

Arts, Language, Culture: Smithsonian Indigenous Heritage Collaborations in Alaska

Aron L. Crowell

In this session we will consider evolving relationships between museums and indigenous communities, between material culture collections and the people whose heritage they represent. I want to thank Michael Mason for challenging us with critical questions about how community participation can be enjoined, how cultural knowledge can be represented and transmitted, and how we can achieve equity and lasting impacts.

- The paradox of museums, as we know, is that they historically separated tangible things, conceived as specimens or artifacts, from the intangible cultural meanings that were associated with the creation and use of those objects. Every museum piece was plucked from an ongoing flow of cultural knowledge, practice, narrative, and aesthetics and set aside, out of time and social circulation, into the physical context of the museum and the intellectual context of Western interpretation.

- Today we recognize that while museums curate objects, communities curate meaning and memory, and that if we are truly to decolonize museums, as we profess, then this disconnection must be overcome.

I will discuss this dynamic for Alaska, where I direct the northern office of the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Center, located at the Anchorage Museum. Our main office is here in Washington, in the Anthropology Department at the National Museum of Natural History.

- Arctic Studies Center collaborative projects with Alaska Native communities include cultural and archaeological research, ●exhibitions, ●documentation of indigenous arts, and heritage education.

- The Smithsonian has a long history in Alaska starting in the 19th century when large ethnological collections were gathered there for the U.S. National Museum. Two Smithsonian branches, the National Museum of Natural History and National

Museum of the American Indian, together hold over 30,000 heritage items that represent Alaska's 20 indigenous peoples.

- Diverse forms of traditional knowledge, which the Inuit Circumpolar Council describes as a “systematic way of thinking across biological, physical, cultural, and spiritual systems,” have been preserved by Alaska's indigenous communities and offer a rich contemporary context of meaning for the *cultural reactivation* of Smithsonian collections.

- This knowledge system encompasses deep understanding of arctic environments and ways of living from the land and sea; ●traditional designs and technologies; ●oral histories and mythologies; ●social values of cooperation and sharing; and ●indigenous languages, arts, and performance.

- Many in Alaska Native communities view traditional knowledge as essential for health, well-being, resiliency, and ultimately, cultural survival. Tribal leaders and educators state that connecting younger generations more closely with their heritage is an urgent priority.

This perspective arises from Alaska's history. Alaska Natives suffered the destructive impacts of Western domination, from Russian colonization in the 18th century through U.S. colonial rule, missionization, and recent decades of repressive legal and educational policies. To quote briefly from an influential cultural commission, “Alaska Natives were given a clear message that one way of looking at the world was superior to the other. That the survivors did as they were told — abandoning their feasts and ceremonies, their dances and even their languages — is testament not to the correctness of the Western message but to the survivors' states of mind. Having lost multitudes of spiritual and political leaders, artisans, historians, and elders, those who were left were orphans — spiritually as well as physically.”

- This history left a legacy of difficult social conditions and symptoms of cultural breakdown. Educational achievement by Alaska Native students lags other groups at all grade levels as does the high school graduation rate of only 68%. Public education focusing on Alaska Native cultures and languages is a critical tool for keeping students engaged, pointing to opportunities for museums to respond to this need and make a difference.

●A basic approach of our work in Alaska is to cultivate ways for Indigenous and Western knowledge systems to interact and inform each other. This can happen in field research when scientific studies connect with local expertise; ●in collaborative exhibitions and programs that work with cultural objects as expressions of Indigenous knowledge; ●and in schools, where education is enlarged by these two streams of information, rather than the old scenario of replacement, when Alaska Native cultures and languages were suppressed.

●At field sites around the Gulf of Alaska, one of the most biologically productive marine environments on the planet, we employ the scientific tools of archaeology, geology, and paleoenvironmental studies to uncover evidence of Indigenous ecological knowledge in action over a time frame of many centuries. When we study animal bones and artifacts at these sites, we see how people utilized this ecosystem and adapted to its changes. Here we are working at a 500-year old village site in Yakutat Bay in collaboration with the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe, sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

●Settlement of the village by Ahtna immigrants from the Copper River is recorded in oral tradition, and archaeological artifacts and data from the site confirm these oral accounts. A senior Yakutat Tlingit research colleague, Daxhootsu, said that archaeological demonstration of the truth of oral tradition was one of the most important outcomes of the project for her community.

