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Language, Native People, and Land Management in Alaska

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ABSTRACT. The native people of Alaska rely on access to land for subsistence resources. As a result of a series of congressional acts, about 88% of Alaska's land is now managed by federal or state agencies. For native people to retain their subsistence use of resources they must affect agency management decisions. Effective participation in the decision process requires clear translation between English and native languages, of which there are 20 in Alaska. Translation to these languages, even those with few speakers, is important because: elders, the primary decision makers in native communities, are most likely to speak the native language; language survival relates directly to cultural survival; and land management agencies have become the latest Western institutions to suppress native language and culture. Translation, however, is difficult due to substantial differences in English and native language vocabularies, particularly in the area of land management. Three solutions are proposed: training of translators and support of "two-way" terminology workshops; development of a unified glossary of agency management terms; and use of traditional (native) place names and terms by agencies. Agencies are encouraged to provide support to implement these solutions.

Key words: native people, language, translation, public participation, land management

RÉSUMÉ. Les autochtones de l'Alaska comptent sur l'accès au territoire pour trouver leurs ressources de subsistance. Suite à une série de lois adoptées par le Congrès, environ 88 p. cent des terres de l'Alaska sont maintenant gérées par des agences fédérales ou de l'État. Pour que les autochtones conservent l'utilisation de leurs ressources à des fins de subsistance, ils doivent agir sur les décisions de l'agence concernant la gestion. Une participation efficace dans le processus décisionnel exige une traduction précise entre l'anglais et les langues autochtones - qui sont au nombre de 20 en Alaska. La traduction vers ces langues - y compris celles qui ne sont parlées que par quelques locuteurs - est importante pour les raisons suivantes: les anciens, qui sont les plus importants preneurs de décision dans les collectivités autochtones, parlent très probablement une langue autochtone; la survie de la langue est directement liée à la survie culturelle; et les agences qui s'occupent de la gestion foncière sont devenues les dernières institutions occidentales à réprimer la langue autochtone et la culture. La traduction est cependant difficile, vu les grandes différences dans le vocabulaire anglais et autochtone, en particulier dans le domaine de la gestion foncière. On propose trois solutions, à savoir: la formation de traducteurs et l'appui à des ateliers de terminologie dans les deux langues; la création d'un glossaire regroupant les termes se rapportant à la gestion foncière; et l'utilisation par les agences de toponymes et termes traditionnels (autochtones). On encourage les agences à offrir leur appui pour la mise en place de ces solutions.

Mots clés: autochtones, langue, traduction, participation du public, gestion foncière

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INTRODUCTION

> Unlike other Indo-European languages, it seems that Indian and Inuit (Eskimo) languages cannot be calibrated with our own. Native people dissect nature and the universe differently, and this often leads to fundamental differences in perceptions of what is true, what is right, and what conduces to public needs and welfare [Gamble, 1986:22].

Although many elements of Western culture are found in the "bush," a large number of native people in Alaska — Inuit (Eskimos), Indians, and Aleuts — continue their traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering (Kruse, 1984; Schneider, 1982). These subsistence activities require vast tracts of land. Before 1971, the indigenous people occupied and used the largely vacant lands of Alaska without benefit of a treaty or settlement of their aboriginal rights. This changed in 1971 when Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which set aside 44 million acres, or about 12% of the state, for native people. The remaining 330 million acres were divided among state and federal agencies, primarily by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980. (Less than 1% of the state remained in private, non-native, ownership.) The act effectively resolved land ownership in the state, setting in motion a major new activity — land management (Gallagher and Epps, 1988).

Today, the native people of Alaska, having battled with Congress for a settlement of their aboriginal rights, find that they must struggle with federal and state agencies to maintain their traditional access to and use of resources on the large portion of the state that is public land. Effective participation of native people in agency decision making requires clear communication, in both directions, across the language barrier.

