Journal of Research Practice
Volume 10, Issue 2, Article N20, 2014

ISSN: 1712-851X

Research Note:

Contributing to Alaska Communities by Cultivating Local Monitoring for National Park Management

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Index Terms: Alaska; environmental management; oral history; situated knowledge

Suggested Citation: Higgins, M. N. (2014). Contributing to Alaska communities by cultivating local monitoring for national park management [Research note]. *Journal of Research Practice*, *10*(2), Article N20. Retrieved from http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/416/373

Note. This research note is part of the thematic section, Giving Back Through Collaboration in Practice, in the special issue titled "Giving Back in Field Research," published as Volume 10, Issue 2 in the *Journal of Research Practice*.

You cannot get very far in Alaska without asking someone for help. Regardless of how much I plan, my success is often dictated by the wind and rain, my food supply, the road conditions and the dwindling capabilities of a 19-year-old vehicle. Doing fieldwork as a single woman in the 23 remote resident communities of Wrangell Saint Elias National Park and Preserve (WRST) often involves doing research without Internet, electricity, phone, or reliable transportation—if there is any road access at all. Things leak; they shred; they freeze and fizzle out. They break down and there are no replacements for hundreds of miles. Or you run out of an essential supply, like propane or batteries for a voice recorder. Alaskans often replace these things, no questions asked, trusting that you will return the favor. In a state of just over 700,000 people, where families of Alaska residents are often far away, my Alaskan family runs deep. In almost any community where I end up, I find that this informal network connects me with someone who might invite me to stay in their home or welcome me inside for a cup of tea. One community expands to the next.

Iris (pseudonym) is one of the dozens of Alaskans who have kindly opened their homes to me since I first arrived in 2004. I have appeared at her door, travel weary, covered in mud, in tears, after days of sleep deprivation. Iris unfailingly welcomes me like one of her own children. Whether I land in Anchorage at 12 noon or at 1 in the morning, Iris is often there to greet me at the airport. Iris has offered me a rest amidst the myriad last minute tasks involved in preparing for a summer spent off the grid in rural Alaska. In her small pink home in Spenard (a neighborhood of Anchorage, Alaska, United States), where she raises honey bees on the roof and plants silky lettuce in tidy rows, Iris routinely offers a cozy guest bed for me to lay my tired bones, a car for me to run errands with, stories from the year gone by that keep us awake long past the midnight sun. She often reads me a favorite poem and gives me a chance to pause amidst the packing dust and last minute scrambles of preparing for summer fieldwork. This is before sitting down with me for several hours in an interview.

Having homesteaded and engaged in subsistence activities on federal land since the 1950s, Iris has a unique perspective on the very recent establishment of most Alaska national parks. The establishment of these parks is the subject of my dissertation and Iris is one of many Alaskans who have spent hours engaged in a conversation with me to inform my research. The people who have contributed to my research are not as indebted to me as I am to them. Hospitality is a normative behavior in a state where people are spread out. When your car battery freezes or you get stuck in your driveway at negative forty (−40 °F temperature), distant neighbors make good friends. At the same time, the hospitality club has been a difficult one to join as a reciprocating member. Repaying these favors, giving back to the community that is helping me to develop my dissertation and launch my academic career has been an ongoing personal challenge. How can I give back to people like Iris?

The Wrangells attract a great deal of traditional, well-funded field science, but there are few scholars who evaluate this Park's resident communities and their combined history. In a 2006 review, park scholars Paige West, James Igoe, and Dan Brockington (2006) called for more research on protected areas that specifically focused on what "we see as a simplification process that takes place when biologists and other natural scientists write about, think about, and attempt to legislate the social relations between people and their surroundings." Drawing on the concept of *situated knowledge* developed by Donna Haraway (1991) and other feminist scholars, my dissertation examines the role local narratives play in shaping management conflicts in WRST. Like Haraway, I pay attention to these narratives in order to seriously consider different kinds of knowledges in the Park, while recognizing that all academic work, including my own, is itself "situated, political and partial" (Nightingale 2003). This effort follows a long line of scholars who have taken from Alaskan communities without ever returning their findings. Though a few scientists have become year round residents of park communities, often they arrive for 2-3 years to draw plot lines, form conclusions, raise questions for future study, and rarely return. Due to a long history of human displacement in these areas, local narratives have largely been left out of the discourse on national parks. However, they are particularly relevant for the current phase of national park management, which is making a better effort to incorporate human history and attract a more diverse crowd of visitors.

Understanding the dynamic relationship between remote wilderness communities and the federal government has involved fieldwork that requires ongoing interviews with park stakeholders, the National Park Service (NPS), and the visiting public.

