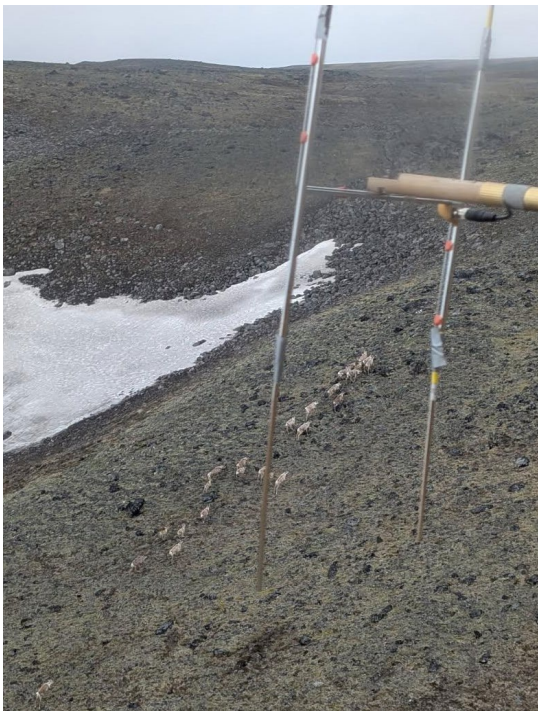
Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission
connect@ahtnatribal.org (907) 822-4466

The Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission (AITRC) continues scientific research, seeking funding for future projects and collaborating with other organizations on Game Management Units 11 and 13 projects. Our team's focus extends beyond fish and wildlife. We are working on mapping our customary and traditional use territory, establishing a tribal historic preservation office, and developing apps to help track the distribution of individual subsistence catch. Our primary goal is to fill data gaps to better inform the management of subsistence species that the eight (8) federally recognized tribes and their tribal citizens have relied on since time immemorial, helping co-manage with agencies. The information in this report is current as of August 22, 2025, and may be updated as new data becomes available.

Wildlife-

Mentasta Caribou- AITRC, in partnership with the Cheesh'na Tribal Council, received funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) through the Tribal Wildlife Grant (TWG) to assist Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve (WRST) in their ongoing Mentasta Caribou Herd Monitoring. Following the capture and collaring efforts, AITRC transitioned in spring/summer 2025 to research focused on calving and recruitment rates, using capture success and winter survival of collared adult females as benchmarks.



Aerial telemetry surveys of collared Mentasta Caribou to document caribou calf recruitment throughout the 2025 calving season.

AITRC obtained approval through the National Park Service (NPS) Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) and a federal research permit to serve as the lead Principal Investigator for caribou calf capture and collaring. While the original plan called for deploying neonate calf GPS collars, ADF&G did not approve the research permit application. In the spirit of adaptability, AITRC pivoted to conducting aerial surveys from late May through mid-July to estimate calving rates and recruitment. Mentasta caribou calves were first observed on May 28th, 2025, with a peak calf:cow ratio of 47:100 on June 13th, 2025. The final survey on July 16th, 2025, indicated a decline in calf:cow ratio of 34:100. These surveys also provided insights into predator activity, with numerous golden eagles and brown bears observed frequenting the core calving areas identified through collared females.

Looking ahead, AITRC will continue "the spirit of adaptability" in the 2026 field season and continue to use aerial surveys to estimate calving and recruitment rates. AITRC will also continue to meet with State and Federal partners to agree on approved project deliverables that will gain the most valuable insight into the long-term stagnant population of the Mentasta Caribou Herd. Grant extension requests have been submitted to ensure this important research is completed. This continued work will strengthen our understanding of Mentasta Caribou dynamics and help inform conservation and management efforts in the years to come.

Trail camera photograph showing two wolves, including one individual fitted with a GPS collar, feeding on the remains of a moose carcass.

Wolf Research- AITRC, in partnership with the Native Village of Tazlina, received funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) through the Tribal Wildlife Grant (TWG) program to study the range, distribution, and seasonal diet of wolf packs within GMU 11. In November 2024, AITRC successfully captured and GPS-collared nine wolves, marking the foundation of this AITRC-led project. The study is supported by an approved Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) protocol through the National Park Service (NPS), along with research permits from NPS, ADFG, and Ahtna, Inc.

