



The Cooperative Park Studies Unit: Dynamic University-Based Research in the Parks

By Frank Norris and Becky Saleeby

On December 18, 1971, President Richard Nixon signed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) into law. This act contained a specific clause, known as “d-2,” that commenced a chaotic, nine-year-long “land rush” of unprecedented proportions. What ensued was a frantic period of study, evaluation, and advocacy that would forever transform Alaska land ownership patterns. The National Park Service was at the vortex of much of this chaos, because a variety of advocacy groups (plus many in the organization itself) recognized that millions of acres of federally-owned Alaska land had the potential to be part of national park units – and, indeed, tens of millions of acres would, in December 1980, become absorbed into various national parks, monuments, and preserves.

Soon after Nixon signed ANCSA, NPS leaders concerned about Alaska drew up a list of potential park areas and began the process of gathering resource information about those areas. At first, they had little information upon which to draw, and more help was needed. As the accompanying interviews illustrate in

greater detail, a major instrument for gaining new knowledge about Alaska’s existing and potential parklands was the Cooperative Park Studies Unit (CPSU), which was established at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) in the spring of 1972. This research unit consisted of the Biology and Resource Management Program, headed by Dr. Frederick Dean, and the Anthropology and Historic Preservation Program, headed by longtime NPS anthropologist Zorro Bradley.

Research up until 1972

In December 1971, however, all that was in the future. At that time, the NPS had just four units in Alaska: Sitka National Monument in southeastern Alaska, Glacier Bay National Monument also in the southeast, Mt. McKinley National Park between Anchorage and Fairbanks, and Katmai National Monument at the base of the Alaska Peninsula.

Except for Sitka, the reasons for establishing each of Alaska’s park units had been purely scientific. In 1917, Congress had passed the bill establishing Mt. McKinley National Park in order to protect the area’s remarkable sheep, caribou, and other megafauna populations. A

year later, President Wilson had proclaimed Katmai National Monument in order to protect the area surrounding the massive volcanic explosion that had wreaked such havoc in June 1912. And in 1925, President Coolidge had set aside a large area of tidewater glaciers and surrounding countryside, forming Glacier Bay National Monument. The establishment of each of these areas had been sponsored by influential national organizations, and in most cases these groups sponsored significant studies. But information about the broad array of natural and cultural resources in the various parks and monuments, as originally designated, was sorely lacking. And given the fact that the acreage of these units was substantially expanded over the years (Mt. McKinley had expanded twice, and Katmai three times), the lack of basic knowledge further exacerbated the NPS’s inability to manage the agency’s resources.

Given its perennial fiscal strait-jacket, the NPS did what it could during these early days to gather information about natural and cultural resources. Mt. McKinley, because it was a national park, had garnered the lion’s share of attention. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the park

Figure 1. CPSU anthropologist David Libbey in front of Old John’s cabin at Old John Lake, near Arctic Village in 1979.

Photograph courtesy of David Libbey



Photograph courtesy of David Libbey

Figure 2. Two women and sod house – CPSU anthropology research near confluence of Itkillik and Colville Rivers.

had attracted well-known government scientists Joseph Wright and George Dixon; in addition, researchers from the University of California, University of Wyoming, and other venues made summer-long research trips. And beginning in the late 1930s, the park had the good fortune to obtain the services of biologist Adolph Murie, to work on the vexing wolf-sheep controversy. Murie enjoyed the park and its wildlife so much that he remained at the park, off and on, until the late 1960s to study bears, birds, small mammals, and vegetation.

The University of Alaska's Fred Dean, working through the Alaska Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, began studies in the park in 1957. Park rangers and park naturalists also played a valuable research role through their day-to-day

observations of the park's common and unusual mammals, birds, and plant life, and some of these observations formed the basis for ongoing reports to Washington. Cultural resource investigations were almost entirely ignored during the park's early years, but in 1960 a chance discovery by a geological field crew brought forth the first archeological work, by University of Alaska experts, along the Teklanika River (Norris 2005).

Alaska's two large national monuments, by contrast, were subject to far less scientific scrutiny. This was primarily because both Glacier Bay and Katmai, being largely inaccessible by most common-carrier transportation, were monuments in name only. Until 1950, they had no budget, which also meant that they were not staffed, either in winter or

summer. Therefore, no ongoing agency research took place. At Katmai, the monument received an extended 1930 visit from biologist Robert F. Griggs, who observed plant succession patterns on the margins of the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes and appraised the area's brown bear habitat. Griggs recommended that Katmai's boundaries be expanded, primarily to ensure high quality bear habitat. The Interior Department agreed and drew up a presidential proclamation that more than doubled Katmai's acreage. In April 1931, President Herbert Hoover signed it into law.

At Glacier Bay National Monument, the major scientific presence during this period was William O. Field, a Harvard glaciologist. Field first visited the bay in 1926 and returned every few years for another forty years. In 1932, the agency sent wildlife biologist Joseph Dixon to the monument, and six years later he returned with the NPS's chief forester, John D. Coffman. Both visits were aimed at collecting bear habitat data. After the 1938 trip, a proclamation to expand the monument was forwarded to Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, and in April 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the measure into law.

