INTERNATIONAL POLAR YEAR
2007-2008

Introduction

By Sue Masica, Alaska Regional Director

This symposium, the third in a series focused on science and scholarship in and around Alaska's national parks, is a joint effort with the Beringia Days International Conference. Our theme "Park Science in the Arctic – the Natural and Cultural Heritage of Greater Beringia" is focused on very special places deliberately set aside by nations to preserve their exceptional, natural, cultural, historic, and inspirational significance. Beringia is an area of worldwide significance for its cultural and natural resources. With unusually intact landforms and frozen remains, Beringia provides unparalleled opportunities for comprehensive study of the earth, the character of past climates and the ebb and flow of earth forces at continents' edges. As one of the world's truly great and ancient crossroads, Beringia is still revealing secrets about how the first people came to North America, how and when they traveled, and how they survived under such harsh climatic conditions.

Figure 1. Leonid Kutylin, an elder of the Chukchi village Yanrakynnot, winter fishing in 2006.

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This International Polar Year is an auspicious time for science in the Arctic. Fifty years ago, the International Geophysical Year (IGY) was also a time of great discoveries and excitement. Despite Cold War tension, scientists from across the globe jointly explored the physical structure and working of the earth's crust, oceans, polar ice caps, and atmosphere. Today, we sometimes take those accomplishments for granted, but we shouldn't, for IGY brought major accomplishments in international science, conservation, cooperation and peace.

Events of intervening years also pertain closely to this symposium. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, a sweeping piece of legislation that established the parks, preserves and monuments of northern Alaska.

In 1991, the presidents of the United States and the Soviet Union endorsed a proposal to establish an international park agreement between the two countries. The Shared Beringian Heritage Program grew from that agreement and today recognizes and celebrates the contemporary and historic exchange of biological resources and cultural heritage shared by Russia and the United States on both sides of the Bering Strait.

The Natural Resource Challenge, which was initiated by the National Park Service in 1995, led to the creation of 32 Inventory and Monitoring Networks nationwide including the Arctic Network. Additionally 17 Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units were created with over 100 partner institutions and agencies nationwide, including the North and West Alaska unit centered at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Seventeen Research Learning Centers, including the Murie Science and Learning Center at Denali were created nationwide to provide opportunities for scientists, educators, and the public to research and experience science in our parks.

Fifty years after IGY—and 50 years from passage of the Alaska Statehood Act by the U.S. Congress—scientists and scholars from many nations have again joined to better understand, protect, and share what they are learning. How can we not be energized by the new and expanded opportunities for science and scholarship in parks in the Arctic? This Symposium is truly a celebration of both science and scholarship and of national parks, America's gift to the world. And, where better to hold this event than in Fairbanks, below the shimmering aurora borealis, and a world leader in research and development of the next generation of scientists, scholars, educators, and other leaders. I trust the wonder of the place, the people, the culture, and the historic moments will infuse and saturate our experience completely.