During the 2024–2025 field season, two AITRC technicians conducted systematic site investigations at clustered GPS locations, recovered biological samples, and deployed trail cameras at kill sites, rendezvous areas, and denning locations. These efforts were carried out using snowmobiles, ATVs, and aircraft, allowing access across diverse terrain. In addition, AITRC partnered with local trappers to collect supplemental biological samples from harvested wolves, expanding dietary sampling and analysis across a larger area of the eastern portion of the Ahtna Territory. In total, 50 wolves were sampled during the 2024–2025 trapping season within and adjacent to the study area, with all samples archived for laboratory analysis.

To further strengthen the research, AITRC is establishing agreements with the University of Alaska Anchorage to conduct stable isotope analysis and with the University of Alaska Fairbanks to complete metabarcoding of fecal samples. This work will provide insight into prey composition, seasonal diet shifts, and potential disease prevalence within the population.

Funding for this project has been extended through September 30th, 2026. This extension will allow additional captures in spring 2026, due to weather delays during spring and fall captures in 2025, and for sample analysis. Preliminary results from stable isotope analyses show distinct dietary changes in segmented whiskers. Additional research is planned on captive wolves to better understand whisker growth rates and to definitively assign a timespan to the segmented whisker stable isotope analysis. Lastly, AITRC and the attending veterinarian are preparing a manuscript describing the anesthesia protocol used to immobilize the wolves during this project. This new protocol includes a reversible sedative that reduces recovery time from hours to minutes, making it safer and more ethical. We hope that this new anesthesia protocol will become the new standard for wolf captures in Alaska and beyond.

AITRC works with local hunters to collect samples from harvested Dall sheep, helping investigate diet, health, and disease factors behind population declines.

Dall sheep- In recent years, local hunters across the Ahtna Territory have raised concerns about local Dall sheep populations. In response to these concerns, AITRC developed an assessment program soliciting voluntary hunter samples for the 2025 hunting season. This project marks AITRC's first attempt at understanding the health status of Dall sheep populations in a portion of the Ahtna Territory.

AITRC is working with Tribal and local hunters to collect samples from sheep harvested in a portion of the Ahtna Territory. Hunter-donated samples of organs, muscle tissue, hair, feces, and nasal swabs will be analyzed to assess levels of heavy metals and essential minerals, reconstruct dietary intake, and estimate disease prevalence. These lines of inquiry will help AITRC gain insight into what sheep eat and how their diet influences their health, survival, and reproduction.

We hope to learn whether observed declines in Dall sheep abundance are due to mineral deficiencies, contaminants, or disease, such as Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae, which is already known to cause lung infections that can lead to high mortality rates among Dall sheep

populations. AITRC's recent entry into sheep health monitoring contributes to ongoing monitoring efforts to detect the presence and severity of M. ovi. infections in the Ahtna Territory's sheep populations.

Bear Project- The Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission's (AITRC) collaborative bear research project in the Copper Basin (GMU 13) continues to advance, with several key milestones achieved since fieldwork was completed. The project was initiated in response to a question posed by a tribal elder: "How many bears are on the land?" This study was designed to help answer that question in a scientifically rigorous way while respecting tribal data sovereignty and incorporating local and Indigenous knowledge.

Trail camera photograph of a female brown bear with two cubs investigating a hair snare site in the Copper Basin. As part of the collaborative project, hair samples collected from these snares are being analyzed to identify individual bears genetically.

Field data collection was completed during the 2022 field season, during which noninvasive hair samples were collected across GMU 13 and beyond. DNA analysis of these samples was completed in May 2023, resulting in the genetic identification of 1,077 successful hair-trap samples assigned to 137 grizzly bears (52M:85F) and 143 black bears (75M:68F). These individual identifications form the foundation of the project's population modeling efforts.

A major step forward occurred in June 2025 with the execution of a new Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) between AITRC, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), and the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). This agreement establishes clear expectations for how data are accessed, used, and shared, ensuring appropriate tribal stewardship of data while maintaining scientific transparency and integrity. Finalizing the DSA took longer than initially anticipated and represents one of the primary reasons results have not yet been publicly released.

Originally, the project design anticipated incorporating ADF&G's 2022 mark–recapture data for GMU 13 bears into the modeling framework to strengthen population estimates. However, ADF&G ultimately withdrew from that specific aspect of collaboration. As a result, the modeling approach was revised to rely solely on noninvasive genetic sampling collected through this project. While this change required additional time to reconfigure analyses, it does not invalidate the study. Instead, it shifted the focus toward methods that are fully independent, transparent, and replicable.