In a previous paper (Gallagher, 1988) I described a broad range of factors that prevent full and effective participation of native people in Alaska. Among these are the large number of management agencies and the complexity of management organizations, processes, and terms; communication style differences, such as the appropriateness of direct questions; and the lack of resources in the native community to attend meetings and review documents. This paper focuses on a related problem — language — particularly on the problem of accurately translating between English and native languages. The paper is general in character, as it is difficult to portray specifically the diversity of native languages and cultures in Alaska or the diversity of individuals within each culture. The intent of the paper, then, is to increase the sensitivity of both agency managers and native people to the nature of the problem and to the types of solutions that might be considered.

NATIVE LANGUAGES IN ALASKA

There are 20 native languages in Alaska, divided into two major families (Krauss, 1980). (Fig. 1 shows the regions where each language is dominant.) The Eskimo-Aleut family of 5 languages is spoken in the western and northern portion of the state and the Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit family of 13 languages is found in the central and southern part of the state. Two additional languages (Haida and Tsimshian) are found in the southeast panhandle.

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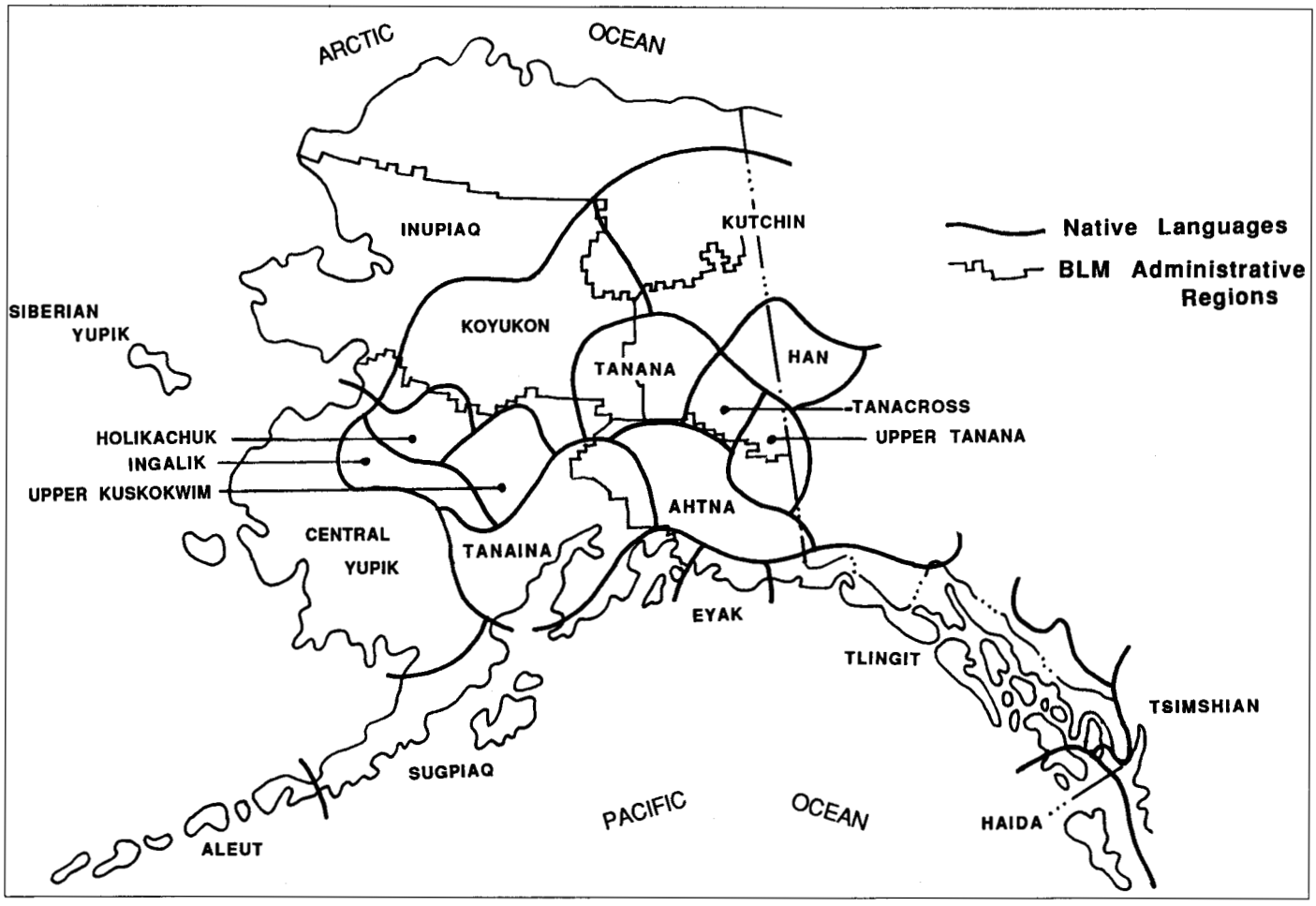

