

# International Cooperation



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### Joint Statement of the President of the United States of America and the President of the Russian Federation on Cooperation in the Bering Strait Region

**THE WHITE HOUSE  
OFFICE OF THE PRESS SECRETARY**

*For Immediate Release*  
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The President of the United States of America and the President of the Russian Federation:

- Calling for protection of the shared natural and longstanding cultural heritage of Alaska and Chukotka;
- Recognizing the worldwide cultural and natural significance of the Bering Strait region, both as an ancient crossroads and as an area of present-day cooperation between our two countries;
- Noting that the Bering Strait region is important to the economies of both countries;
- Recognizing the many successes of the “Shared Beringian Heritage Program” in better understanding our shared history and sustaining the cultural vitality of the Native peoples in the Central Bering Strait region today;
- Confirming the mutual interest of both countries in deepening cooperation and strengthening ties, particularly in the region of our common boundary in the Bering Strait;

- Noting the important need to protect the rights of Native peoples residing in Alaska and Chukotka and to ensure that residents and Native peoples engaged in cultural and traditional activities aimed at providing for their personal needs have continued access to natural resources in accordance with each nation’s laws;
- Conscious of the importance of cooperation to protect nature and natural resources in the Bering Strait region and to apply effective strategies aimed at sustainable development of the Arctic regions of our countries;
- Understanding the significance of unique Arctic ecosystems of Alaska and Chukotka in the Bering Strait region; and
- Conscious of the effects of climate change and other pressures on the common natural and cultural heritage of the Bering Strait region;

Declare an intention to deepen cooperation between the United States of America and the Russian Federation in the cross-boundary Bering Strait region, including the expansion of interaction between the national agencies that are responsible for the specially protected natural territories/areas of both countries in the State of Alaska and the Chukotka Autonomous District, including their commitment to developing a dialogue with Native peoples to help determine the specific goals and methods for such cooperation.

## International Cooperation

### Russian/U.S. Collaboration in the Beringia Region

The United States supports the establishment of an international protected area in the region of the Bering Strait to reinforce peaceful cooperation between the U.S. and Russia. Such a protected area will provide a framework for 1) American and Russian scientists to plan and work jointly in this region of the Arctic as they foster environmental protection of this fragile ecosystem, 2) the conservation of flora and fauna and 3) the continued use of the area's natural resources for subsistence. Moreover, by increasing international recognition of the area, the designation may promote tourism in the region, providing an economic benefit for both countries.

To realize these goals, the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) has sought input from local stakeholders on the establishment of an international protected area spanning the Bering Strait. The NPS has sought to remain flexible as to what form an international protected area might look like in order to allow local stakeholder perspectives to be expressed. As NPS gains the perspectives of interested parties, it will need to formalize a proposal and engage in tribal consultation. To date, NPS has not expressed a public opinion, but favors establishment of a sister park relationship between a Russian park in Chukotka and one or more parks in Alaska.

#### Previous Attempts to Establish an International Protected Area in the Bering Strait Region and Creation of the Shared Beringian Heritage Program

The governments of the United States and Russia have long supported the creation of an international protected area in the region of the Bering Strait. During a June 1, 1990, summit meeting, Presidents George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev jointly called for such an agreement to promote preservation of the common natural and cultural heritage spanning the two countries.

In November 1991 draft legislation to establish the Beringian Heritage International Park (S.2088) was submitted to Congress, but was never acted on. Subsequent attempts to redraft the legislation with the cooperation of Native groups in Northwest Alaska and conservation organizations were not successful.

The U.S. Congress subsequently funded the National Park Service (NPS), beginning in 1991, to further the objective of greater understanding of the region's resources through the establishment of the Shared Beringian Heritage Program. With funding of about \$650,000 annually, the program supports 2.5 employees, funds scientific, educational, cultural and community based projects in the Bering Strait region; supports cultural and technical expertise exchange programs; and organizes an international conference every other year alternating between Alaska and the Chukotka Autonomous Region.

Annual funding for projects/research totals about \$400,000. Projects have a "Russian component" and are recommended for funding by a panel, including NPS staff and representatives from the three Alaska Native regional corporations in Northwest Alaska. The Beringia Program has been successful at enhancing local Alaska and Chukotka Native support through encouragement of village-based projects and exchanges. Currently there are about 18 on-going projects. Since the program's inception, the NPS has distributed nearly \$9 million to fund these projects. (See "Spanning the Bering Strait: 20 years of collaborative research.")

The Beringia Program encourages local support and involvement in activities that an international protected area designation would promote and since the mid-1990s has built a productive working relationship between the NPS and local interests.