The project uses two complementary scientific approaches:

- Spatially Explicit Capture–Recapture (SECR) modeling uses DNA from hair samples to estimate how many bears are on the landscape and how densely they are distributed.
- Resource Selection Function (RSF) modeling identifies where bears are most likely to occur by examining how they use different habitats, such as river corridors, uplands, and areas closer to or farther from human activity.

In plain terms, combining these methods allows researchers to answer both "how many bears are there?" and "where are bears most likely to be found, and why?" Together, these tools provide a clearer, landscape-level understanding of bear distribution, movement, and habitat use across GMU 13 than has previously been available for this region.

When we state that "early results are promising," this means that the DNA data quality is strong, the number of individual bears identified is sufficient to support robust modeling, and preliminary analyses indicate that the models are behaving as expected. In

practical terms, this suggests the project is on track to produce reliable density estimates and meaningful habitat-use maps once modeling is finalized.

Current efforts are focused on finalizing model covariates, completing SECR and RSF analyses, and preparing maps and technical summaries. A draft results package is anticipated in [insert target date], followed by community presentations and briefings with management agencies.

With respect to ongoing federal subsistence bear proposals, final results are not yet available and therefore should not be considered definitive for current deliberations. However, once completed, this work is expected to provide valuable long-term context for state and federal managers by improving understanding of bear abundance, distribution, and habitat use in GMU 13. These results will be particularly useful for future management discussions and proposal evaluations that require defensible, region-specific population information.

Ecology-

Disease Surveillance and Genetic Stock Identification Sampling of Copper River Salmon- The Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission (AITRC) continued its monitoring of disease and parasite burdens in Copper River sockeye and Chinook salmon, funded by two successive grants from the Environmental Protection Agency. This project began in 2023, and each year the scope has expanded to ensure that we collect as much information as possible while respecting the time of subsistence users.

Kelsey Stanbro, Ecologist, and Mia Bobowski and Bella Ranck, Fisheries Technicians, sample sockeye in Chitina

During the 2025 season, samples included:

- Weight and Length → Overall body condition
- Pelvic fin clipping → Individual genetic stock identification
- Scales and otoliths → Age
- Plasma → Immune proteins for biomarkers of health status
- Whole Blood → Thiamine
- Eggs → fecundity and Thiamine (indicator of reproductive success and fry survival)
- Heart, spleen, kidney → histology and qPCR
- Gastrointestinal tract → parasite burden
- Muscle tissue → stable isotopes and immune proteins

Current results:

2023- 148 samples (137 sockeye, 11 Chinook)

- We realized that this sample amount was tedious for reading slides and interpreting results, and that a lower amount could be more advantageous, while still maintaining data quality
- Culture-based testing for *Ichthyophonus*, conducted at ADF&G's Pathology Lab, yielded either negative or inconclusive results, primarily due to the inherent contamination challenges associated with field-based sampling. In response, the project adapted its analytical approach and transitioned to quantitative PCR (qPCR) in subsequent years, which is less susceptible to contamination and provides improved sensitivity for pathogen detection.
- Parasitological analysis of gastrointestinal tract (GIT) samples collected in 2022 revealed approximately equal proportions of roundworms and spiral nematodes, with occasional cestodes (tapeworms). Identified taxa included *Anisakis* spp. (a known zoonotic risk to humans), *Philonema* spp. (generally not zoonotic), *Hysterothylacium fabri* (not zoonotic), and *Clistobothrium montaukensis*, which is not currently recognized as a public health concern but has been implicated in NIH-supported research as a potential human health risk if consumed.

2024- 84 samples (73 sockeye, 11 Chinook)

- qPCR testing for *Ichthyophonus*, conducted at ADF&G's Pathology Lab, is currently being written in a repost to be released in early 2026.
- Parasitological analysis of gastrointestinal tract (GIT) samples are currently being conducted at UAF's Glass Lab.

2025- 83 samples (66 sockeye, 17 Chinook)

- Parasitological analysis of gastrointestinal tract (GIT) samples are currently being conducted at UAF's Glass Lab.

Additional results:
Histopathological appraisal, completed by Sitka Sound Science Center, of 2023 samples included a visual assessment of the heart, while 2024 samples included assessments of the bulbus arteriosus, heart, kidney, and spleen. Findings are currently considered preliminary. Additional statistical analysis will be required to assess numerical trends, estimate population-level incidence, and evaluate relationships between pathological findings and other measured fish health metrics.

Serum samples from 2023 and 2024 were analyzed using VetBio-1 assays to assess biomarkers related to immune response and tissue condition, including precerebellin, cathelicidin, cardiac muscle troponin (CTNC), skeletal muscle troponin (STNC), and ubiquitin-like protein 1 (ULP1). Laboratory analysis and interpretation of these biomarkers are ongoing and will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of salmon health as results are finalized.