FIG. 1. Boundaries of Alaska's native languages and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administrative regions (from Krauss, 1974).

The population of each native group and the percentage of native people that speak the language vary widely (Krauss, 1980) (Table 1). The number of speakers of native languages ranges from 13 000 for Central Yup'ik to just 2 speakers of Eyak. The percentage of speakers within a native group ranges from 100% for Siberian Yup'ik to less than 20% for several languages.

The older members of the community are much more likely to speak the native language than children (Krauss, 1980). Several languages are now considered "moribund," having no new speakers. The youngest speaker of the Tanana language was over 50 years of age in 1980 (Krauss, 1980). Most of Alaska's native languages are threatened with extinction in the next century (Krauss, 1980).

The large number of native languages complicates the matter of translation. Because agency management occurs on a statewide or regional basis, translation would often be necessary into two or more languages. (Figure 1 shows, in addition to the language boundaries, the five administrative districts of the Bureau of Land Management, one of the many land management agencies in Alaska [Gallagher and Todd, 1991]. All of the districts overlap at least two language regions.)

IMPORTANCE OF NATIVE LANGUAGES

Given the need to translate into at least two, or maybe many, languages, it would seem reasonable to translate only to those languages with a large number of speakers. The number or percentage of speakers of a language does not, however, accurately reflect the importance of the value of translation. At least three factors make translation more important than numbers would suggest.

First, as noted, it is the older members of the community who are most likely to speak the native language fluently. In native communities the elders typically play the dominant role in decision making (Madsen, 1982; Guedon, 1974). English is recognized as a difficult language for public meetings in rural Alaska, in part because it eliminates elders from the discussion (Madsen, 1982). Translation to the native language allows the elders to participate more fully. When agencies do not use translation there is increased risk of misunderstanding the interests of the community. It is possible for agencies to hear primarily those community members that do not have decision-making authority and, by listening only to those who speak English, to subvert the normal decision-making hierarchy and process of the community.

Second, language is more than a way to communicate, it is a critical component of culture. The interrelationship of language and culture has been argued by many (Whorf, 1956; Lander, 1965; Bloom, 1981). The interrelationship of native cultures and their language is considered particularly important. As Krauss (1980:89) writes: "If Alaska native languages die I frankly do not know what future there is for Alaska native culture. Language is in my view the most essential part of

TABLE 1. Language groups in Alaska (from Krauss, 1982)

Language family	Language name	Population	Number speaking
Eskimo-Aleut			
	Aleut	2100	600
	Alutiiq (Sugpiaq)	3100	900
	Central Yupik	16 000	13 000
	Siberian Yupik	1100	1050
	Inupiaq	12 500	5000
Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit			
	Tlingit	9000	1600
	Eyak	20	2
	Ahtna	500	150
	Tanaina	800	150
	Ingalik	300	80
	Holikachuk	150	20
	Koyukon	2300	650
	Upper Kuskokwim	150	120
	Tanana	350	70
	Tanacross	200	100
	Upper Tanana	300	200
	Han	60	20
	Kutchin	1000	500
Tsimshian		1000	150
Haida		500	100

culture." Leap (1988) argues that language renewal is the key to cultural survival for native people. Given the close relationship between language and culture, land management agencies, whether they choose to be or not, are involved in the future of native cultures. This makes the issue of translation far more critical than simply achieving effective public participation.

