

Cultural Preservation Program for Alaska

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ABSTRACT: In this technical report, an innovative cultural preservation program for implementation in Athabascan villages is presented. The parameters for success in implementing such projects is discussed based on a workshop with Athabascan elders.

KEYWORDS: **AUTHOR: Please add 10 keywords.**

Introduction

Between November 21 and 22, 2008 the Long Term Ecological Research Program (LTER) and the Institute of Arctic Biology held a workshop in Venetie (an Athabascan village in the interior of Alaska with 202 inhabitants according to census 2000), with the purpose of assessing the needs of this community, related to climate change.

Given the desire to preserve the cultural identity and the need to overcome the poor nutrition condition of many indigenous communities (Bersamin, Luick, Stern, & Zidenberg-Cherr, 2006, 2008; Henry-Stones 2008) I designed a Cultural Preservation Program using digital media and the Internet with the following objectives: a) to rescue local history and tales, b) to develop environmental education programs, c) to improve nutritional content with the object of preventing obesity and diabetes.

I found a number of publications and websites with similar objectives in Alaska and throughout the world. That included research into indigenous communities' history and knowledge base preservation, interaction with the internet, disease control, and increasing survival possibilities, one of which had just begun in Australia (Australian Research Council, 2008).

Other examples included: Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN, 2003), www.ankn.uaf.edu; Project Jukebox, <http://uaf-db.uaf.edu/Jukebox/PJWeb/pjhome.htm>; the Babiche Project: <http://www.babiche.org/about.html> hosted by the University of Alaska and the Alaska Native Science Commission which produced very useful education material published in books and CD rom as well as a scientific analysis about the process of teaching and learning in indigenous

communities (Allen, n.d.; Barnhardt, 2001, 2008; Barnhardt & Kawaley 2005; Keim, 1997).

However, in these programs usually anthropologists or other scientists interviewed elders, and in a few cases community members were trained to do the same job (ANKN, 2003; Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (ARSI) & ANKN, 1997).

Considering that culture is transmitted to new generations within the family and the community, I designed a method for knowledge preservation within this framework.

Method

According to Agnoletti (2007), strategies are essential to ensure integration and continuity of cultural values, policy-making, and planning for sustainable natural resource management, while certain actions should be specified for the appropriate application of these values in diverse environments.

Following those guidelines, and listening to the interventions of locals during the workshop in Venetie, people of that community stated the need to educate their children, because they were losing their cultural identity and they wished to bring it back.

An initial draft of the Cultural Preservation Program was discussed during three presentations I made to the University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF) between November and December 2008, with the participation of different stakeholders who contributed to improve the draft with their ideas and feedback: these included anthropologists, librarians, native alumni (UAF) and educators, Office of Multicultural Affairs & Diversity (UAF), researchers of different sciences, representatives of Athabasca and Inuit People, social workers, and practitioners working in native villages.

Results

The primary goal of the Cultural Preservation Program was to scan all of the families of each village, rather than just a sample. To achieve that, tape recorders would be left in schools or with tribal councils of different villages with the intention that pupils in primary and high schools would take them home and record the knowledge of their elders. The children were to be given instruction on how to use the tape recorders and to collect the information.

To encourage the participation of the communities in this project, the children of each community in Alaska should understand that the

knowledge of the elders as well as the current indigenous knowledge of each family is a heritage that must be passed on, like a valuable jewel, to future generations.

This project would provide each child with the opportunity to ask their own grandparent(s) or other elders about stories of their way of life in the past. In addition to stories about the past, children were to interview their grandmother(s) to document recipes used to prepare meals in the past and then their mother, to obtain the recipes she cooks with presently. The children were to then e-mail the results of their interviews to the Cultural Preservation Program website where the interviews would be archived.

This method of cultural preservation would trigger the process of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next from the first stage of the project: community members would be interviewed in the privacy of their own homes using an inexpensive device, while enjoying family life at the same time. This would then provide children the opportunity to discover and preserve their own culture. In addition, while they worked with the website, they could share their experiences with their friends, relatives, the community, and even with other communities depending on privacy issues.

Each family and each community would decide whether or not to participate in the project – if they were to proceed, they would be provided with a password. As a result of that action, each family would make the decision to share their knowledge with others, or to preserve it for themselves. If they were to proceed, they could proudly enjoy listening to their own voices on the Internet.

