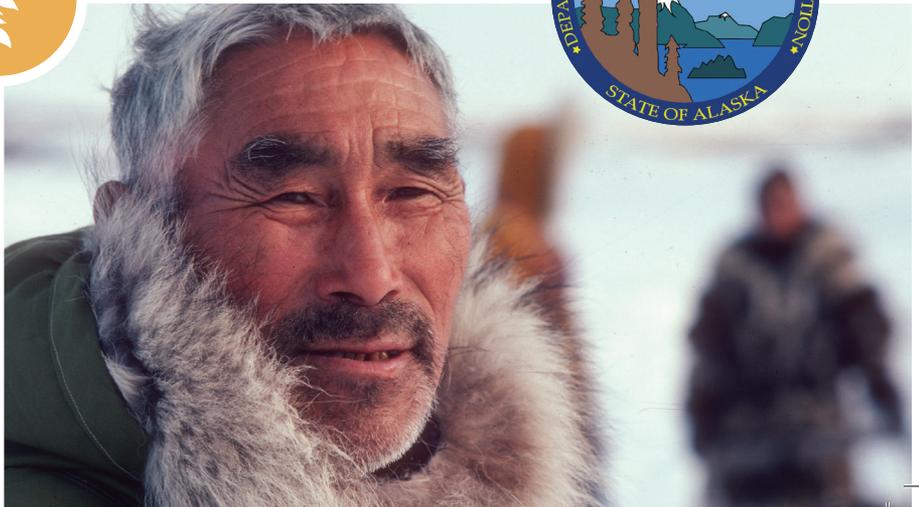




# COORDINATING *with* ALASKA'S NATIVE COMMUNITIES



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# THE DEPARTMENT AND ALASKA NATIVE COMMUNITIES

The mission of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (the Department) is to conserve, protect and improve Alaska's natural resources and environment, and control water, land and air pollution to enhance the health, safety, welfare, economic and social well-being of Alaskans. To help fulfill this mission, the Department communicates with residents from all regions of Alaska to provide notice of proposed plans and projects and ensure that public concerns are fully considered in decisions and actions.

The Department works throughout rural Alaska to clean up contaminated sites; manage the discharge of pollutants into air, soil, and water; build infrastructure for water and sewer treatment; and ensure the safety of food and drinking water sources. The Department coordinates with tribes on projects with the potential to affect them, and solicits and incorporates local and tribal knowledge and concerns into agency efforts. Staff should become familiar with Alaska Native cultures and traditions, in order to effectively communicate and facilitate the success of agency programs and projects.



*Photo Credit: ArXotica*

## ALASKA NATIVE CULTURES

Language is often considered the most important component of effective communication, but having an understanding of the cultures you are communicating with can be just as important.

Alaska Natives represent approximately 16 percent of the state's population and reside in more than 200 villages and communities statewide. Alaska Natives are diverse, representing at least 11 distinct cultures speaking 22 different languages. Alaska Native cultures are tens of thousands of years old, and their heritages have evolved over time. They are often discussed as five major cultural groupings.

Traditionally, Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yupik people lived in North and Northwest Alaska; Athabascan people migrated seasonally through Interior and Southcentral Alaska; Yup'ik and Cup'ik people lived throughout Southwest Alaska; Unangax (Aleut) and Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) people ranged from Prince William Sound to the Aleutian Islands; and Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people lived in Southeast Alaska.

Today, many different Alaska Native cultures are found throughout urban and rural areas. People continue to incorporate their traditions, language, and subsistence practices into daily life. Practices often result from individual perspectives, experience, and location. Rural communities continue to evolve in varying degrees with increasing presence of modern culture and technology.





## ARCTIC REGION

### Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yupik People

Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yupik people originated in North and Northwest Alaska. Indigenous groups in Canada and Greenland share a culture with the Inupiat, and groups in Siberia with the St. Lawrence Island Yupik. The area includes about 40 federally recognized tribes and one federally recognized regional tribe, the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope. Regional organizations include the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, Inuit Circumpolar Council, and Arctic Slope Regional, NANA Regional, and Bering Straits Native corporations.