The third factor is the historic role of Western institutions in suppressing native languages (Krauss, 1980). Western missionaries and religions, as early as the 1890s, discouraged native people from speaking their language. The Bureau of Indian Affairs implemented a national public policy to suppress native languages from 1910 to 1960. The Alaska public school system continued this suppression through the 1960s. Native children who spoke their own language in schools were often severely punished. "Most [schools] . . . actively discouraged it [native language] by punishing children for speaking their own languages, striking them, taping their mouths shut, and isolating individual offenders. Such mistreatment remains a vivid traumatic memory for many middle-aged Native people today" (Thompson, 1984:30). In 1972 the Alaska legislature passed the Alaska Bilingual Education bill, which formally ended language suppression as public policy. However, the bill only allowed native languages to be taught in public schools; the few native language programs introduced in the public schools had ". . . no positive interest in the survival of the Native language" (Krauss, 1980:30). Given this history, land management agencies should seriously consider whether they wish to be judged as but the latest Western institution to deny native people their language and culture.

VOCABULARY AND TRANSLATION

Translation between English and the native languages, particularly in the area of land management, is difficult. Native languages and English are "radically different" from each other (Thompson, 1984:2). They share no words except those introduced in the past century of contact (Krauss, 1980). The roots of native languages are in Asia, the roots of English in Europe. Perhaps as important, as hunting and gathering cultures, native people developed a quite different collection of words from those found in the industrialized Western culture. Each culture has developed concepts and terms useful to achieve its own ends. Thompson (1984:9) writes, "In a sense, a modern language recapitulates the history of social and cultural changes among its people, as new words are added and old words dropped to suit a changing environment."

The difference in vocabulary ranges from the subtle to the obvious. Davidson (1974:9) describes a subtle example when he writes: "The Yup'ik language has words for being a poor hunter, for being hungry, sick or cold. But there were no words for being rich or poor in a modern sense." The concepts of rich and poor, which would seem to be universal concepts, did not develop among Yup'ik-speaking people. More obvious problems occur with such Western concepts and terms as "corporation" and "private property" (Berger, 1985).

Of interest here are problems of translating land management terms to native languages and translating native concepts and information about the land and resources to English. The English vocabulary offers a long list of useful words for managers: manage, process, plan, goals, objectives, information, alternatives, decision, impact, resources, and policy. Each of these words comes from Greek or Latin roots. Other words that are important in Western culture, and specifically to land managers, are such concepts as park, refuge, and wilderness and such activities as camping, picnicking, and bird watching. Land managers have added their own jargon, such as "carrying capacity," "multiple use," and "environmental impact statement" (Schwarz *et al.*, 1976). These words make little or no sense to traditional native people, who have a substantially different relationship to the land. Similarly, native languages contain words for concepts and activities not found in English. Translation of native concepts and activities related to "land management" has not been attempted.

A review of dictionaries of three Native languages — Central Yup'ik (Jacobson, 1984), Inupiaq (MacLean, 1980), and Ahtna Athabascan (Kari, 1990) shows that few of the English management terms mentioned above have an equivalent in native languages. Inupiaq is the most comparable language, with words for "to decide" (*sivunniq*), "to plan" (*sivunniuq*), "planner" (*sivunniugti*), "manage" (*analat*), and "information" (*ugallautisimaaqttuag*). Central Yup'ik has words for "to make plans" (*pillerkir*) and "planner, those who try to deal with the future" (*ciunerkiungnaqellriit*). The Ahtna Athabascan dictionary lists only one word from the list, "to have a plan for" (*pghananilt'ae*). While these dictionaries are not comprehensive, the lack of equivalent terms is consistent with the general lack of Western concepts of land management among native people.

