



# Alaska Resource Management: The Relationship between the Government and Alaskan Natives

*Lydia Mills*

Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa USA  
millslyd@grinnell.edu

*I looked at relationships between Alaskan Natives and members of Fish and Game and the Forest Service in the context of resource management in Southeast Alaska. It is known that these relationships are often problematic, however most studies give only anecdotal speculations of why or focus on one stakeholder's perspective. I took a grounded theory approach and spent three months in four different Alaskan communities over the summer of 2013. I gathered 20 interviews, observed two Fish and Game subsistence permit distributions, a Forest Service consultation, and did participant observation counting salmon as a contracted government worker through a Tribal entity for the Forest Service. My goal was to identify underlying patterns, problems and solutions. I identified three categories of conflict: limits and access to resources, bureaucratic problems, and personal relationship problems. I found that these conflicts are driven by access to scientific and bureaucratic information, general communication, and historical tension. All stakeholders wish to establish better relationships, address historical tension, and strengthen communication about bureaucratic and scientific topics. Streamlining science and bureaucratic information and making it more available through effective communication would help address the perpetuation of a collective memory and set the grounds for better co-management and building better relationships.*

## **Introduction**

Alaska is a co-managed ecosystem in which Native Alaskans and the government (both State and Federal) have legally prescribed mutual rights and responsibilities to manage Alaska's resources for conservation, sustainability, economic gain and cultural and dietary needs.

It is generally known by the stakeholders that the relationship among them is often problematic. These tensions are reflected in the current

© Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa USA

relationships where stakeholders must interact for resource management and allocation. Tensions manifest in the form of work and domestic stress, inefficient resource management, and feelings of discrimination. Problems with co-management of resources stem from a variety of reasons. The relationship between the Government and Natives predisposes the two to distrust one another after events like assimilation (Hinkley, 1980), resource management complications, loss of control over cultural identity tied to subsistence practices (Dombrowski, 2007), and land ownership complications (Beier, 2008). Many of these tensions have been researched through the views of a single stakeholder or have been described anecdotally. I identified ways to decrease conflict and thus facilitate a more efficient and effective management system.

### **Methods**

I talked to multiple stakeholders and took a grounded theoretical approach to identify underlying patterns and problems with stakeholder relations in resource management. The stakeholders I focus on are the Department of Fish and Game, the Forest Service, and Alaskan Natives. I analyzed the data collected from multiple stakeholders to identify common patterns and underlying issues in resource management. I identified ways to decrease conflict, increase management efficiency, and enhance wellbeing. I achieved this by analyzing contexts in which Alaskan Natives and the Government must work together in the management of resources and identifying the circumstances under which these relationships are positive and negative for different stakeholders. I gathered information about resource management relationships through various methods. I did participant observation where I worked as a part of a Native field crew contracted by the Forest Service through a Tribal entity counting sockeye escapement. I interviewed 20 stakeholders from four different towns on what they identified as the biggest problems and solutions regarding resource management. I also observed two Fish and Game subsistence permit distributions and a Forest Service consultation.






### **Results**

After sorting and organizing data, I arrived at three categories of conflict (Table 1). 'Limitations on Resources' refers to conflicts that have to do with immediate access to resources and 'on the ground' or 'immediate'

applications of bureaucracy. ‘Access to Bureaucracy’ focuses on understanding and utilization of government structures and policy making. ‘People to People Relationships’ concerns personal relationships and interactions. As Table 1 shows, I determined the relative amount of concern on four different levels from the highest (the darkest) to the lowest (white).

**Table 1. Ranking and Summarization of Problems by Stakeholder**

Problem: Stakeholder:	Limits on Resources	Access to Bureaucracy	People to People Relationships
Alaska Department of Fish and Game	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management is difficult to mold to individual needs</li> <li>• People shouldn't be limited on their food supply</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not a lot of outreach efforts, and people are not proactive</li> <li>• Difficult to translate science</li> <li>• Difficult to facilitate understanding of agency working</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discrimination of agency from locals</li> <li>• Difficult to discuss wants and values of individual needs, especially if there is cultural miss communication</li> <li>• There is a over-all separation between the government and subsistence users</li> <li>• Tensions between ownership and birthright</li> </ul>
Forest Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a conflict of interest between commercial and subsistence fisheries</li> <li>• Translating the science of limits is difficult</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not enough subsistence users have voice.</li> <li>• Communication about policies difficult due to distance and poor consultation methods</li> <li>• Difficult to facilitate understanding of agency working</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships can go poorly when either side is not passionate</li> <li>• Relationships difficult to establish due to time and distance</li> <li>• Some lingering ethnocentric attitudes and distrust being perpetuated</li> </ul>
Forest Service Law Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard to stress conservation of resource to non-locals</li> </ul>	∅	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of cultural sensitivity</li> <li>• Treated unkindly</li> </ul>