On the other hand, the children would have the opportunity to add information continuously to the website because the tape recorders would not be removed and the website will be alive forever. Each family would have the opportunity to write its very own history and share it along the generations. The website to be built has to be dynamic and in constant growth and interaction with communities, registering cultural changes, and how that changing knowledge is used by each family considering the different challenges they may have to face – for example, climate change and socio-economic changes, overcoming the concept of a web museum of indigenous knowledge.

To guarantee the successful incorporation of indigenous knowledge as well as the protection of this information, Indigenous People must control the collection and use of the information for resource management (Higgings, 2000). Article 8(j) of the Convention on

Biological Diversity states that arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations, and practices, provisions shall be made for the equitable sharing of benefits with the holders of this knowledge (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2003).

In a second stage, the information obtained from the interviews on a voluntary basis, and with interaction from school teachers, the program would develop environmental education programs. Videos about trapping, hunting, fishing, and hand-crafting skills could be posted on the website with the help and advice of elders.

In a third stage, comparisons could be made between the nutrition values of the past and current recipes. To improve nutrition and for successful interventions, it would be necessary to incorporate strategies to improve diet choices, related to both traditional and Western foods. On the website there would be different videos showing mothers healthy ways to cook foods obtained from subsistence activities. We would hope that this might help reduce levels of obesity and diabetes presently found in rural communities.

At the same time, it would be desirable to implement a physical work-out program and increased outdoor activities for the younger generations. With the participation of elders, children could be taught skills needed for the successful harvest of ecosystem products and also to gain valuable experience. The experiences of ARSI and the work of ANKN (1997) in Old Minto Camp is an example that could be taken into account for the implementation of such activities.

Before the implementation of this project it would be necessary to better understand the relationship school children have with the surrounding environment (i.e., plants & animals). In the schools of the villages researchers could determine the perception children have about local species by having them write on a piece of paper his or her age and grade level and then draw all the wild species known to them of plants and animals. They would also add the uses of each species (e.g., food, trade, medicine, nuisance, ritual use, construction material, etc.).

This activity, called "Animals and Plants of the Bush" would allow researchers a written register of the use of the various species. The environmental perception could be measured according to the frequency of each species in the drawings, giving a quantitative indicator. Figure 1 shows an example developed in Argentina, where this method of studying wildlife use and environmental perception of school children was developed and implemented by Barbarán (2001).

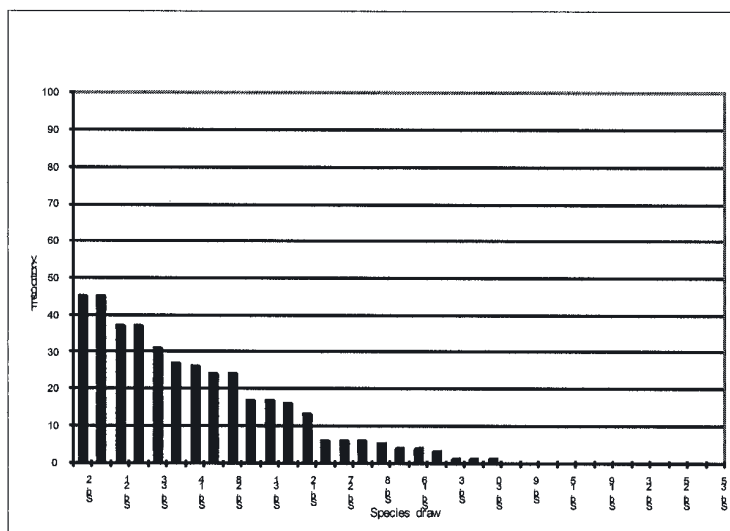


Figure 1. The mammal species of Acambuco Provincial Reserve (Salta, Argentina) are identified with numbers from 1 to 35, according to the quantity of species drawn by the school children of that study area. The perception of each species is ordered according to its frequency in the drawings.

A diagnostic about the environmental perception of the community would also be necessary. Each village could write its own book outlining their use of wild species. At home, the student could ask questions to determine the usefulness of different species of wild plants and animals or any other elements of the ecosystem deemed useful.

They would be asked to draw pictures of each species on a sheet of paper writing its name, use, and where it could be found, obtaining a description of its habitat. If a plant is drawn, the pupil would then collect a sample of it and make a herbarium so that the species is physically documented and available for teaching activities. Each drawing, habitat description, and archived plant would be collected by the participating teacher and be made into a book that may be increased over time, as necessary.