Given the lack of "calibration," it is extremely difficult to translate accurately between English and native languages in the field of land management. Translation is almost always an exercise in approximation. For example, the Inupiaq word for "information" (*ugallautisimaaqttuag*) translates to either "the thing that has been told" or "one who has been informed," depending on context. "Environmental impact statement" has been translated in Inupiaq to *inuuniagvium irrusiata allannugniagniksranagu,* which means, approximately, "a place where you live — the way it is — a statement of how it is going to be changed." The expectation that translations can be concise is not realistic. The opportunity for misunderstandings when dealing with complex land management issues is very real.

The problem of accurate translations is further complicated by the lack of accepted definitions for some terms within the land management profession. Many of the terms used by managers, such as "wilderness" and "multiple use," do not have accepted definitions even among different groups within Western culture (Knopp and Bruder, 1985). Vaudrin (1974) cynically notes that translation of professional jargon is always a two-step process, first into standard English, and then into the native language. A great variety of terminology for equivalent concepts and activities can be found in the over 100 regional-scale plans prepared by agencies and now in effect in Alaska (Gallagher and Todd, 1991). The management plans prepared by agencies, for example, are variably called "resource management plans" (Bureau of Land Management), "land and resource management plan" (U.S. Forest Service), "general management plan" (National Park Service), "comprehensive conservation plan" (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), and "area plan" (Alaska Department of Natural Resources). The independence of each agency in creating its own terminology has created a literal barrier to public understanding and, in particular, to translation to native languages.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Improve Translation

To improve translation there is a need for translators who are more qualified and for improved translation of concepts and terms. In the past, agencies have relied primarily on community residents who are more or less bilingual to translate. This practice often leads to unintentional miscommunication and can lead to intentional miscommunication when the translator has a personal "agenda." To be accurate, when translating about land management the translator must have special training. As with other professions, the jargon of land management is difficult, with everyday words taking on new meaning. Casual use of technical terms can lead to major errors.

In addition, it is necessary that translators be able to translate in both directions. This means that they also must be familiar with native culture or trained to be able to accurately represent native culture values and information. A program to provide this training is needed. Such a program might provide a credential to those who demonstrate the needed skill. Trained personnel, of course, need to be paid a professional wage.

To be effective, translators need to have at their disposal words and phrases for difficult concepts. One strategy used in the past is the "terminology workshop." The North Slope Borough, the local government of northern Alaska, has held terminology workshops to translate Western legal concepts and parliamentary terminology into Inupiaq. The workshops have provided Inupiaq words for such English terms as "arrest" (*tiguniq*), "suspect" (*iliamgiraq*), and "point of order" (*uniunas*). There have been no workshops for translation of land management terms, however.

One major change in translation workshops is proposed. Past workshops have been "one-way" — from English to the native language. Future workshops should spend equal effort translating native words into English. In this way native values and information can be better introduced into management decisions. If only Western concepts and terms are translated, it is assured that the value of native concepts and terms will be diminished in the decision-making process.

Control Vocabulary

As noted above, the vocabulary of management is difficult, requiring professional training to master. When used in public documents the vocabulary is very difficult to read. A survey of management plans prepared by federal and state agencies in Alaska found all written at between the 15th and 17th grade level (Gallagher and Patrick-Riley, 1989). Thus, these documents, intended for public review, were written at from 7 to 9 grade levels above the "plain language" (8th grade) level required for consumer documents in several states. The difficulty of the plans was related primarily to the use of a high proportion of long, management-oriented words. Difficulty was enhanced by the use of word chains, such as "environmental impact statement," and by the extensive use of acronyms, such as ANCSA, ANILCA, NEPA, EIS, FLPMA, and JFSLUPC, to name but a few.

