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Linking protected areas throughout the world

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Picture: D. Mann and P. Heiser

A river flows by the Great Kobuk sand dunes, in north-west Alaska.

A CULTURAL BRIDGE OVER THE BERING STRAIT

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THE waters of the Bering Strait separate the continents of Asia and North America, but they do not divide the people, the resources or the heritage of "Beringia".

It is this simple premise that brought about the first discussions regarding the establishment of an international park that would include lands on both sides of the Bering Strait, in Russia and the United States.

About 50 miles apart today, the continents were once connected by the Bering Land Bridge — not a thin peninsula but broad shoulders of continents pushed together to form a seamless transition from Asia to North America.

The migration and dispersal of plants, wildlife and people across the land bridge, and later across the narrow sea, has left the Chukotka Peninsula in north-east Russia and the Seward Peninsula in north-west Alaska with a common natural and cultural heritage.

That common heritage has been explored more in the past 10 years than ever before, thanks in large part to the National Park Service's Beringian Heritage International Park Programme. The move toward an official relationship between resource managers in the two countries got its start in the 1960s, but there was little action until the mid-1980s when a working group was established to address "Conservation and Management of Natural and Cultural Heritage". Specific themes were developed by the working group in 1987. ➜

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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.

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Whether you wish to write about a specialist subject — your park or protected area perhaps — send a short news item or a letter for publication in response to an NPIB article, I would be delighted to hear from you.

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Right: the emblem of the Beringian Heritage International Park.

Below: map of the central Beringia area, showing the main settlements.

some of the earliest North Americans at a site along the Noatak River. This type of work, and earlier projects that looked below volcanic ash layers, are giving us a better picture of what that part of the continent was like thousands of years ago, and providing insights on how the climate has changed.

"This year we're also dealing with some recently emerging needs. Alaska Pacific University (in Anchorage) conducted training for local Russian tour operators and craftspeople, working on ways to conduct tourism on protected lands. National parks in Alaska get about two million visits a year, while at the same time protecting the resources. How to encourage use, regulate it, and sustain tourism are all very timely topics in the Russian Far East."

Under the decade-old proposal to establish an international park, the United States would designate four existing park units (Bering Land Bridge National Preserve, Cape Krusenstern National Monument, Kobuk Valley National Park and Noatak National Preserve) to be the American component to the international park. Already the programme uses these parks as a basis for the research being accomplished, as it works with many of the surrounding communities from St Lawrence Island to Barrow.

At a recent meeting of researchers, Vladimir Etylin, Chukotka's representative in the Russian parliament, said he is working to move the park idea forward, a plan that is also favoured by Chukotka's governor. If Russia establishes a federal park in Chukotka, discussions could begin in earnest with the United States regarding an international designation by both countries. At this time, no legislation is being considered by the United States Congress.

While the political wheels slowly move, international research has moved briskly. Increasingly, Beringia projects — whether academic or community-based — have a "Russian component". Some of the studies involve doing some or all of the research on the Russian side. In 2001, Beringia projects in Russia included a survey of the traditional use of seabird habitat, the facilitation of Native-to-Native co-opera-

tion on polar bear habitat use in both countries, and a retrospective study of how the border between the two countries being opened for the past 10 years has affected people on both sides of the Strait.

For the past several years, the Park Service has also supported the translation into English of several Beringian-related Russian books of interest to the academic and general community, including works by regional archaeologists. In a related project, the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Native Language Institute has worked on a dictionary for the Naukan Eskimo language of Chukotka, Russia. Park Service funding has assisted the institute in gathering data from visiting Native speakers, and with the publishing of a dictionary. These and earlier projects related to Native place names provide for a more common understanding of the resources, improved communication among researchers and the dispersal of local knowledge.

Map showing the land bridge which connected Chukotka and Alaska 12,000 years ago.

In addition to published research and community projects, another technique used to increase cross-border awareness and appreciation for the unique natural and cultural values found in the region is the annual "Beringia Days" Conference held each autumn in Anchorage, Alaska. These meetings allow American and Russian park managers, scientists, Native and non-government organisations, and the public to discuss topics of interest, present research papers, and to reiterate the benefits of an international park for Beringia. In 2001, several Russian specialists attended in addition to researchers, representatives of Alaska Native organisations and the general public.

Other Beringia programmes have emphasised the inclusion of local residents in the work. Golovin, a small village south of Bering Land Bridge National Preserve, has hosted archaeological field schools for the last four years. The Golovin Village Corporation is an organisation started as part of the settlement of Alaska Native land claims, and the local school gave students training in archaeology. In 2000, in addition to classroom training conducted by personnel from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the group assessed cultural sites on village corporation lands; six students and two adults from Russia participated. In 2001, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference assisted the Golovin Field School with a reciprocal student exchange with Provideniya, Russia.

In another project, the school district based in Kotzebue, Alaska, has adopted a new curriculum for writing based on this project. Students maintain journals on natural and cultural observations and have developed web and graphics products based on the material written.

"The Beringia programme is an exceptional international example of what the National Park Service is doing more frequently around the country — work with universities, communities, native organisations and others in partnership to further our knowledge of the natural and cultural resources of a region," said Arnberger. "Whether or not there is ever a formal international park, the kind of relationships that have been built among the academic world, local residents and land managers is a wonderful accomplishment."

Russian children undertake an Inuit language programme at the Alaskan settlement of Savoonga. Photo: NPS