Cultural values include knowledge of language and family tree. Many Inupiat people believe in reincarnation, and ceremonies honor beliefs that spirits of animals and people are reborn. There is a particularly close connection to marine mammals (especially whales), which are still harvested and honored, along with caribou, fish, and birds. Artists of the region are skilled at skin sewing, ivory carving and scrimshaw. Transportation included the umiaq, kayak and dog sled, but motorized boats, ATVs and snowmachines are often used now.



## INTERIOR REGION Athabascan People

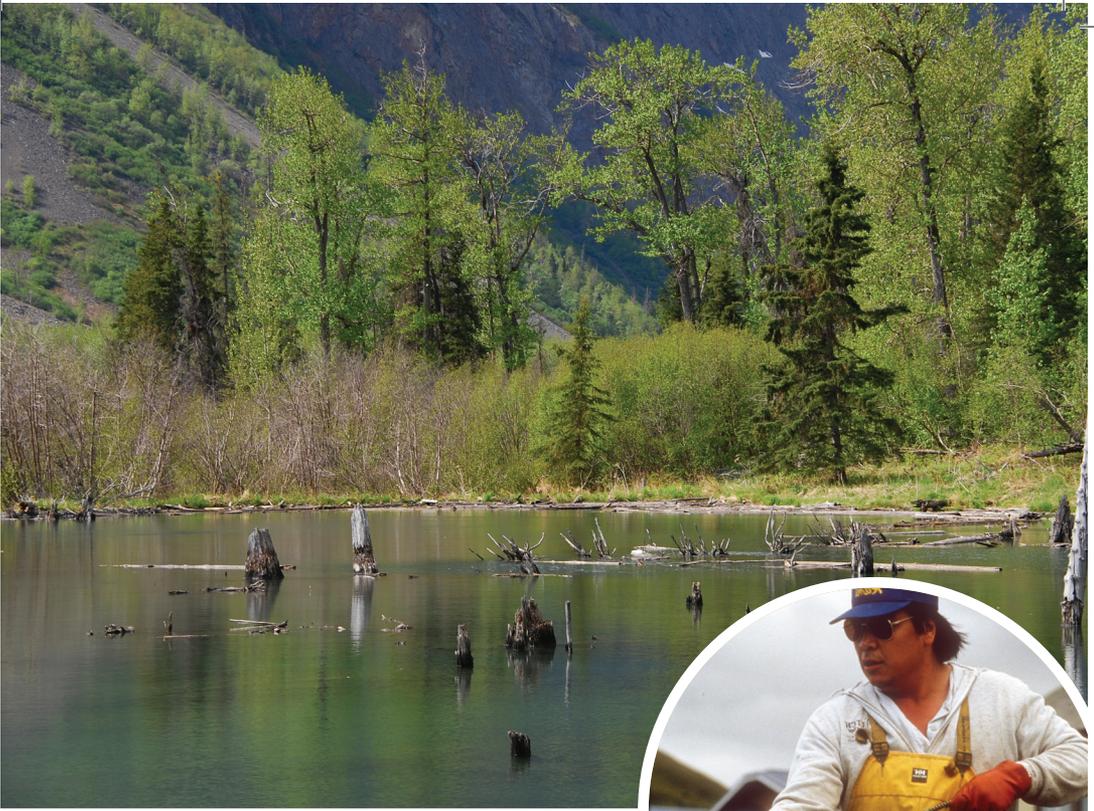
Athabascan people originated along major river ways in Alaska, from the Brooks Range down to the Kenai Peninsula, and extend into Canada and the continental U.S. Traditional Alaskan Athabascan territory includes more than 50 federally recognized tribes. Regional organizations include the Tanana Chiefs Conference, Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, Copper River Native Association, and Doyon, Cook Inlet Regional and Ahtna, Incorporated corporations.

Athabascan culture is matrilineal and values include respect for all living things. An important aspect of Athabascan subsistence is sharing and kin-based networks dictate responsibilities for sharing within the community. Elders are highly respected and often influence marriages, trading and leadership positions. People are highly mobile, and many families still use seasonal camps. Salmon, moose, birds and berries are important resources. Fiddle dancing is a well-loved pastime and fine beadwork is highly regarded. Transportation is most often by boat, traditionally birch bark canoe, or snowmachine or ATV, but some communities are also on a road system.