Stable isotope analysis has been completed for all three years. While the laboratory work is complete, the computational analysis and data interpretation are still in progress. Once finalized, these analyses will provide insights into feeding differences and trophic positions among Copper River salmon, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of population ecology and health.

AITRC also continued sample collection to support ongoing Copper River salmon genetic stock identification marker expansion and reevaluation by the ADF&G Gene Conservation Laboratory, with funding provided from Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. With over 1,800 genetic samples collected in 2025.

Moose Health Monitoring Project- The Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission entered the fourth year of the Moose Health Monitoring Program, initiated in response to Tribal Citizens' concerns about meat quality and health risks. With a focus on essential and non-essential elements, the project aims to ensure that subsistence resources are safe for consumption and that the moose population in the Ahtna region is healthy.

Sample Collection: In 2022, we collected 8 samples; in 2023, 33; in 2024, 41; and in 2025, 36. Samples are sourced from hunter-harvest, roadkill, educational, or ceremonial take to diversify research opportunities.

Tamra Jones, an Ahtna tribal citizen, is completing her master's on 'Micronutrient Interactions and Nutritional Status of Moose in the Ahtna Area.' She is evaluating the effects of copper, selenium, molybdenum, cadmium, zinc, and iron on moose nutrition. AITRC's analysis focuses on the other elements analyzed: beryllium, aluminum, vanadium, chromium, manganese, cobalt, nickel, arsenic, strontium, silver, tin, antimony, barium, thallium, lead, and uranium. The final findings will be published in Ms. Jones' thesis and, hopefully, in some peer-reviewed manuscripts, highlighting the significant drivers of heavy metal accumulation and assessing risks to moose and human health.

Emily Benson, 2024 Natural Resource Technician, and Tamra Jones, UAF Master's Student, collect a sample from a hunter-harvested moose.

AITRC is grateful for the support from Ahtna Inc., the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Bureau of Land Management, and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park is distributing sampling kits to hunters in the Ahtna region. These projects rely heavily on public participation, and we appreciate the samples collected. The project is funded by the Windward Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Fish Biomonitoring: Protecting Subsistence, Food Security & Ecosystem Health- AITRC received grant funding for a new project beginning this year to analyze fish species from 10 lakes across the Ahtna Region. The project will develop a scientific baseline of environmental conditions by measuring stable isotopes, elemental concentrations, mercury, and PFAS. By pairing contaminant data with species composition and trophic information, the project will help assess ecosystem health and potential risks to subsistence harvesters. These baseline data are especially important as climate change, permafrost thaw, altered hydrology, and shifting species distributions continue to reshape northern freshwater ecosystems. These results will support informed management decisions, protect food security, and strengthen our understanding of how environmental change may be affecting culturally important fish resources.

Fisheries-

Tanada Creek Adult Salmon Weir - The season began with staff from AITRC and NPS-WRST working together to install and repair the weir. AITRC hired a resident of Mentasta Lake as a seasonal weir technician to perform duties including daily maintenance of the weir, downloading recordings, reviewing daily recordings, and documenting environmental factors such as streamflow and temperature. The 2025 season ended with a minimum count passage of 11,067 sockeye and 1 (one) Chinook salmon. Daily counts were made (00:00:00-23:59:59) from June 19 to September 26 (aligning with the historical counting period), with the exception of downtime (no counts) during an extreme high-water event lasting 18 days at the end of June and beginning of July. We suspect minimal fish passage during this time, as indicated by the Batzulnetas fish wheel's minimal harvest (just downstream) and historical weir passage counts in relation to streamflow. As a primary goal, video recording equipment was improved to capture more frames per second at higher resolution. Additionally, the AITRC team designed new video review software, which was perhaps the greatest improvement to the operation, enhancing the accuracy and efficiency of video review. Physical modifications to the weir were made to ensure the system's longevity.

Mentasta Lake resident and AITRC weir coordinator, Tim Olson, making adjustments to the Tanada Creek weir, August 5, 2025.

Peak daily passage was around July 21 to July 30 after the high flows subsided, with about 45% of the run traveling past the weir in the 10-day period. Otoliths (used for population age composition) were collected at Tanada Lake in mid-September. AITRC plans to continue improving equipment and study design in 2026.