●The educational impacts of this collaborative work are significant. Alaska Native students join us in the field, learning about science and the history of their own communities. We train graduate and undergraduate students, interns, and fellows who join the Center through field schools and lab projects.

●The Arctic Studies Center has also collaborated with Alaska Native experts and observers to document northern ecosystems, ice and weather, climate change, cultural landscapes, and environmental history.

●Returning now to the museum, a leading example of collaborative work with Alaska Native communities is the Smithsonian exhibition *Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska*, which opened at our center in Anchorage in 2010.

Living Our Cultures was made possible by \$14M of state, federal, foundation, and corporate funding, including strong support from Alaska Native regional corporations that were established under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

- Collaborative development of *Living Our Cultures* began with collections and archival research at the Smithsonian. Seven contingents of community scholars traveled with Arctic Studies Center staff to Smithsonian collections facilities near Washington on “reverse expeditions” to discover, discuss, and temporarily reclaim for exhibition some of the objects that had been acquired long ago from their villages.

- The delegates were a distinguished body. Dr. Rosita Worl, Director of the Sealaska Heritage Institute, said of the southeast Alaskan elders who accompanied her to Washington, “I would like to say for the record that these are our scholars. There are the people we selected to represent us and who carry the wisdom of our people and our ancestors.”

- The scholars’ dialogues, many conducted in Alaska Native languages and later translated, documented the intangible realm of technical, artistic, and cultural knowledge that is embodied by material objects.

- The information they shared is the foundation of *Living Our Cultures* and is published on the exhibition website, in the catalog by Smithsonian Books, ● on our YouTube channel, and on ● touch-screen kiosks throughout the exhibition.

- Leadership and staff at both the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian were extremely supportive of the *Living Our Cultures* project, which comprised the most extensive Indigenous consultations and largest object loans that either museum has undertaken. I want to acknowledge Kelly McHugh, who is speaking next in this forum, for her many contributions to this effort on behalf of the National Museum of the American Indian.

- As objects were being prepared for exhibition, Alaska Native artists and consultants traveled to Washington to assist the conservators with repairs and

treatments. This is Elaine Kingeekuk repairing a seal intestine using traditional techniques and sinew thread that she brought with her from St. Lawrence Island.

- Collaboration continued through exhibition planning and design. Alaska Native advisors from all parts of the state with backgrounds in education, museums, and cultural leadership joined the Arctic Studies Center, Anchorage Museum, designers, and media producers to help shape *Living Our Cultures*.

- They contributed to its modes of Indigenous self-representation and perspective, final selections and arrangements of the more than 600 objects on display, exhibition films and media, and the overall exhibit design, which highlights both the uniqueness of each Alaska Native culture and the vital connections between them.

- The exhibition is also a visible storage collection for indigenous knowledge research. Case panels slide apart for access to the objects and the pole and bracket mounting system allows their easy removal for study and discussion in a Community Consultation Room adjacent to the gallery.

- The Arctic Studies Center has facilitated a variety of heritage programs that make use of the exhibition as a cultural resource. These include community workshops and arts residencies in which Alaska Native artists teach youth and adults and interact with the museum public. The artists study objects in the *Living Our Cultures* collection for insights into ancestral techniques and incorporate these discoveries into their work and teaching.

Events in this series have focused on the arts of making of snowshoes,

- bentwood hunting hats, ● fish skin tanning and sewing, ● seal intestine clothing, ● walrus ivory carving, ● grass basketry, ● wood carving, ● moosehide tanning and sewing, and more.

Dawn Biddison, the Arctic Studies Center's assistant curator, produces instructional videos based on these events, in which the artists demonstrate each step of the process and talk about the cultural and personal dimensions of their work. These documentaries are posted on our YouTube channel and distributed on DVD to support revitalization of the arts in rural Alaska Native communities. The programs have reached hundreds of artists and students, many thousands of

public visitors and school groups, and hundreds of thousands of online visitors, who all learn about Smithsonian collections and their connection to living cultures and knowledge.