*Photo Credit:  
Calista Corporation*





## WESTERN REGION

### Yup'ik and Cup'ik People

The Yup'ik and Cup'ik people originated in the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bristol Bay regions, and on Nunivak Island. The area is predominately flat, marshy and dotted with lakes. It includes almost 90 federally recognized tribes. Regional organizations include the Association of Village Council Presidents, Bristol Bay Native Association, and Bristol Bay Native and Calista corporations.

Yup'ik and Cup'ik values emphasize the importance of respecting the land and resources. Ceremonies detail the connection between the wildlife and hunters. Storytelling is used to pass on skills and knowledge to youth. Central Alaskan Yup'ik is the largest of the state's Native languages, both in the size of its population and the number of speakers. Traditional dancing is mostly stationary with elaborate hand patterns and masks from the region are highly prized. Important resources include caribou, moose, salmon, marine mammals, plants and birds. People are very mobile, traveling on waterways with the migration of resources. Many current villages are former fishing or hunting camps.

## SOUTHWESTERN REGION Unangax and Sugpiaq People

The Unangax (Aleut) and Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) people are maritime people, originating on the shores of the North Pacific and Bering Sea. The area is volcanic and extreme in geography and weather patterns. It includes 25 federally recognized tribes. Regional organizations are the Aleut International Association, Aleutian/Pribilof Island Association, Kodiak Area Native Association, and Koniag Incorporated and Aleut regional corporations.

The cultures were influenced by the proximity to and early contact with Russians. During WWII, the U.S. government destroyed at least nine Unangax villages, and forcibly evacuated people and interned them in camps in Southeast Alaska for two years. Unangax and Sugpiaq cultures value a close connection to the environment and family and ancestors. People traditionally live in villages and have a vast knowledge of weather patterns, as activities in the region are dictated by wet and frequently harsh climate. They are known for fine basketry and boat building, handling and navigation skills.



*Photo Credit: Denali Commission*



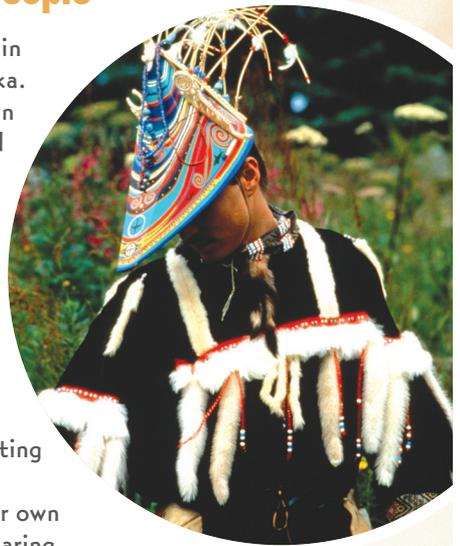


## SOUTHEASTERN REGION

### Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian and Eyak People

The Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people originated in Southeast, while the Eyak live in Southcentral Alaska. The areas feature temperate, coastal rainforests rich in resources, and include about 25 federally recognized tribes and one federally recognized regional tribe, the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. Some regional organizations are the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, Chugachmuit, and Chugach Alaska and Sealaska regional corporations.

They share a similar, matrilineal cultural system, with important differences in language and social organization. There are complex social systems consisting of various divisions based on moieties, clans, or other distinctions. People traditionally married outside their own group. Cultural values include respect, balance and sharing. Potlatches are formal events hosted to commemorate events or pay debt and include feasting, speeches, singing, dancing and elaborate gifting to guests. The cultures are prolific in art and tools, with canoes, totem poles and weaving particularly prized. Important resources include salmon, other fish, marine mammals, deer, plants and berries.





## THE IMPORTANCE OF ALASKA NATIVE CULTURAL AWARENESS

Communicating with people from different cultures can be confusing to anyone. Unfamiliar mannerisms, tone of voice and habits can easily be misinterpreted as offensive or rude. It can be difficult to get a message across. However, people from different cultures can communicate successfully with education, honesty, openness, understanding and patience. Strong networks and healthy, constructive working environments are formed when a relationship starts on a positive note.

Department staff are most effective in supporting the mission and programs of the agency with understanding of Alaska Native cultures and cross-cultural communication.



### POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Be respectful of Elders.
- Speaking loudly may be interpreted as rude or angry.
- Listen and allow periods of silence.
- Give time for a response.
- Apologize if you think you may have offended someone.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

Non-Natives	Alaska Natives
Conversation is used to get to know people	Observation and familial ties are used to get to know people
Learn through speaking up and making mistakes	Listen and learn, taught not to answer questions unless they know the answer
Self-confident and speak of future goals	Unacceptable to boast or speak of future
Talk fast	Take long pauses, think before speaking
Key points first, background story later	General information first, specific points later

*Developed from National Native Association of Treatment Directors*

Keep in mind these differences are generalities and do not apply to all Natives or Non-Natives.

## DIFFERENCES IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION

### What's confusing to...

Non-Natives about Alaska Natives	Alaska Natives about Non-Natives
Alaska Natives don't speak	Non-Natives talk too much
Alaska Natives downplay abilities	Non-Natives brag
Alaska Natives avoid direct questions	Non-Natives ask too many questions
Alaska Natives are too slow when they talk	Non-Natives talk too fast and interrupt
Alaska Natives may leave without saying goodbye	Non-Natives need to say goodbye before leaving

*Developed from "Cross-Culture Communication for Land Managers and Planners in Alaska"*

## SENDING THE RIGHT SIGNALS

### INTERPRETING BODY LANGUAGE

Body Language Signal	Non-Native Meaning	Alaska Native Meaning
Head nodding	I understand what you're saying	I hear what you're saying
Raised eyebrows	I'm surprised	I agree
Furrowed brow	I'm listening carefully or I question what you are saying	I am displeased with you
Arms tight to body	I'm cold	I want to maintain an impersonal distance
No eye contact	I am lying to you	I respect you

*Developed from "Cross Cultural Communication" Association of Stranded Rural Alaskans*



### HELPFUL TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING ALASKA NATIVES

- Take time to make the person comfortable, talk about what you have in common.
- Don't speak in loud tones, especially to Elders, unless requested.
- Listen, slow your pace and avoid talking too much.
- Allow periods of silence and plenty of time for questions.

*Developed from "Alaska Air Medical Escort Training Manual 4th Edition Chapter 12: Diversity and Cultural Issues in Alaska"*



Belief systems about the natural world vary greatly between Alaska Native and Western cultures, in particular with regard to science, health and philosophy. The Department utilizes both Western scientific knowledge and traditional Alaska Native knowledge to inform permit decisions and other actions. It can be helpful for staff to know some of the major differences between cultural belief systems to enhance understanding of local concerns, perspectives and alternatives.

Western Science	Traditional Native Knowledge
Skepticism	Trust for inherited wisdom and respect for all things
Emphasis on understanding	Emphasis on practical application of skills and knowledge
Knowledge is based on evidence discovered in physical world	Physical and metaphysical world are linked to a moral code
Communication of evidence, theories and procedures	Communication of metaphor and story connected to life and values
Global verification	Local verification
Mathematical models	Integrated and applied to daily living and subsistence practices
Secular only	Sacred and secular combined
Explanations based on hypothesis, theories, and laws	Explanations based on examples, anecdotes and parables

*Developed from the Alaska Native Science Commission*

## ALASKA NATIVE TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS

The federal government has a government-to-government relationship with federally recognized tribes, and provides access to funding, resources and consultation on federal actions.

The State formally recognizes the federally recognized tribes, currently 229, in Alaska. About 150 are governed by traditional councils organized according to community traditions. About 70 were formed under the federal Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) and organized through a federally approved election process and tribally adopted constitution and/or by laws. Traditional councils and IRAs may both govern through laws, regulations, social services and a judicial system.

Tribes are nonprofit, sovereign entities, and treated as important stakeholders by the Department.

Tribes may also own for-profit corporations or have a for-profit arm with a similar name. Department staff should understand the nature of the entity they are working with.

Tribes also generally possess sovereign immunity from lawsuits by individuals or the State, unless immunity has been specifically waived or Congress has stated they can be sued under specific circumstances.