Stream Temperature Monitoring - As part of the state-wide stream temperature monitoring program, AITRC has deployed remote temperature loggers in major tributaries of the Copper River and various other feeder streams. Because ambient summer temperatures affect non-glacial stream temperatures more than glacially influenced streams, the emphasis for the water temperature monitoring effort was placed on the precipitation-driven Gulkana River system. Partnered with USFWS, AITRC maintains and collects data via rafts over approximately 10 days from 121 remote sensors in the Middle and West Fork Gulkana each summer. All data from both the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 monitoring periods, along with updated site locations, are now publicly available on the Alaska Water Temperature Database (AKTEMP). To pair with stream temperature, air temperature monitoring stations were installed at Mentasta, Tanada Creek, and Klutina Lake.

AITRC Staff Campsite (West fork of the Gulkana)- conducting temperature monitoring maintenance and data retrieval.

NPS-WRST Inventory of Freshwater Fish - AITRC will begin an inventory of harvestable freshwater fish in lakes and streams of Wrangell-Saint-Elias National Park beginning in the Spring of 2026.

Partners for Fisheries Monitoring Program (OSM) - The AITRC Fisheries Biologist has secured funding.

Alaska Sustainable Salmon Fund: Gulkana River Chinook and Sockeye Salmon Escapement – AITRC's Fisheries Biologist will be serving as a Co-PI on a Gulkana River sonar feasibility assessment project with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Sport Fisheries, beginning in 2026. AITRC just learned that this project was selected for funding, so more details will be provided as the project gets underway.

Alaska Sustainable Salmon Fund: Investigating new approaches to describing freshwater habitat and tracking the smolt migration of Chinook salmon in the Copper River. AITRC's Fisheries Biologist will be serving as a Co-PI on the Prince William Sound Science Center's recently awarded project, conducting radiotelemetry monitoring of juvenile Chinook salmon in the Copper River. AITRC just learned that this project was selected for funding, so more details will be provided as the project gets underway.

Stream Habitat Restoration

Position currently vacant – accepting applicants

Community Engagement- A portion of the NOAA grant that funds this position is geared towards engaging with local tribes to help create a prioritization of streams, creeks, lakes, culverts, low water crossings, and areas of anthropogenic disturbance that AITRC and partners can focus restoration efforts on in the future, in hopes of protecting and enhancing local fish populations. During the 2025 summer season, AITRC's Stream Habitat Restoration Biologist attended tribal consultation meetings with Gulkana, Gakona, Mentasta, and Kluti-Kaah (Copper Center) councils, as well as Ahtna, Inc.'s annual shareholder meeting. A number of fish passage concerns were identified, including culvert replacement, beaver dam mitigation, and areas to improve stream/trail crossings. Increased water temperature monitoring efforts were also identified as important, given the potential for water temperatures to reach levels lethal to salmon, as documented on the Yukon River and elsewhere in 2019.

Partnership - This position focuses on collaborating with our downriver neighbors at the Copper River Watershed Project (CRWP) to identify culvert-replacement projects and fill gaps. In 2025, AITRC and CRWP worked together to survey failing culverts and low water crossings along Klutina River Road. The Alaska Department of Transportation (ADOT) was then

contacted to determine whether these crossings were a priority for ADOT. It was determined that they are not a priority, but a potential partnership could be established to replace/improve these crossings if prioritized by AITRC/Tribal Leadership. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) Habitat Permit Coordinator issued AITRC an Aquatic Resource Permit to conduct minnow trapping and electrofishing above and below the crossings; however, no fish were found during the initial site visit.

Anthropology-

The Copper Basin Community Harvest Assessment – This project, a cooperative agreement with NPS, is a collaboration among the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's Subsistence Division (ADF&G), Wrangell-St. Elias National Park (WRST), and the Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission (AITRC). The project aims to document one year of subsistence use in the following communities: Mentasta Lake, Mentasta Pass, Slana/Nabesna Road, and Chistochina.

Two methods are being used: a standard survey administered to every household willing to participate. The other is in-depth interviews with local individuals identified as being significantly active harvesters. Fieldwork conducted in 2023 collected data from residents of Chistochina, Mentasta Lake, and Mentasta Pass, focusing on their activities in 2022. The Slana/Nabesna Road fieldwork was completed in 2024, capturing residents' activities in 2023.

Final publication of the technical report is planned for January/February 2026. Normally, ADF&G does not have the capacity to meet with communities after the technical report is published. Upon reviewing the budget, AITRC and WRST have determined that sufficient funding is available for their staff to meet with residents of the study communities. The proposed plan is to present an overview of the findings and engage residents of each community in discussions about how they want to use the report to address their concerns. These meetings are tentatively scheduled for February and March of 2026.