At the same time that I have played an academic role within the community, I have also been an active member of the community. I chose to do research in a place I have lived in previously and that will be with me for a long time to come. The trying part is staying in your research community, writing about your neighbors, documenting their lives from your perspective, with every hope and intention of remaining part of the community when the field season is complete. I know too that the impact of my research may continue to change in a dynamic ecological and social environment. In addition, individuals in the communities where I have worked do not necessarily embrace the fluctuating aspect of research. When I arrived for my second field season, for example, many park residents wanted to see my results and my dissertation "report." But I was not ready to share anything just yet. I had completed fewer than half of my interviews and my theories had not stabilized as new data were still coming in. When my final results are in, I am acutely aware that everyone may not agree with what I write. I want my writings to matter to those people who have offered me their time, to those who have invested their own interests in an interview and research project at large.

Alaskans tend to be relentlessly busy in the summer season. There is a strong local identity around hard work, overcoming physical challenges, and innovating with limited resources. Sometimes it is tricky to know how to fit into the daily routine when everyone is seemingly so harried, and it is difficult to ask people for their time. This comes up in one conversation after the next.

Well, I have cleaned community outhouses for days on end. In recently thawed glacial soil, I have cultivated lettuce, broccoli, and kale, in order to provide greens for a man who has no time to garden. I have offered childcare, washed dishes, chopped firewood, and added a fresh layer of spring paint to a chipped door or window. I write "Thank You" notes that revisit a particular highlight from an interview. I participate in community meetings and offer advice where it seems appropriate. I have recorded public comments and inventoried planning documents, which I have handed over for community use. Yet these individual efforts may not be visible to the community at large. And to some extent, that is all right; I enjoy offering quiet assistance.

But lately I have been considering a longer legacy of giving back, and thinking about what it means to give back at a broader scale—institutionally, spatially, temporally, and politically. This effort begins with trying to help build respect and better communication between the NPS and the local community—particularly less vocal members of the community, despite a very contentious history between the two. In the early 1980s shortly after Alaska's national parks were established, one region-wide protest involved over 500 Alaskans who were firmly opposed to the establishment of the parks. At this time, newly hired park employees were denied rental homes in the community, received ongoing threats, and were prohibited from purchasing gasoline from local stores. One small way that I am trying to mend this history is to create a better opportunity for park residents to

assist in natural resource management by acknowledging the unusual knowledge that they have gained by living intimately on lands that are now located within the WRST park. And often this knowledge comes from women, like Iris, who maintain gardening journals, hunting diaries, and record their daily observations in personal calendars and notebooks, such as the annual appearance of wildflowers or migratory birds.

Park residents, whose presence sometimes pre-dates the establishment of the Alaska national park system in 1980, offer a unique contribution to climate change monitoring. These residents are in a distinct position to offer records of changes in the land through their personal records and oral histories. Yet much of the data from local resident natural history observations have been difficult to track in a park where there is a single ecologist and a single biologist for 13.2 million acres. Furthermore, the knowledge held by local people is often difficult to access due to political, social, and remote geographic conditions. In addition, local knowledges, such the observations of wildlife migration that park residents keep track of are not always understood by park managers, who are aware that residents are collecting observational data, but describe it as anecdotal at best.

My research addresses this issue by exploring the nature and role of local observations of animals and vegetation responses to climate change. I seek to understand the people who are documenting these observations and the constraints they face in participating in park monitoring in cooperation with the federal government. This work may help to identify the types of training or support that would facilitate the involvement of local residents in broader monitoring efforts.

The Wrangells are home to one of the largest resident populations of any national park, with roughly 5,200 residents who are eligible to claim subsistence rights. Living in remote rural areas, and relying more on the direct, consumptive use of natural resources, these residents tend to have a different relationship with park resources than those who live in and around parks in the lower 48 states (i.e., the US states other than Alaska and Hawaii). Park residents have noticed significant changes at the intersections of climate, hydrology, wildlife, and vegetation. These changes are expected to accelerate in the future. Given the physical characteristics of this park, coupled with up to 10,000 years of human history, this region presents an opportunity for understanding and managing climate-induced shifts. I would like to give local communities a greater say in guiding how these changes are evaluated and in interpreting what climate change means—socially, culturally, and politically. Ultimately, I hope this effort will also support WRST residents in their desire for greater civic engagement with the NPS—a priority that many local people, including Iris, have expressed to me.

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Received 27 October 2013 | Accepted 17 March 2014 | Published 1 July 2014