Picture: Vladimir Bychkov

Russian archaeologists work at an excavation site on the Chukotka Peninsula.

In 1989, American and Soviet planning teams presented the concept of an international park during a tour of Native villages in northwest Alaska and the Chukotka Peninsula. A major step forward came at a summit conference on June 1, 1990, when President Bush and Soviet President Gorbachev announced their intention to create an international park spanning the Bering Strait. The park would include already existing National Park Service units in Alaska and as yet undesignated national park units on the Russian side.

The summit conference agreement called for co-operation in studying ecology, archaeology and cultural heritage on both sides of the Strait. While park management policies would remain with each government, the international park agreement would encourage co-operative efforts among park managers and researchers, the easing of travel restrictions between the nations for research, and joint projects on issues of common concern.

Progress was halted, though, as the Soviet Union collapsed, new Russian governments pursued other priorities and American administrations changed.

What has remained in place, supported by the governments in both the United States and Russia, and by communities, universities and Native organisations on both sides of the Bering Strait, is a research and community heritage programme that fulfils many of the international park goals without the official designation.

"This programme recognises and celebrates the contemporary and historic exchange of biological resources and cultural heritage shared by Russia and the United States," said Rob Arnberger, regional director for the National Park Service in Alaska. "We're encouraging local resident and international partnerships, and working to help sustain the cultural vitality of Native peoples in the central Beringia region."

The National Park Service, through its annual operational appropriation, funds a $700,000 programme to support these research and community projects. Project funding is guided by a five-member panel, with two members representing the NPS and the other three members representing Alaska Native Regional Corporations in north and north-western Alaska.

Work in 2001 was typical, in that it varied considerably in scope and discipline. "We had a University of Washington team working with Russian researchers to investigate past vegetation and geological changes," said Arnberger. "Archaeologists looked at artifacts dating back more than 11,000 years to

Picture: K. Wessels

This part of Chukotka would be included in the Russian part of the proposed Beringian International Park.