural world of indigenous people are encouraged as well. Some Alaskan regional health organizations, clinics, and hospitals even have on staff traditional healers. Including traditional foods in the diets of indigenous patients is fairly commonplace.
- Alaska's indigenous languages are now being formalized from oral languages to languages that are written and can be taught just as other world languages. Alaska's university system has established an Alaska Native Language Center that researches the correct historical language format and assists indigenous language experts in developing teaching formats for specific languages. Tribal colleges are being considered as a means to encourage indigenous peoples to develop their higher education through the study and practice of indigenous traditions and language.
- Alaska schools now promote and require the learning of indigenous knowledge. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development has adopted Cultural Standards for Students in Alaska schools. By the time they graduate from high school students must demonstrate that they know and are able to practice important aspects of the cultural knowledge of their region. Of necessity, the indigenous Elders are the experts of this part of the curriculum, and are heavily involved in the development of what is taught and learned about the traditional knowledge of their regions.
- Traditional indigenous knowledge as an educational resource is now much more readily available than it was in recent past. The Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative was developed to document the knowledge of Alaska's indigenous groups in a format that is easily accessed and useable by classroom teachers serving primarily Alaska Native students. The Alaska Native Knowledge Network, www.ankn.uaf.edu, is accessed by classroom teachers and curriculum developers very frequently. Another similar resource is Alaskool (www.alaskool.org), devoted primarily to the study of the history, economy, and social aspects of Alaska Natives. These resources depend entirely on traditional knowledge and Elders for their success.
- Groups are forming that promote Alaska Native people's writing and the recording of traditional knowledge as a part of the public literature base. Prior to this decade, most