<p>Alaskan Native</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not getting enough resource</li> <li>• Subsistence is seen as recreation</li> <li>• Allocation of resource collection to various stakeholders unknown</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forced to react to change rather than facilitation or participation</li> <li>• Lack of power and voice in process</li> <li>• Huge amounts of bureaucracy, laws, and policies are difficult to navigate</li> <li>• Method of setting limits unknown</li> <li>• Disconnect between law makers and followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings of discrimination</li> <li>• Rarely interact with government</li> <li>• Negative feels generated by imposed 'otherness'</li> <li>• Otherness creates resentment</li> <li>• Tensions between birthright and ownership</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key:</b></p>			
	<p>-Everyone talked about and stressed as important and a key issue</p>		
	<p>-Not everyone mentioned yet was important and seen as a key issue to those who mentioned it</p>		
	<p>-Came up as being important to a few individuals but was seen as a bi-product of a bigger issue</p>		
	<p>-Issue that came up very briefly, the speaker did not dwell on or have relation to other issues</p>		
	<p>-Issue did not come up</p>		

## Discussion

I identified miscommunication as the main driver of conflict. Poor communication can be further broken down into communicating science and bureaucracy. All stakeholders felt that improved communication is needed to make science and bureaucracy more accessible. Miscommunication on these topics provokes and exacerbates a collective memory that adds to historical tension. All informants discussed the difficulty in receiving and sharing this type of information. Addressing miscommunication would lesson most persistent tensions created by historical trauma, thus setting a platform for achieving the shared goals of all stakeholders: to work together to keep the environment healthy.

Science was described by my informants as jobs, outreach, information, and ultimately having the power to close seasons, regulate quotas, include (or exclude) traditional knowledge, and decide how a resource is utilized. The Forest Service and Fish and Game rely heavily on science to make

decisions about sustainability and to define conservation that is beneficial for all stakeholders as well as the environment. I found that all informants felt that science needs to be more accessible and inclusive.

Similarly to Flanders (1998), I found that every informant who mentioned science regardless of stakeholder category, treated science as undisputed fact. Flanders (1998) argues that the power of science is damaging to resource use when the ideal is considered more than the reality. When science isn't applied properly or understood it can misdirect laws and limits. Forest Service informants described this problem when talking about fishing regulations being set at a district level rather than at a stream level, resulting in inaccurate allocation of resources. My *Limitations to Resources* category of problems was largely a product of this. These problems could be avoided by strengthening scientific methods through critique from multiple views. Results and application of scientific information could be more holistic and realistic when made widely available. Making science accessible would not only strengthen the studies, but allow all stakeholders to have access to the power of science.

All stakeholders agreed that science needs to be more accessible. When science is accessible, it is often easier to identify shared values and ideologies and ultimately work together. I found that when science is available, identifying priorities such as sustainability and conservation allows multiple stakeholders to set aside differences and agree. This was illustrated in a voluntary closure of a salmon creek to allow populations to recover. Many government informants also stated a desire to incorporate more traditional knowledge and get subsistence users involved in scientific investigation. Informants suggested outreach programs that were successful at connecting science and traditional knowledge to get a more holistic picture of the research.

Bureaucracy was mentioned by nearly all stakeholders as a topic that needed to be streamlined to make science more accessible. All stakeholders expressed that bureaucracy was very dense, and became a problem for both inner and outer agency communication. All stakeholders felt that bureaucratic issues also affected relationships, especially when bureaucracy wasn't streamlined. If basic and important information could be streamlined and made more accessible, working with the government and assisting non-government peoples would be much easier.

Many Forest Service informants felt that inner agency communication was almost non-existent. This was described as a problem because different workers have different experiences. Sharing them would create a more efficient agency and allow for better trouble-shooting. Two Fish and Game informants described that the State is an agency designed to help people but needs active prolonged engagement or in depth knowledge of inner agency workings. The Fish and Game informants felt that active involvement was needed either from community members or with the help of a liaison. Many government informants felt that having a liaison of some type would make translating values and objectives from both parties much more effective.

Improved communication will provide a way to: share scientific information, share and decide bureaucratic information together, and build a relationship based on mutual understanding and respect which would help heal the past and build a better future. Improving communication would allow stakeholders to realize shared goals and values such as sustainability and improved co-management. Establishing co-management would cause a more positive relationship and better management of resources.

Many Forest Service informants described successful outreach programs. These had several things in common: making an effort to be available in person, allowing exchange of information from both parties, and recognition and respect of priorities by all parties even if priorities are different. Many Native informants felt that if they could speak to and question the government workers in person it would solve a lot of confusion around both science and bureaucracy. This would be a highly positive outcome, and make people feel as if they too are included in management of the resources they use. One example I observed during permit distributions could be used as a model for successful outreach as well as prioritizing discussion. The Fish and Game workers made all the bureaucracy accessible by being available in person. They listened to each case and utilized the tools and information they had to answer questions. They also explain the scientific reasoning, which was accepted as valid because it made things clear.

