

8 Cosmological Changes

Shifts in Human–Fish Relationships in Alaska’s Bering Strait Region

Julie Raymond-Yakoubian|and Vernae Angnaboogok

For full document - please contact Kawerak

Introduction

This chapter addresses human–fish relationships amongst Alaskan Bering Strait Eskimo people,¹ and some ways those relationships have changed over time. Many species of fish² have long been critical subsistence resources for Bering Strait Eskimo people.³ Fish are a valuable food source, provide important nutrition, are culturally preferred foods, and can be significant contributors to individual and community well-being and identity. One nineteenth-century explorer who traveled throughout the region and beyond even remarked that the Inupiat could be called “a nation of fishermen.”⁴

As an illustration of the importance of fish to contemporary Bering Strait indigenous communities, consider the following statements made by region residents. One Teller resident noted that “[f]ish [is] very, very, very important ... where my parents an’ grandparents came from, which is upriver. Fish was central [to] life basically,”⁵ and another stated the following: “If there was no tomcods, there’d probably be no Eskimos. Tomcods has pretty much saved a lot of Eskimos’ lives, I guess.”⁶ Further, a Stebbins resident stated that “If you know how to hunt and fish, you’re alright. You can live. You can survive. If you don’t know how, you don’t know nothing.”⁷ A Brevig Mission resident noted that “To us, [the fish are] the most important things we need to eat. The fish, we can’t go without fish, ah?”⁸ and an Elim resident noted that “I wouldn’t know how to describe who I am, without having that subsistence of salmon.”⁹

Despite their continued importance, fish are oft-ignored in discussions of highly marine mammal–dependent communities – such as many Bering Strait communities. While the relationship that many contemporary Bering Strait residents have with fish has undergone significant and disruptive changes over the last century, we think that analyzing human–fish relationships can provide important insights into Bering Strait Eskimo cosmology.

Alaska’s Bering Strait region is located just south of the Arctic Circle, extending from the southern shores of Norton Sound to the northern Seward Peninsula, including the northern Bering Sea islands. The region is the homeland for three distinct cultural groups – the Inupiat, Yup’ik, and St. Lawrence Island Yupik people.

The information presented here about contemporary beliefs and practices is derived primarily from interviews and discussions with elders and active fishers, and from participant observation of

For full document - please contact Kawerak

First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2017 selection and editorial matter, Tuomas Räsänen and Taina Syrjämaa; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Tuomas Räsänen and Taina Syrjämaa to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-415-41925-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-22876-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by diacriTech, Chennai

For full document - please contact
Kawerak