ANGSA

*Photo Credit: Alaska Digital Archives  
BLM ANCSA Hearings in Alaska Native  
Brotherhood Hall Sitka April 11, 1975*

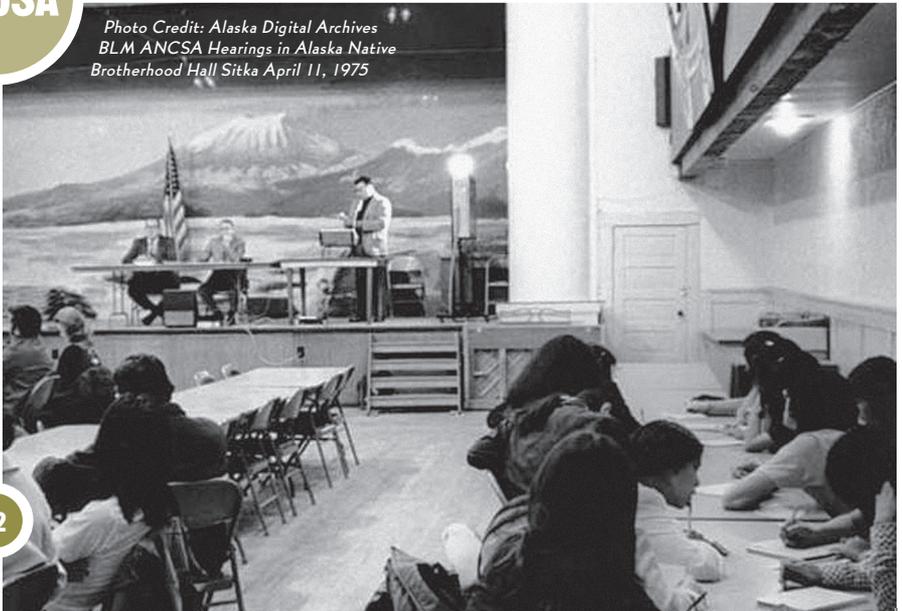




Photo Credit: Alfie Price

## ANCSA AND TRIBAL CORPORATIONS

In 1971, U.S. Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) to determine what lands Alaska Natives owned by right of traditional use and occupancy.

ANCSA secured 43.7 million acres of land for Alaska Natives and created 12 regional Native corporations. Each received land entitlements, including surface and subsurface estate. A 13th regional corporation was created in Seattle in 1975 for Alaska Natives residing out of state; this corporation did not receive land. ANCSA also created approximately 220 village corporations to provide additional preservation and advancement for Alaska Natives.

Regional and village corporations are “for-profit” and treated much like private industries by the Department. Their mission is different from that of tribes.

In 1998, U.S. Supreme Court unanimously found, in *Alaska v. Native Village of Venetie*, land conveyed to regional corporations under ANCSA is not ‘Indian country’, explicitly eliminating almost all ‘Indian country’ in Alaska, except the Metlakatla reservation.

TRIBES

REGIONAL  
CORPORATIONS

VILLAGE  
CORPORATIONS

NATIVE  
NONPROFITS

Check the Department’s directory of Tribal Organizations and Bureau of Indian Affairs list of federally recognized tribes.

## ALASKA NATIVE ORGANIZATIONS

Alaska Natives have also formed state and region-wide organizations to address and advocate for issues of concern. For instance, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) was formed in 1966 to address land issues and indigenous rights. By 1971, AFN had successfully pressed Congress to pass ANSCA. Today, AFN works to enhance the cultural, economic and political voice of Alaska Native communities.

Other organizations include the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, Association of Village Council Presidents, First Alaskans Institute, Nelson Island Consortium, Tanana Chiefs Conference, and Yukon River Inter-Tribal Watershed Council.

Alaska Native affiliated organizations are private interest groups and not treated as for-profit or local governments by the Department.

Organizations can be utilized by Department staff to communication agency messages, but views of the organizations should be considered in conjunction with views of local and tribal governments.



