

Indigenous Knowledge and Use of Bering Strait Region Ocean Currents

Annual Report to the Beringian Shared Heritage Program

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Summary:

The goal of the project is to document indigenous knowledge about, and uses of, ocean currents in the Bering Strait region in collaboration with three Alaskan and three Russian communities (Shishmaref, Wales, Diomede, Lorino, Lavrentiya and Inchoun). The project will document knowledge related to ocean currents and their uses prior to, and after, the widespread use of boats with outboard motors, including physical changes to ocean currents over time and ocean current taxonomy (indigenous-language terms, phrases, descriptions, etc. for ocean currents), in addition to the mapping of spatial information about ocean currents. During this year of the project, significant progress has been made in the work being done in Russia and Alaska.

Russia:

The co-PI on this project, Yury Khokhlov, and his staff have completed the majority of their consultations with experts in Inchoun, Lavrentiya and Lorino (approximately 17 have been completed). While not fully transcribed into English, these consultations have been summarized in English. The final set of consultations is planned for all three communities over the coming months.

Alaska:

Extensive background research was conducted in late 2010 and early 2011, primarily in Kawerak's Eskimo Heritage Program (EHP) archives, by a Research Assistant hired by Kawerak's Social Science program. The Research Assistant was Helen Pootoogooluk, who is originally from Shishmaref, one of the collaborating communities on this project. Helen summarized all of the information that she gathered from the EHP archives and other sources into one document.

The PI presented information about this project at the annual Bering Strait Regional Conference in February 2011 in the form of a poster, fliers, and a brief presentation during a workshop.

The PI also made a formal in-person presentation about this project to the Shishmaref IRA in March 2011, which was followed by a presentation by Ms. Pootoogooluk in which she shared the information about Shishmaref and the other communities that she gathered during her research.

In October 2011 the PI and co-PI created a poster for display at the Beringia Days Conference. We were also fortunate that the co-PI was able to travel from Russia to the conference to meet the PI in person, and to participate in the poster session with the PI.

As of the submittal of this report several consultations have been conducted with ocean currents experts in Wales and Shishmaref, in collaboration with Local Assistants, and a community meeting was also held in Shishmaref to discuss the project.

Future Work:

A public meeting discussing the project, as well as several more consultations with experts, is planned for late 2011 or early 2012 in Wales. Additional consultations in Shishmaref, as well as a meeting with the Shishmaref Elder's Committee are also planned for late 2011 or early 2012. No consultations have been conducted in Diomedede to-date. Passenger transportation to Diomedede is, and has been, difficult for some time now (see below). The PI plans to visit Diomedede after the winter ice-runway is operation and transportation is easier; this is anticipated to be around March 2012. Additionally, if any of the Diomedede ocean currents experts visit Nome prior to March, efforts will be made to conduct consultations with them in Nome. Kawerak's Social Science program is currently making full transcriptions of the Alaskan consultations conducted to-date. It is anticipated that the remainder of consultations with experts in Russia will also be completed by the spring of 2012.

Problems:

The project has not encountered any major difficulties, though several issues have arisen. As noted above, English summaries of the consultations conducted in Russian have been created. However, the Russian to English translation has proved more difficult and time consuming than originally anticipated by the co-PI. No funds were specifically budgeted to pay for these translations, so the Russian staff are doing the best that they can within their abilities. The English summaries have been useful (for example, they were used in the Beringia Days poster), but at this point, additional funds would be needed to carry out full and accurate translations. Another issue that has arisen is the Diomedede transportation situation. Because of current passenger helicopter travel regulations, travel to the island is difficult and limited, and no visits to Diomedede have yet been possible for this project. The ice-runway allows for more predictable airplane travel to the island and the PI intends to travel via Bering Air once the runway is in place. One final issue of note is that the funds currently budgeted for the international workshop/exchange in year three of the project are likely not sufficient to secure a charter flight to Anadyr and cover the additional travel costs (though this has been known since the project was initially funded). Kawerak hopes to secure additional funds to fully cover the costs of the travel for this workshop and cultural exchange.



Artur Nuteveket discussing ocean currents with project staff in Inghouk



Luther Komonaseak -- an ocean currents expert from Wales.