A similar method was developed by teacher Claudio Del Basso in 2005, to register the use of wildlife for medicinal purposes and applied the method in the primary school of Alumbre, a remote village in the

Calchaqui Valley located in the southwest of Salta Province, Argentina. We would measure the perception of the community by calculating the frequency of each species drawn and archived.

With the information obtained, researchers could develop and publish scientific articles, books, CDs, and videos with the findings, as well as environmental and nutrition educational materials, such as brochures, stickers, and posters for school use, identifying new research opportunities, and furthering community needs.

Assessment of the Project

In order to assess the success of the project, perception measurement activities would be repeated in the schools two or three years after the implementation of this initiative. The nutritional component of the program would be assessed by measuring the Body Mass Index of school children, in the same period.

The percentage of people involved in trapping, hunting, and the economic weight of subsistence activities in local economies will also be measured and monitored as indicators of project failure or success. According to assessment results and dialogs and continuous interaction with the communities, researchers could make necessary corrections to the project or begin again.

Implementation

The dialogue with indigenous organizations and tribal councils as well as the capitalization of previous experiences through collaboration, cooperation, and coordination with other institutions, research projects and scientists working in cultural preservation, rural education, and nutritional health in the study area, is key for the success of this proposal and will be the first task to be undertaken.

We hope to begin with two Athabascan villages working over a year to calibrate the method and after that, it could be applied in all of Alaska. It is our hope that this project would provide for the installation of internet infrastructure in all the villages of the study area as well as the provision of computers for each scholar. All the villages of Alaska should now have access to the internet.

On the other hand, this project is replicable and can be applied in indigenous communities all over the world, building networks that could work on an interconnected basis.

We are seeking funding to implement this project as soon as possible, and if any institution is interested, please contact the author of this article.

Discussion

The primary participants in the workshop (n=18), were mainly elders. Only two younger people participated – an extremely low participation rate considering that 60% of the population in that particular village is under the age of 25, according to census 2000 (USA, 2000).

On the other hand, one of the elders attending the workshop commented that researchers were going in circles, asking the same questions again and again, making a living using science but resulting in no practical solutions to overcome poverty and create jobs. That statement may explain the low participation rate of younger people in the workshop: about 34.0% of families and 42.8% of the population in Venetie were living below the poverty line, including 52.8% of those under the age of eighteen (USA, 2000).

Young Athabascans are emigrating from their home communities looking for better economic and social opportunities. Trapping by rural residents in interior Alaska has plummeted despite the good prices being offered for furs at auction houses in Canada and the United States. During the trapping season of 2008-2009, I detected only three active trappers in Venetie, four in Beaver, and four in Arctic Village, all between the ages of 50 and 75.

The trappers interviewed explained that although the younger children start trapping with their relatives between the ages of 10-13 years old, they do not continue with it on a regular basis. As a result, although the younger people know how to trap they have not developed enough skill for a good harvest.

Patterns and intensity of trapping activity are influenced by equipment, time, costs, and availability of alternative resources. To invest time in trapping and to develop the skills may not be worthwhile for the younger people if it is possible for them to find temporary jobs where they can be paid US \$30/hour.

At the same time, most of the families receive public assistance, so the men do not need to spend their time trapping. When receiving welfare, families have their basic needs covered, and for many it is the main source of income. Hunting and fishing provide only a subsistence living and many prefer to spend their time doing other things.

Hunting-harvest societies have a different concept of well being – spiritual peace provides them with happiness, rather than the accumulation of goods or money. Such cultures do not have a conception about time or saving money as they live on a daily basis. If they have what they need that is enough – why would they seek more?

Even considering subsistence activities, it is easier to go to the store to buy canned meat than to hunt for a moose – without the necessity of investing in gas, time, physical effort, and suffering the cold and most of the time coming back with nothing.

The low use of the abundant natural resources may be interpreted as a different way of saving – the natural resources would be available to be used during difficult times, while they can use other resources available from outside the system.

The implementation of a Cultural Preservation Program will not solve the problem of poverty but it would create jobs for the locals, and would keep alive the tools and skills important in a cash-subsistence mixed economy, as well as the pride in belonging to a unique culture.

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