*Photo Credit: Calista Corporation*

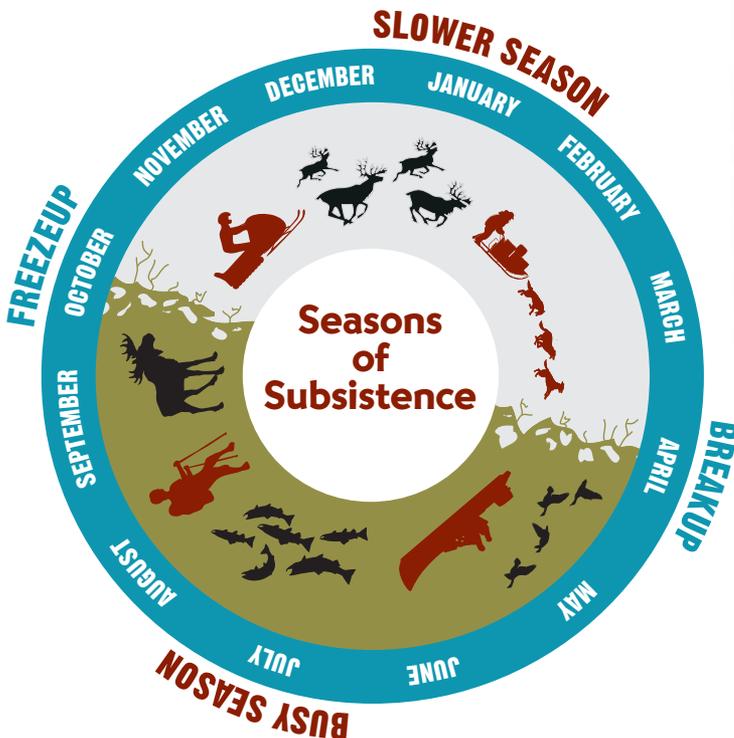


## IMPORTANT ALASKA NATIVE ISSUES

- Protection of environment and subsistence hunting and fishing rights.
- Advocacy on cultural preservation, health care, education and other social issues.
- Alaska Native corporation land conveyance and exchange.
- Federal appropriations and grants.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SEASONS

Alaska Native lifestyles are often closely connected to the seasons. Subsistence resources are only available for harvest during certain, very busy, periods of time. Cultural activities and weather can dictate people's availability. It is important to plan visits when people are likely to have free time.



## VISITING VILLAGES

Rural Alaska communities face limited transportation, infrastructure and technology. It typically takes more advance coordination to successfully complete work when traveling to a rural community.

### MAKING ARRANGEMENTS

- Plan your trip several weeks in advance.
- Notify local and tribal governments of your visit and offer to meet, even if your business is elsewhere. It's a good opportunity to show respect and facilitate productive relationships.
- Check with your contacts about travel logistics and the lay of the land, and call two days in advance to confirm the trip.
- Be prepared to stay longer than expected, weather can delay travel.

### YOU MAY NEED TO BRING

- Food and water.
- Sleeping bag – sleeping arrangements may be in people's homes, the school, community buildings or federal facilities.
- Proper clothing – check the forecast to get an idea of what you'll need.
- Personal protective equipment for the work you'll be conducting.
- Insect repellent, sunscreen, rain gear, boots, toiletries, medications, etc.
- Cash – many villages do not have ATMs and do not accept credit cards.
- Extra "necessities" in case you are stuck for a few extra days.



## VILLAGE VISIT ETIQUETTE

- It is important to remember village residents have likely spent a lot of time and money harvesting the food and it appears disrespectful to turn down a meal.
- Be prepared to explain who you are by talking about your heritage and family, and sharing personal information.
- Handshakes are a common form of communication.
- Don't talk about your religious beliefs.
- Ask before taking pictures.
- Be respectful of the land, wildlife and plants.
- Visiting and purchasing from the local store is polite, and may provide insight to life in the community.

## TRAVEL CHALLENGES

**Transportation in rural communities is usually by small plane, boat, ATV or snowmachine. This means you should be prepared to travel in any mode.**

- Offer to pay for gas if you are given a ride (rural communities face very high fuel prices).
- Understand that others have a different sense of timing and schedule, and don't comment on people's punctuality.
- Dress for the weather.
- Inquire about rentals ahead of time— in some villages visitors can rent cars or four wheelers.
- Be prepared to walk.

**Many rural residents use landlines, satellite and cellular phones, VHF radios, and local or regional radio stations to communicate. Here are some general practices for communication etiquette:**

- Allow periods of silence and avoid interrupting.
- Do not be offended if the person on the other line hangs up. In some Alaska Native cultures formal goodbyes are not necessary, the phone call ends when the conversation is over.

## HOSTING A MEETING

### MEETING PREPARATIONS

Between subsistence activities and long distance travel, the availability of rural residents is not as frequent or flexible as urban residents.

- Set dates and times well in advance and try to avoid conflicts with tribal activities. Be flexible - subsistence activities or weather may still preclude a meeting.
- Notify people using flyers, letters, email, newspaper notices, and/or radio announcements, and be sure to include appropriate contact information.
- Post notices on community bulletin boards, often found at post offices, washeterias and stores.
- Pick a location that is easily accessible.
- Assess if language translation is needed - if so, work with the community to identify a translator and administrative support to provide compensation.
- Identify if notes should be taken and included in the record, and plan accordingly.