#### Shared Natural and Cultural Resources of Beringia

The United States recognizes the cultural and environmental importance of Beringia, including its role as habitat for migratory birds and mammals, and supports ongoing efforts to conserve this keystone area of biodiversity. Scientists consider Chukotka and Northwest Alaska to be a single botanical entity. Chukotka and Alaska share environmental concerns and face similar ecological threats.

## International Cooperation

Because both Chukotka and Alaska are rich in natural resources, safe and environmentally sound resource extraction has been the focus of concern on both sides of the Bering Strait. Local people have united to discuss these issues at international forums and through organizations like the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace and the Arctic Council. They also collaborate on several shared environmental projects with the National Park Service's Shared Beringian Heritage Program, including those regarding climate change, wildlife monitoring and management and shrinking sea ice.

In addition to preservation of natural resources, parklands in Western Alaska preserve and protect the cultural norms and ideas shared by indigenous people of Chukotka and Alaska. Tangible examples of these resources include culture, traditions, language, ecology and subsistence hunting.

Traditions involving food, hunting, marriage, shamans and elders are similar on the two sides of the Bering Strait. Because inter-marriage was frequent before Soviet Communism, many coastal peoples in both locations are distant relatives – a bond that was not severed by Soviet rule. Indeed, the current superintendent of NPS's Bering Land Bridge National Preserve had a grandparent who was Russian Yupik.

The language spoken by Inupiat and Yupik people in Alaska is understandable by coastal Eskimos in Chukotka. It is the same language with different dialects depending on geographical location.

Another commonality is dependence on a subsistence lifestyle. Hunters and herders in Chukotka and Alaska share the resource of wildlife and rely upon whales, seals, walruses, polar bears and reindeer to augment their diet. Russians and Alaskans collaborate on polar bear hunting quotas and serve on the Eskimo Whaling Commission and the Association of Traditional Marine Mammal Hunters of Chukotka.

### Formal Designation for Beringia – What is required, what form could it take?

Four parcels of protected lands in the United States, which are proposed for inclusion in a shared Beringian international protected area, were established in Alaska by federal law in 1980 and include Bering Land Bridge National Preserve, Kobuk Valley National Park, Cape Krusenstern National Monument and Noatak National Preserve (collectively known as the Western Arctic Parklands). Because the focus has been on an international park, other Department of Interior lands in the region have not been part of the concept. Protected lands in either country will be subject only to the regulations of that country and will not be subject to any international management or regulation.

From the beginning, the Russian Federation has needed to designate comparable protected lands at the federal level before an international protected area designation could be considered. This has not yet happened, despite assurances several times in the past 20 year.

A variety of frameworks for U.S.-Russian cooperation on Beringia could be considered, ranging from an informal sister park relationship to a formal agreement, such as an International Heritage Area or International Park.

The NPS has not expressed an opinion publicly, but favors establishment of a sister park relationship between the proposed Russian National Park in Chukotka and one or more of the Western Alaska Parklands. Such a designation could be accomplished without legislation. An NPS decision will depend on local input and be vetted through the Department of Interior in the fall/winter of 2011.

Movement by the Russian Federation to establish a national park in Chukotka would set the stage for trans-boundary protected area discussions and is required before a form of international designation could be determined.

## International Cooperation

### What Would An International Designation Accomplish?

After 20 years of close cooperation between the National Park Service and Russian conservation organizations and agencies, an international designation would:

- provide worldwide recognition of the region's shared natural resources and cultural heritage,
- constitute a joint effort to preserve the important natural elements of the land bridge and the cultural traditions that continue today,
- create a dramatic example of cooperation between the two nations, formalizing the gesture of peaceful cooperation on a national level as an enduring symbol of our relationship,
- provide a framework for American and Russian scientists to plan and work jointly in this region of the Arctic, leading to increased protection of its fragile Arctic ecosystem,
- provide a mechanism for meaningful involvement of indigenous people and local communities in Beringia in administration and management of programs and agreements under this designation,
- improve tourism and other economic activities in the region and
- provide an opportunity to educate the public about the phenomenal resources in this region as economic and development interests continue to explore greater opportunities.

### Is There Local Support for an International Designation?

The National Park Service has visited communities across Northern and Western Alaska, Native organizations, interest groups and other stakeholders over the past two years to gain some perspective on people's interests and positions on an international designation.

While the NPS has not received formal comments on an international designation, support by local Native Alaskans for the international protected area may hinge on the ability to respond to concerns regarding their Russian counterparts across the Bering Strait. NPS community outreach revealed an important concern for the potential negative impacts of an international protected area on the subsistence and traditional activities of local Chukotka indigenous communities.