Exploring Alternative Harvest Monitoring Methodology for the Ahtna Traditional Use Territory - Several participants in the Copper Basin Community Harvest Assessment expressed that a one-year snapshot of a household's participation in subsistence does not capture how harvesting has changed over time. Therefore, there is a need to develop potential methods for capturing one's lifetime of experiencing changes in subsistence. To address these data gaps, AITRC entered into a cooperative agreement with WRST.

It also became clear that while sharing happens, the understanding of how resources move through and across communities is unclear. During the Copper Basin Community Harvest Assessment, questions about resource sharing focused only on whether the household had received and/or given away resources. AITRC is developing a program to track how harvested resources move from person to person (see ***). There is a need to develop methods of data analysis to understand the flow of different resources within and between communities.

The two primary objectives of this project are to develop a methodology to bridge the gap between comprehensive harvest assessments and harvest monitoring and to delve deeper into methods of studying sharing networks within the Copper Basin.

AITRC's Anthropologist, GIS specialist, and NPS-WRST's cultural anthropologist have designed and are currently designing a series of guides for conducting exploratory life history interviews to gain insights into changes in document and map use, subsistence activities, harvest practices, and sharing patterns throughout the lives of long-time customary and traditional harvesters and users. In addition to these interviews, the anthropologist will conduct a literature review of existing social network analysis work conducted in Alaska. By combining the results, the project aims to develop a methodology that can fill the data gap between harvest assessments, potentially transforming into a systematic data collection method similar to the comprehensive harvest assessment. The analysis of the interviews and the development of the methodology will be presented in a comprehensive report.

NLURA Staff conducting GPR surveying at Squirrel Creek

Ahtna Cultural Preservation Capacity Building Project- The Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission (AITRC) is concluding its Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) project, funded by a grant from the Administration for Native Americans, to build AITRC's capacity to provide Tribal Historic Preservation Office services to the Native Village of Chitina and, eventually, the other Ahtna Tribes.

As part of the project, AITRC collaborated with the Native Village of Chitina, AKDOT, Ahtna, Inc., and Chitina Native Corporation. AITRC contracted with Northern Land Use Research Alaska, LLC (NLURA) to conduct archaeological fieldwork on multiple projects in the Chitina area associated with public access to the Chitina Subdistrict Personal Use Fishery. The broad objective is for the State and Tribal partners to protect Ahtna graves and cultural sites from further damage, while ensuring access to the fishery.

Over the past year, AITRC's THPO has been actively assisting the Native Village of Chitina in responding to Section 106 requests for feedback on how federally funded projects may impact cultural resources. These include addressing projects being conducted by Copper Valley Telecomm (CVTC), Alyeska, BLM, NPS, and AKDOT. As part of the feedback on these projects, the Native Village of Chitina requested that AITRC staff provide tribal monitoring services during fieldwork conducted by Alyeska, BLM, CVTC, and AKDOT.

Another part of the Section 106 consultation is to request further surveys to identify cultural resources at potential risk from the proposed work. For example, AKDOT is planning to work on the Richardson Highway in the Tonsina area. Knowing that the highway's right-of-way passes through a historic Ahtna cemetery, AITRC, Native Village of Chitina, and Ahtna Inc. requested the use of Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) in the proposed project footprint. The results indicate that there are ancestors buried within the right-of-way. This discovery, along with ongoing efforts to protect graves at O'Brien and Eskilida Creeks, has motivated AITRC to help develop a broader regional protocol to improve how agencies treat the remains of Ahtna Ancestors.

By working closely with our collaborators, AITRC has been making headway in fulfilling the Native Village of Chitina's vision for protecting these important cultural sites.

Background on Section 106 and Recent Regulatory Efforts

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires federal agencies to consider how their actions—such as permits, funding, or approvals—may affect historic and cultural places. These places can include archaeological sites, traditional cultural areas, and historic villages that are important to Tribes and rural communities. Section 106 also requires agencies to consult with Tribes before making decisions that could affect these resources.
In recent years, both federal and state agencies have pursued efforts to revise or "streamline" Section 106 regulations. These efforts are often framed as ways to speed up development projects, such as roads, mining, or energy infrastructure. However, many of the proposed changes would reduce or limit tribal consultation requirements, making it easier for projects to move forward without fully considering impacts to cultural and historic resources.

