

Tribute to Charlie Johnson



Alaska Native Leader (1939 – 2012)

On Friday April 13, 2012, we lost a true friend and valued partner, Charlie Johnson of Nome. He was a father, a grandfather, a mentor, a friend, a partner and countless other things to those who remember and pay tribute to him. Everyone who worked with him has a favorite Charlie story, saying, or shared a laugh with him. All who had the pleasure of knowing or working with him will remember him fondly.

For many years Charlie collaborated with the National Park Service and the Beringia Program on a variety of projects and issues, the latest being a new agreement signed with the Alaska Nanuuq Commission just before Charlie's passing. The new agreement is essentially a continuation of work begun many years ago through the Beringia Program and continues to focus on understand-

ing Chukchi polar bear habitat.

Charlie was an integral part of our program's success in rural Alaska. His tireless work ethic, diligence and determination on behalf of Alaska and Chukotka indigenous people, and his genuine humility and ability to bridge gaps through effective communication and politics made him a unique individual. He was a continual source of guidance, information and wisdom for program cooperators and program staff. Because of his influences, in 2011, during Beringia Days in Nome, the National Park Service presented him with the David M. Hopkins Award, the Beringia Program's highest honor.

Those who knew Charlie will remember his lifetime of work on behalf of Alaska Natives. His credentials, titles, positions and actions are a testament to his unending devotion to his people, the land and the Native way of life. He led various organizations throughout his career, and he dedicated those efforts to enhancing and protecting the lives of indigenous people in the Beringia region. (See below for a list of some of the positions he held throughout his career.)

Far from only advocating for Alaska Native people, Charlie recognized that empowering the indigenous people on the other side of the Bering Strait in Chukotka was not only morally right, it was essential to heal the families torn apart by the Ice Curtain. Through his diplomacy, he was able to improve the lives of his Russian kinsmen, neighbors and relatives on both sides of the strait. Charlie advocated strongly for the re-establishment of free and easy travel for Native people between Alaska and Chukotka.

As a result, Charlie served under the U.S. State Department as the Chief Commissioner overseeing Visa Free travel between the U.S. and Russia. His dedication and diplomatic influence helped facilitate, support and allow for unrestricted travel between the indigenous residents of Beringia through a cultural exchange program, something the residents had been longing for since the early days of the Cold War. His actions also served many others, as he was crucial in expediting the travel of many scientists, students, researchers and residents between both sides of the strait and worked vigorously to ensure the physical and legal safety of cross-border travelers.

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One of his many successes in developing relations between government and non-governmental agencies across the Bering Strait was the recent signing of the U.S.-Russia Treaty on the Conservation of Chukchi Polar Bears, ratified in 2007. A Native-to-Native agreement between Alaska Natives and the indigenous groups within the Chukchi region founded this international legislation. This agreement, facilitated by Charlie, established a partnership between the groups. Through his direction, this treaty essentially provided the Natives of Chukotka with a legitimate form of democracy. For the first time in nearly 60 years, the Natives of Chukotka would have the opportunity to subsistence harvest polar bears and have meaningful participation in resource management. Because of his efforts, the previous governor of Chukotka called the signing of the treaty concerning polar bears, "The most democratic piece of legislation the Chukotka region has ever seen." The significance of the bilateral effort for Native hunters on both sides cannot be overstated and stands as a testament to Charlie's dedication to preserving the traditions and rights of the people he represented.

These titles and leadership positions are secondary to the symbolic role that Charlie played as an advocate for indigenous rights to resources, conservation of the land and Native self-determination. He demonstrated a strong commitment to science and humanities and placed great importance on interdisciplinary work. He strived throughout his lifetime to bring multiple fields of knowledge together in hopes that they be able to share knowledge and information with others to advance scientific and cultural studies of Beringia. He placed great emphasis on traditional ecological knowledge while also embracing new technologies and incorporating new areas of scientific inquiry. He shared the vision that one day we would consider traditional ecological knowledge equal to purely scientific data.

Charlie was a mentor to many young leaders, both Native and non-Native. He did not hesitate to share his personal and professional knowledge with others. Charlie made every effort to ensure that the work he did and the information and experience he gathered was shared and available to others, both locally and internationally. In this role he helped many of his students go on and become leaders themselves, often advocating for and sharing his vision of conserva-

tion and self-determination. Charlie's ability to create and maintain personal relationships with those he mentored, and often with those he worked with, will perhaps be his most memorable trait.

Charlie's generosity and warmth were legendary, and he had an unrivaled ability to put people at ease, add humor to a situation and make friends. While his body of work is considerable, it was his time spent with his children Truman, Frank (Boogles), his daughter Nicole, his wife Brenda and all of his grandchildren that he revered most. Often he would be the center of attention in a room full of dignitaries or consulates and drop his attention to them the moment a child entered the room. He loved children and the innocence they possessed. Someone once remarked, "Charlie could be just as engaged and comfortable if he were talking to a high ranking official as he would if he were talking to a child on his lap." Charlie had a genuine sense of compassion for others and a unique sense of humility. He was fond of saying, "People in leadership positions are always going to face adversity. The most important thing to know is even though you may be right, always let them leave with their dignity." This is how we will remember him at the Beringia Program, and we will continue to support the causes he advocated and remember the wisdom he imparted.

Work:

Before his position with the Alaska Nanuuq Commission, Johnson was the executive director for the Eskimo Walrus Commission, representing Alaska villages on a range of matters concerning walrus conservation, management and research. He has the distinction of having served as the president of Bering Straits Native Corporation (1983-1988), the president of Kawerak, Incorporated (1976-1983), the chairman of the Alaska Federation of Natives (1981-1983) and the vice president of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference. Appointments include U.S. Arctic Research Commission under President George H. Bush, Alaska Science Review Group, National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Delegation Arctic Council and Member, CAFF Working Group International Arctic Social Science Committee.