During the early 1950s, NPS officials organized the Katmai Project, an interdisciplinary study effort funded primarily by the Defense Department. Scientists from universities as well as public agencies fanned out across the monument and produced a series of papers related to a wide variety of scientific fields. Among their findings,

scientists discovered that the site of the June 1912 eruption was Novarupta, not Mount Katmai; another key contribution was Victor Cahalane's biological survey. Beginning in 1960 and for more than a decade thereafter, Katmai was the scene of studies for both natural and cultural resources. They included seismic and volcanic investigations by personnel from the University of Alaska's Geophysical Institute; bears in the Brooks Camp area by Fred Dean of the University of Alaska; and archeological reports of the Brooks River and Shelikof Strait areas of the monument by Don Dumond (1965, 1971) and his crews from the University of Oregon.

CPSU and post-1972 research

In 1972, NPS administrators stepped up research in the parks with a dynamic university-based program, the CPSU. The Biology and Resource Management arm of the program was established when there were few NPS scientists in Alaska. It operated out of Fred Dean's office on the UAF campus and was staffed mostly by graduate students and other faculty members. Although Dean had a wide interest in plants, insects, fish, and birds, he eventually shifted more toward mammals, particularly bears. Dean's bear research began in Denali, when it was still Mt. McKinley National Park, and he and Adolph Murie clashed over Dean's suggestion to use transmitters to track these animals' movements. Over the years, he co-authored several CPSU publications on a project to compile exhaustive bibliographies of the literature on black and brown bears, in the hope that this data

would prove useful for the management of bears in the parks.

Most of the CPSU research of Dean and his colleagues was tied to resource concerns of several park units, including the need to better understand hunting and harvesting in the Wrangell-St. Elias region. Besides the focus on the interactions between humans and individual species, such as wolves, caribou, Dall sheep, harbor seals, and humpback whales, there was also a push for broad biological surveys of the soils, flora and vegetation, birds, terrestrial mammals, and aquatic systems in two proposed national monuments: Bering Land Bridge and Kobuk Valley. Resulting reports were not widely distributed except within the parks and the NPS Alaska Regional Office, but are still available at University of Alaska (UAA and UAF) libraries.

The Anthropology and Historic Preservation Program arm of the CPSU operated separately from the natural resources program, and had a different scope of duties. As discussed in Zorro Bradley's interview, his team was originally charged with identifying cultural resources to be included in the new park areas. However in 1974, Bradley managed to secure funding to help Native Regional Corporations, established under ANCSA, to survey and inventory abandoned villages and camps, archeological sites, and cemeteries that they were allowed to claim under Section 14(h)(1) of ANCSA (Libbey 1984). Implementation of these duties involved three federal agencies (NPS, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Indian

Affairs) and 12 Native regional corporations (Williss 2005). Bradley cast a wide net in recruiting staff for the formidable amount of work to be accomplished, including field documentation of sites, interviews, archival research, and the preparation of National Register of Historic Places nominations for many of the sites.

Bradley was adamant about getting the results of CPSU fieldwork and research in print. He established a series of Occasional Papers of the Anthropology and Historic Preservation CPSU, published between 1976 and 1983. Among the 37 publications on this list are some which pertain to nationally significant cultural resources (National Historic Landmarks) within park boundaries, such as Melody Webb Grauman's paper on the Kennecott Mines; Robert Spude's paper on the Chilkoot Trail; and Alice J. Lynch's publication about Qizhjuh (Kijik), the large Dena'ina settlement in Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. Also included are regional overviews, such as an eight-volume set about the early days on Norton Sound and Bering Strait by Kathryn Koutsky. Archeological site reports and subsistence studies are other publications in the Occasional Papers series. Perhaps the most widely distributed of them was *Tracks in the Wildland*, a detailed portrayal of Koyukon and Nunamiut subsistence.

In 1982, NPS Alaska Regional Director, John A. Cook, wrote to inform researchers at UAF that due to budgetary constrictions, there would be no more funding for the CPSU in the next fiscal year. In his letter (Cook 1982),

Cook praised the CPSU for being "highly productive and ... turning out quality research products." Bruce Ream, who became project leader for the Anthropology and Historic Preservation unit after Zorro Bradley retired in 1981, has said, "CPSU was a wonderful concept because of its flexibility. It was ultimately beneficial for the parks." The legacy of the CPSU has been passed to natural and cultural resources staff now in the Alaska Regional Office and in parks units across the state, as well as to the Bureau of Indian Affairs who continues to administer the ANCSA section 14(h)(1) program (Pratt 2004). During a decade of fieldwork, CPSU biologists, anthropologists, archeologists, and historians covered little-known territory and investigated a breadth of topics that still serve as baseline for research and have enduring relevance to Alaskans today.

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See complete list of CPSU reports at www.nps.gov/akso/documents/AKcpsubiblio.pdf

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