The **Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA)** is another federal law that protects archaeological sites and materials on public and Indian lands. ARPA makes it illegal to excavate, damage, or remove archaeological resources without a permit and recognizes the importance of protecting these sites for future generations.

Together, NHPA and ARPA are key laws that protect cultural resources and ensure Tribes have a voice when development may affect places of cultural, historical, or spiritual importance. Changes that weaken consultation under these laws can reduce tribal involvement in decisions that affect not only cultural sites, but also the lands and waters that support subsistence hunting and fishing.

AITRC & NPS In-Season Salmon Teleconferences- June 5 – August 28, 2025

The Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission (AITRC) would like to thank Wrangell–St. Elias National Park Service for the support that made it possible to hold a full season of weekly in-season salmon teleconferences. This summer, AITRC hosted twelve teleconferences—slightly more than last year, as the series began earlier in the fishing season. These calls continue to serve as an important space for dialogue, connection, and collaboration among tribal citizens, subsistence users, state and federal managers, and local biologists.

AITRC's 2025 In-Season Teleconference Flyer

Participation was strong throughout the season. Our first call brought together twenty-four participants, including agency partners and state and federal representatives. The structure of the calls followed a consistent pattern: biologists and managers shared updates on sonar counts, tower numbers, permits issued, and harvest data, followed by reports from subsistence users. This balance allowed for the sharing of both scientific data and lived experiences, ensuring that the information exchanged reflected what was happening on the ground and in the water.

Subsistence users played an especially important role in this year's calls. They provided updates from their camps, reporting on the number of fish harvested, water levels, fish health, and any issues encountered. Their firsthand observations not only informed the discussions but also allowed them to ask questions directly of area biologists and managers. A common theme across many calls was the impact of high-water levels. Several subsistence users reported that they were forced to stop their fish wheels due to low catches, debris, or large trees interfering with their equipment. Others described sporadic fishing conditions, with catches fluctuating depending on water levels.

Not all reports were negative. In the Chitina area and upriver, fishers noted improved catches at certain times, particularly when water levels dropped. The Native Village of Eyak reported that low water created a window of opportunity in which subsistence users were able to access fishing areas and bring in good numbers of fish over the course of a week.

In addition to the weekly teleconferences, AITRC also hosted two in-person meetings. The first was held in Gulkana Village, where youth participation was a highlight, bringing energy and intergenerational perspectives into the conversation. The second, held at Tazlina Hall, served as both the final teleconference of the season and a wrap-up meeting. This gathering provided an opportunity to hear season-end reports from ongoing AITRC projects and to introduce the work of AITRC's Stream Restoration Biologist, who is beginning to look at long-term habitat concerns in the region.

Overall, the 2025 in-season salmon teleconferences successfully combined data sharing, community knowledge, and open dialogue. They provided a vital link between subsistence users and resource managers, strengthening advocacy efforts,

documenting seasonal trends, and building collective understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Copper River salmon.

Tribal Stewardship Coordinator

Research & Training in Tribal Stewardship – Ongoing research focuses on documenting past and present land use by tribal members, requiring skills in GIS mapping, interviews with community members, and a detailed study of regional land and water use. This work builds knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the eight federally recognized tribes in the Ahtna Region. This program emphasizes understanding tribal concerns related to land, interviewing members and extended families, and applying traditional stewardship principles and laws. Research also explores key issues that conflict with tribal stewardship values and seeks strategies to mitigate these challenges, ensuring future management decisions reflect both cultural priorities and sustainable practices.
The research process involves a structured interview in which we ask about sacred places and the traditional customs or practices associated with them. We also inquire about any sacred lands known to the tribes and seek to understand the significance of each watershed to them, as well as the reasons it is important to each tribe. What is the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) for the landscape that tribe so happens to be at. Like the Stevens Village Land Use Plan, which includes the tribe's land use and ethnography, this plan provides the tribe with further jurisdiction to manage its resources and human development on the land from its origin. Eleven tribal members (or affiliated with the tribe) have been interviewed, two in Cantwell and about eight, and counting, in the tribe of Tazlina, with one non-tribal member affiliated with the tribe of Tazlina.

Education and Outreach-

AITRC organized a range of hands-on workshops and training designed to strengthen community connections to subsistence resources and ensure knowledge is carried forward.