NPS will continue to meet with stakeholders in 2012.

### What is the National Park Service Doing to Further the Discussion?

Aside from meeting with local people and other stakeholders in Alaska and cooperators and other interested groups across the country, NPS is actively working to increase/improve communication and cooperation between Chukotka and Alaska in anticipation of designation of an international protected area.

The Beringia Days 2011 Conference provided an excellent opportunity to discuss the creation of an international protected area. NPS sponsored 21 Russians to travel to the conference. The Chukotka Administration funded 18 delegates from their region as well, representing the largest contingent of Russian participants to the conference. In total, a delegation of about 50 Russians from communities across Chukotka and from the Chukotka Autonomous Region Administration attended the conference in Nome. The U.S. State Department funded NPS travel to Russia and some components of the Beringia Days Conference.

NPS established a Russian-language website - <http://www.nps.gov/akso/beringia/ru-index.cfm> - mirroring the Shared Beringian Heritage Program website - <http://www.nps.gov/akso/beringia/index.cfm> - to improve communication at the local level. The U.S. State Department funded the project.

## International Cooperation

### Next Steps

- In response to the May 2011 joint statement by Presidents Obama and Medvedev, calling for increased cooperation in the Bering Strait region, the Beringia Days Conference in September focused on opportunities for increasing communication and cooperation between the two countries and the possibility of an international protected area designation. (A copy of the Presidents' Joint Statement on Beringia is on page 116 , and comments received at the Beringia Days Conference on ways of deepening cooperation are below).
- NPS is well positioned to complete its public process and move forward in designating an international protected area, if supported by local constituents.
- NPS is sensitive to the concerns of the Russian government that the U.S. keep pace with the Russian process for establishment of an international protected area, rather than move ahead of Russia.
- NPS must confirm Department of Interior concurrence with a sister park (or alternate) framework before a formal consultation process is initiated.
- Formal consultation with tribal organizations on establishment of the international protected area is projected to occur in 2012.



## International Cooperation

### Responding to the Presidents' Message: Thoughts on Deepening Cooperation across the Bering Strait

#### *Facilitated Discussion of Conference Attendees*

#### **FACILITATOR**

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In response to Presidents Obama's and Medvedev's joint statement on Beringia, on the second day of the conference a facilitated workshop was held to solicit comments from participants on deepening cooperation across the Bering Strait. The Shared Beringian Heritage Program is pleased to report that as of the spring of 2012 several of the ideas outlined below have been implemented. The ideas expressed are as follows:

- We should celebrate heroes.
- Tell stories that dispel stereotypes.
- Bring the Hope race back.
- Increase the positive power of tourism.
- U.S. government should publicly state that it would support an international protected area in Beringia.
- New industrial development is needed in Chukotka.
- Finalizing protection agreements are critical for the good of marine and land resources (reindeer).
- Capture traditional ecological knowledge about reindeer herding.
- Give the David Hopkins Award to women.
- Have Beringia conferences in villages to involve the people who live on the land.
- Recognize that local people have advanced knowledge of subsistence hunting, sled dogs, caribou and rivers, knowledge that has passed through the generations.
- Travel to Chukotka may be challenging, but maintaining a strong will to visit can help – do not lose heart.
- Commerce between countries has been hard since 1999. Government needs to make it easier.
- There are many commonalities between people – especially reindeer herding. We need to share history, stories and current operations.
- We share genealogy and relations between U.S. and Chukotka.
- Families do not have political borders.
- Clothing study shows our relationships and values.
- Cultural and spiritual exchange reveals common roots that can improve communication.
- Concept of “Protected” areas imposes a them-us relationship. Native organizations need to ensure their continued resource use rights on both sides of the strait.
- Discuss issues – solve problems with people's diplomacy.
- Visa-free travel is critical.
- Modern travel is too expensive – use boats.
- Initiate a quarterly journal with editorials from experts on each side about regulations.
- Publish fairy tales to teach traditional values.
- Produce more films about traditional life.
- Expand cultural exchange with children.
- Return the opportunity for customary travel. Visiting renews cultural spirit and well-being.
- Have the next meeting on St. Lawrence [Island].
- Recognize that people have been reindeer herding for a whole lifetime in Stebbins.
- Deepening cooperation: You have done such an incredible job at deepening understanding of the richness of the area. If NPS could foster a dialogue about community futures in the midst of such changes, then there may emerge joint goals to deepen cooperation. It seems that migratory wildlife has so many existing collaborative opportunities, NPS should probably focus on landscape and environmental change, as well as conservation of cultural resources and cultural landscapes. Thank you.