- With the Anchorage Museum and visiting artists, we have co-organized programs that reach out to Alaska Native youth in Anchorage. Through Urban Interventions, students have made skateboard art and ●street mural art based on designs they discovered in the *Living Our Cultures* exhibition.

- The Arctic Studies Center develops teaching resources for Alaska Native languages, using the method of inviting dialogue about Smithsonian objects by fluent Native speakers, then working with bilingual educators to produce curricula for Alaskan schools from video recordings of the sessions.

- The *Listen and Learn* series, sponsored by the Beringian Heritage Program of the National Park Service, includes courses in Iñupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik, and we plan to do more work in this area. It is valued in a state where all 20 Indigenous languages are classified as endangered by UNESCO and the Alaska Native Language Preservation Council.

- These and dozens of other programs with community scholars, artists, students, and teachers have helped to realize the broader purpose of the exhibition – in the words of its Alaska Native co-creators, to “live our cultures and share our heritage,” both within the museum and beyond its walls. This work has been recognized by the Smithsonian Education Achievement Award, which we received in 2016, and through science and education awards from the National Museum of Natural History.

We’re currently working on a new partnership with the Smithsonian Center for Digital Learning and Access and its Learning Lab project, which will help us to offer our extensive catalog of curricula and learning materials in all 54 Alaskan school districts.

- I want to conclude with a few ideas about implementing collaboration, based on our experience in Alaska.

- The first is the importance of sustainable, long-term partnerships. The Arctic Studies Center's Alaska office exists through a no-cost agreement between the Smithsonian Institution and the Anchorage Museum which has been in place since 1994. Staff, resources, and facilities are shared in-kind in a sustained and productive partnership.

For the Arctic Studies Center, having a base in Anchorage enables a level of active engagement with Alaska Native cultural and educational organizations that would not be possible from Washington.

At the same time, our Washington connection enables important alliances at the Smithsonian, both within the natural history museum and with other units including the National Museum of the American Indian, the Smithsonian Center for Digital Learning and Access, and Smithsonian technology, exhibition, and development offices, all expanding the breadth and depth of what we can offer in Alaska.

- We raise much of the funding for our programs from Alaskan sources, including Alaska Native corporations and foundations, complemented by grants from national foundations. This enables the Alaska office to be virtually self-sustaining at minimal cost to the Smithsonian or the federal government, which protects the continuity of our program. Most importantly, it demonstrates strong and continuing support from Alaskan stakeholders.

- On the important issues of equity and fair representation, we are faced with the challenge of targeting programs to an Alaska Native population of over 100,000 people residing in almost 300 villages, towns, and cities spread across the largest state in the country. There is a very limited road system, and air travel to and from all parts of Alaska is extremely expensive.

Our strategy has been to co-develop programs with regional partners such as Alaska Native museums and cultural foundations. These partners help design projects for maximum benefit to their constituents and recommend the artists, elders, and others who will participate and receive financial compensation for their work. We do not presume to have the local knowledge or right to make these decisions on our own. Leaving equity decisions at the local level has worked out extremely well; we have avoided offense or the appearance of favoritism, and

the community-selected representatives have invariably been excellent. Over time, we have been able to produce programs many parts of the state, aiming for regional parity of access.

- Another guiding principle is “through-collaboration” meaning joint planning, decision-making, and participation in all stages of projects from initial concept to research, design, production, and completion. I discussed this in relation to the *Living Our Cultures* exhibition, but it applies equally to other Arctic Studies Center programs and field research.

- By multi-purposing I mean that collaborative exhibitions, public programming, education, outreach, field research, publication, and digital dissemination can all intersect and build off each other, so that Indigenous participation yields the most value to communities and museums. Everyone’s time, knowledge, and ideas are precious and it’s important to maximize their impact.

- Digital strategies are important, although not all-important. Rural Alaska has reasonably good broadband internet and cellular coverage, and we deliver content to communities through web sites, YouTube, Learning Lab, Facebook and other platforms. The downside is the relative impermanence of online content because of ever-changing technologies and platforms, so we remain committed to books and other non-digital forms of dissemination as well. We are now also working to permanently preserve Alaskan indigenous knowledge research in the Smithsonian’s digital collections databases and archives.

Thank you for being here. I look forward to the other presentations in this panel and thank the Global Consortium for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage for convening this excellent conference.