Many Forest Service workers felt that when information is brief and concise it has a much higher chance of being distributed and read. I think that this could be used in a positive manner for introducing people to projects. An informant described a method of sharing information in this

manner: the informant would first make a document with summaries of the year's projects that the Forest Service was planning to do. The next step was to distribute the document to the Tribal entity. The informant described that they would also show up to as many of the monthly meetings as possible, and if they weren't scheduled to speak about anything in particular they would discuss the summaries in order of the soonest event. The informant was met with immense gratitude and kindness.

Another successful communication method was to establish how stakeholders wished to interact. Two Forest Service informants described the importance of sitting down with the Tribal entity workers and having a conversation about preferred times and communication styles. This allowed for all stakeholders to prepare questions and information before the designated time. Establishing a time to communicate involved a quick discussion about whether it was best to contact one another through the phone, formal mail, monthly meetings, or email. This establishment of a casual verbal agreement seemed to be extremely effective for creating a best fit communication method for effective information sharing.

In my observations, examples of stakeholders successfully communicating had the same results. They involved a clear effort of all stakeholders to incorporate each other's views through respectful discussion of the project and end goal, and they left all stakeholders feeling as though they accomplished something together.

Government-Native interactions around subsistence and resource management is a key place of interaction for the two stakeholders and thus the primary space in which feelings of discrimination occur. I found in my research that feelings of discrimination were largely generated from failure to access science and bureaucracy as well as negative interactions. Almost all of the Native informants felt some sort of discrimination that is related to feeling as though they were intentionally excluded from scientific or bureaucratic information to keep them away from resources. To first understand why this is, the perpetuation of a collective memory must be understood.

A collective memory is where a group of peoples who suffered a trauma remember and mentally relive the trauma when negative incidents happen (Lebow, 2008). This can be seen when a member of the one dominant group makes the member of the once oppressed group uncomfortable, hurt, or fearful, the individual will relate this negative experience back to the past for

a logical explanation (Lebow, 2008). Many Natives I interviewed felt as though racist attitudes surrounded them, and felt as though the government was responsible for keeping their resource acquisition low, and felt that this was because the government was discriminating. This would have been true in the past, so every encounter with law enforcement or government workers that are negative, or even not explicitly racist, will continue to drive people to think the government has a dislike for Natives, especially if the reasoning behind negative or harsh actions isn't understood.

The Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game both showed great concern for the past and wished to build a better future. Government informants expressed wanting to get rid of the negative feelings of the past, and worried because they didn't know how to express care or concern for something they themselves had not experienced or caused.

Solutions to healing historical trauma involve sincerity and understanding. As Bradford (2003) suggested, awareness of collective memory can be an effective tool for reconstructing a positive relationship for both stakeholders. Listening to Native oratories and studying what took place may give some insight and sensitivity (Bradford, 2003). Other anthropologists have also found it very effective to use Native ceremonies as a way to apologize appropriately (Bradford, 2003).

I found through my research and observations of interactions between Alaskan Natives and government workers that kindness goes a long way to stop the perpetuation of a collective memory. During a permit distribution I witnessed a friendly Fish and Game worker assisting locals of the village with permits, filling out affidavits and making conversation. This was successful. People relaxed, spoke freely and smiled with the worker and even stayed around to chat. The Fish and Game worker's kindness went a long way because they was willing to explain and negotiate government forms, treated people fairly without prejudice, and allowed people to speak freely and worked with each individual who voiced concern. Forest Service workers described similar interactions with their Native field crews and informants in the villages. Informants expressed that people were willing to come to them and trust them even if their job position held no relevance to the current government related resource problem. These relationships and friendly interactions give the government agencies credibility as being a resource with service to the individuals that is run by individuals, rather than



an impenetrable monolithic structure. All stakeholders expressed that bureaucracy can be very dense, and that this creates problems for both inner and outer agency communication. All stakeholders felt that bureaucratic issues also affected relationships, especially when bureaucracy wasn't streamlined. If basic and important information could be streamlined and made more accessible, working with the government and assisting non-government peoples would be much easier. Thus, successful communication is important for efficient management and decreasing historical tension. Enhancing this communication through attention to science and bureaucracy will enhance the wellbeing of all stakeholders as well as allow for management issues to be resolved with less stress and tension.

## References

- Beier, Colin M. 2008. "Influence of Political Opposition and Compromise on Conservation Outcomes in the Tongass National Forest, Alaska." *Conservation Biology* 22(6):1485-1496.
- Bradford, William 2002 "with a very Great Blame on our Hearts": Reparations, Reconciliation, and an American Indian Plea for Peace with Justice. *American Indian Law Review* 27(1):1-175.
- Dombrowski, Kirk. 2007. "Subsistence Livelihood, Native Identity and Internal Differentiation in Southeast Alaska." *Anthropologica* 49(2):211-229.
- Flanders, Nicholas E.1998 Native American Sovereignty and Natural Resource Management. *Human Ecology* 26(3):425-449.
- Hinckley, Ted C. 1980 "we are More Truly Heathen than the Natives": John G. Brady and the Assimilation of Alaska's Tlingit Indians. *The Western Historical Quarterly* 11(1):37-55.
- Lebow, Richard Ned. 2008 The Future Memory. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617:25-41.