*Photo Credit: Calista Corporation*





Photo Credit: Donlin Gold

## MEETING ETIQUETTE

- Understand the material you are presenting.
- Be patient - allow extra time for questions and discussions.
- Provide plenty of copies of handouts, materials referenced and business cards.
- Incorporate visual aids where possible- maps, facility diagrams and other graphics are great ways to display information.
- Allow people to voluntarily sign-in by setting up a table along a back or side wall.
- In Alaska Native cultures, food and drink is often provided - consider emulating this. Fresh fruit is particularly appreciated, and refreshments can be left as gifts.
- Be sure to conduct follow-up to address questions and share outcomes.

*Developed from "Protocol Guidelines – Consulting with Indian Tribal Governments"  
Bureau of Reclamation*

## DEPARTMENT CASE STUDIES

### ENGAGING ALASKA NATIVES ON CONTAMINATED SITE ISSUES

The Department established the Reuse and Redevelopment Program to support revitalization of “brownfield” properties across Alaska. Technical support and assistance and limited funding are provided for assessment and remediation activities at qualifying sites. The Department hosts an annual *Alaska State and Tribal Brownfield Workshop*, which builds lasting relationships with tribes managing EPA State & Tribal Response Program (STRP) grants, and developed the *Alaska STRP Brownfield Handbook* as a resource for tribes. The Department solicits requests for assessment or cleanup projects, and organizes pre-and post-project stakeholder meetings by teleconference.

The Department coordinated with the McGrath Native Village Council to complete an assessment at the site of the former McGrath Tribal Hall, which had burned down. Before reconstruction, the tribe needed to understand potential environmental concerns. The Department assessed the site, removed an underground tank and confirmed cleanup through sampling.

**Project results helped the tribe to supplement funding it had already secured to redevelop the property.**





## ENGAGING ALASKA NATIVES ON WASTEWATER DISCHARGE ISSUES

The Department established the Alaska Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Program (APDES) to manage permitting and compliance of wastewater discharge. A public participation process that includes early notice and involvement opportunities for local and tribal governments was developed. Additionally, the Department secured a State Environmental Justice Cooperative Agreement grant to provide training; create outreach, guidance and tools to facilitate tribal involvement in the APDES program; and develop a communication protocol ultimately signed by the Department's Commissioner and tribal chiefs from six Yukon-Koyukuk region villages.

During the early notice process for a proposed individual APDES permit to a small suction dredge operator in the Sand Point area, three potentially affected tribes were identified and sent informative letters and maps. One tribe expressed concerns about areas they identified as fragile and highly productive. The Department addressed tribal concerns by incorporating restrictions within a general permit for small suction dredge operators that excludes discharge in areas the tribe was concerned about including kelp, shellfish, and eel and sea grass beds.

**This is an example of how providing opportunities for tribes to review and inform proposed permitting actions can facilitate the development of sound permits that meet agency requirements and are more protective of the environment and based on a full understanding of local conditions.**

The Department successfully realizes its mission to protect human health and the environment when effectively coordinating with Alaska Natives to provide technical assistance, project oversight, and inform and involve local and tribal governments in agency actions and decisions.

## **ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION**

410 Willoughby Ave. Ste. 303  
Juneau, Alaska 99811-1800  
Phone: (907) 465-5180  
Fax: (907) 465-5177  
[dec.alaska.gov](http://dec.alaska.gov)

## **ADDITIONAL CULTURAL RESOURCES**

### **Alaska Native Heritage Center**

[www.alaskanative.net](http://www.alaskanative.net)

### **Alaska Native Knowledge Network**

[www.ankn.uaf.edu](http://www.ankn.uaf.edu)

### **Alaska Native Language Center**

[www.uaf.edu/anlc](http://www.uaf.edu/anlc)

### **Alaska's Native Peoples: A Call to Understanding**

[www.uaa.alaska.edu/books-of-the-year/year08-09/index.cfm](http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/books-of-the-year/year08-09/index.cfm)

### **Alaskool**

[www.alaskool.org](http://www.alaskool.org)