To resolve this problem, agencies need to identify their audience and then develop a defensible writing program. Of course, difficult words should also be removed from other forms of communication as well. Since there are so many land management agencies in Alaska, it is important that they agree on the definition of words. A common glossary is needed that is supported by all of the major land management agencies in Alaska, federal and state. The glossary might be developed from an existing guide, such as the Wildland Planning Glossary (Schwarz *et al.*, 1976). Ideally, such a glossary would be brief and readable and would be developed specifically for the Alaska situation, involving native communicators in the development process.

Use Native Terms

There are two key opportunities to use native language in land management. The first is simply to use traditional native place names for geographic features such as mountains and rivers. Agencies typically use the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) base maps for planning in Alaska. These maps, unfortunately, use Western names that native people may or may not use. The maps have caused confusion in public meetings where native people have their own terms. Also, the USGS names supplant traditional names that often have considerable information of value to the traditional cultures. The Tanana people, for example, call the ridge on which the Fairbanks campus of the University of Alaska sits "Troth Yeddha," or "Indian potato ridge" (Kari, 1983). Native place names can be added to agency maps without removing USGS names or incurring substantial cost.

The second strategy is to incorporate native terms for wildlife and plants into the management program and plan. Each native language has names for important resources, and these names often have special meaning, descriptive value, or a level of detail not found in English alternatives. For example, the Yup'ik word for fish is *nega*, which is also the word for food (Jacobson, 1984). This relationship underscores the importance of fish to that culture. An understanding of this double meaning helps understand why the Yup'ik people do not approve of "catch and release" fishing, which they consider equivalent to "playing with your food."

The descriptive power of native words is found in the Yup'ik word for bear, *carayak*, which translates to "terrible, fearsome thing" (Jacobson, 1984). And some words describe resources in a finer level of detail than found in English. The Yup'ik words *aciirturtet* ("the first group of king salmon

running under the smelt") and *masseq* ("old salmon near spawning") (Jacobson, 1984) discriminate between salmon in a way not possible with single English words. Native words can be added to agency plans and reports, just as biological (Latin) names are provided now. The use of native terms would begin to introduce "native science" (Crampton, 1988) into management decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

These strategies require different levels of investments by agencies. Some are potentially very simple and inexpensive, such as adding native place names to maps. Other solutions, such as holding terminology workshops and developing a common glossary, require considerable investment. Also, while some of the solutions can be handled directly by agencies, others probably require the assistance of other institutions. Terminology workshops, for example, might call upon the services of the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Given the large number of land management agencies in Alaska, it is important that their efforts are coordinated. There are definite benefits to native people and to agencies if all land management agencies support the same program. An interagency group is desirable to provide the coordination necessary, particularly about how to expend limited resources. Difficult questions, such as which languages to focus on first, should be made by this group.

An interagency group could also investigate ways to reduce the amount of duplicative contact with native people. The historic lack of cooperation among Alaska's land management agencies (Gallagher and Gasbarro, 1989) needs to be set aside. Cooperation among federal and state governments would permit consideration of simplifying activities, such as joint meetings and hearings, shared information workshops, cooperative publications, and even interagency plans. Such coordination would reduce the amount of material that needed to be translated and would allow the cost of translation to be spread among all agencies.

Native people do not have the resources to implement the solutions themselves. Universities and philanthropic organizations may provide some support, but the land management agencies have the primary role in dealing with the translation problem. It is the land management agencies that have the obligation, under law, to provide opportunities for public participation, and it is the agencies that make the decision to use translators and translation. Unfortunately, agencies are only recently beginning to recognize that their traditional public participation programs may not be working in cross-cultural settings like rural Alaska.

Now, a decade after ANILCA, the initial rush to begin management has waned. As the land management agencies enter into a more mature phase of their management in the 1990s, it is time to pause and examine the issue of language, native people, and land management. Agencies need to establish a participation program that permits native people to help determine "what is true, what is right, and what conduces to public needs and welfare" (Gamble, 1986:22) and to establish a translation program that supports the renewal, not the extinction, of native languages and cultures.

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