



## Briefing Statement FY 2012

**Bureau:** National Park Service

**Issue:** Shared Beringian Heritage Program Overview

**Member:** Department of Interior

**Park:** Alaska Regional Office

### Funding:

FY-2012 appropriation for the Beringia program was \$655,000 and includes 2.5 FTE. The program has been ONPS funded since 1991.

### Key Points:

An international park designation between the U.S. and Russia in the Bering Straits region has been contemplated since 1990, but progress has been limited due to local concerns in Alaska as well as limited progress in designating nationally significant areas on the Russian side. In lieu of an international designation, Congress has funded NPS (Alaska Region) to conduct a cooperative program, known as the Shared Beringian Heritage Program, to foster international connections in the absence of an official international park designation.

NPS supports efforts to further U.S. and Russian collaboration in the stewardship of these shared resources, and remains committed to accomplishing many of the goals an international agreement would promote. The Russian government has announced plans to establish a national park in 2012 and their interest in discussing transboundary designation subsequently. NPS proposes consideration of a sister park arrangement with continued cross-border collaboration defined by an accompanying action plan.

### Background:

In 1990, the Presidents of the United States and then, Soviet Union endorsed a proposal to establish an international park spanning the Bering Straits. The proposed park included existing NPS units in Western Arctic Parklands, Alaska and a park unit or units to be created on the Russian side of the Bering Strait.

A bill to establish a Beringian Heritage International Park was introduced in the Senate in 1991, but was not acted upon. Stakeholder concerns with the proposed legislation included: inadequate protection of subsistence activities and access; limitations on economic opportunities; lack of direct benefit to local communities; insufficient local and native involvement (in Russia and in the U.S.); undue international influence and loss of sovereignty; and change in management and expansion of NPS units. Many of these concerns may still be present with stakeholders in Alaska.

The Shared Beringian Heritage Program recognizes and celebrates the natural resources and cultural heritage shared by Russia and the United States on both sides of the Bering Strait. The program works



to improve local, national and international understanding of these resources and sustain the cultural vitality of Native peoples in the region.

The goals of the Beringia program are to:

1. Foster mutual understanding and cooperation among the United States, Russia and the indigenous people of Beringia in environmental protection, climate change, historic preservation and interpretation.
2. Support subsistence opportunities within Beringia and recognize the unique and traditional activities by indigenous people of the region.
3. Promote the study, interpretation, and enjoyment of the natural and cultural resources of international significance.
4. Support cultural exchange between the indigenous people on both sides of the Bering Strait.

Annual goals are accomplished by funding biological and cultural research, and community projects, and sharing results; supporting cultural and technical expertise exchange programs; and hosting or participating in an International Beringia Days Conference.

The projects have a tremendous variety and have strong support in Beringian communities. Whether academic or community-based, projects have a “Russian component” by involving Russian researchers or communities. Projects are recommended for funding by a panel including NPS staff and representatives from three Alaska Native Regional Corporations. The program has been successful at enhancing local Alaska and Chukotka Native support through the encouragement of village-based projects and exchanges.

## **Current Status:**

There are 12-20 active scientific and community-based projects every year. Recent projects have included work on marine mammals, sea ice patterns, reindeer herding, archaeology, and documentation of local traditions, language and culture. Increasingly, projects are directly or indirectly related to climate change. This includes research to gather critical species and habitat information, documentation of traditional ecological knowledge, and establishment of citizen-based science involving youth and local communities in Russia and the U.S.

Discussions between the NPS and State Department began in 2009 regarding the possible reintroduction of a proposal to establish an international protected area supported by the local population. The NPS is meeting with local constituents and hosting community meetings to ascertain their interests and/or concerns in regards to international recognition in the future.

The next International Beringia Days Conference will be in Russia; date and location to be determined.

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