AITRC continued to expand its work with local schools to inspire the next generation of stewards. In partnership with Glennallen Middle School, AITRC co-hosted Salmon in the Classroom, giving students the opportunity to watch salmon develop from eggs to fry. This hands-on experience gave youth a close look at the salmon life cycle, reinforcing why these fish are vital to community subsistence and the ecosystem. AITRC will continue this program in the upcoming 2026 spring semester. With funding from the Copper River Watershed Project, we will take the lead on this project and work with Glennallen Elementary School, Glennallen Middle School, Kenny Lake School, and Upstream Learning.

In partnership with Glennallen Elementary School, AITRC has been leading weekly science lectures that connect students in grades K–5 to their environment. These age-appropriate lessons introduce foundational concepts, including wildlife habitats, seasonal cycles, watersheds, and the roles of salmon and other animals in local ecosystems. Through interactive activities and hands-on demonstrations, students begin to see how the land and water around them support daily life and community well-being. These early learning opportunities help foster curiosity, respect for the environment, and a sense of responsibility toward subsistence resources from a young age.

The Fish and Wildlife Techniques 1-Credit course was hosted by AITRC for Copper River School District biology students. The course built practical field skills, and supported the development of future local natural resource technicians while keeping learning engaging and fun. Participants learned how to set up and collect data using techniques previously used by AITRC to monitor wildlife, and practiced accurate data recording and observation skills. These activities provided students with a realistic understanding of how wildlife research is conducted and how science, technology, and stewardship come together in the field.

AITRC Staff teaching how to take samples at the fetal moose necropsy.

AITRC has also been working closely with Glennallen High School to provide more opportunities for hands-on, applied learning across biology, agriculture, and FFA programs. Students partook in a fetal moose dissection facilitated by AITRC staff in collaboration with the Copper River School District. The moose was salvaged following a vehicle collision, and the fetal moose was donated for educational and scientific purposes. Students identified rumen parts, examined key organs, and collected samples for AITRC's ongoing Moose Health Study, directly connecting classroom instruction to real-world wildlife research and local subsistence knowledge.

AITRC also partnered with Glennallen High School's Agriculture class to host a three-day salmon smoking and canning course, funded by the National Park Service. During the course, students brined and smoked salmon, then cut, jarred, and pressure-cooked it, learning how traditional preservation practices align with modern food safety standards. The class emphasized the cultural importance of salmon, food security, and the practical skills needed to safely prepare subsistence foods. Together, these experiences helped students see how biology, stewardship, and subsistence practices intersect while building skills relevant to future careers in natural resource management and community resilience.

AITRC Staff leading how to can salmon.

Prince William Sound College's Conservation of Natural Resources class invited AITRC to share insights from its carnivore research in the Ahtna Territory. Students learned how to set up hair snares and apply mark–recapture techniques using methods previously used by AITRC in a GMU 13 bear study conducted in collaboration with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to monitor bear populations in a non-invasive way. Through hands-on field practice and discussion, AITRC demonstrated how these research tools contribute to a better understanding of wildlife health and habitat use, while connecting classroom learning to real-world conservation work taking place across the region.

An additional Trapping Course, partially funded by the First Nations Development Institute, was offered in partnership with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and Prince William Sound College, welcoming trappers of all skill levels. The course provided hands-on instruction in trap-setting techniques, safety protocols, and current state regulations, while also teaching participants to select appropriate traps, identify productive trapping areas, and properly skin and prepare harvested animals. Instructors emphasized ethical, responsible harvest practices and respect for wildlife, reinforcing the role of trapping in subsistence livelihoods and in wildlife management. By bringing together community members, agency partners, and educational institutions, this training helped ensure that trapping knowledge continues to be passed on in a safe, informed, and culturally grounded way.

AITRC taught Introduction to Wildlife and Fisheries Management and the Role of Ahtna Dene in Protecting Tribal Ways of Life in Alaska through the University of Alaska Fairbanks Department of Tribal Governance. The course focused on Alaska subsistence law, Tribal co-management, and the regulatory processes that shape natural resource decision-making. Students practiced developing and delivering testimony on issues affecting Tribal lands, waters, and ways of life, gaining practical skills for engaging in state and federal governance processes.

Through these school partnerships, AITRC is strengthening the bridge between education and community stewardship. Students are not only learning scientific concepts but also gaining an understanding of how cultural values, traditional knowledge, and modern science work together to support healthy ecosystems. These programs encourage youth to envision themselves as future biologists, technicians, educators, and leaders who can contribute to the long-term care of the Ahtna Territory. By engaging youth and community members in these programs, AITRC is ensuring that traditional knowledge, cultural values, and modern science come together to protect the subsistence resources that sustain the Ahtna people today and for generations to come.