8 Cosmological Changes

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

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Introduction

This chapter addresses human–fish relationships amongst Alaskan Bering Strait Eskimo people, and some ways those relationships have changed over time. Many species of fish have long been critical subsistence resources for Bering Strait Eskimo people. 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.”

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,” 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.” 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.” 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?” and an Elim resident noted that “I wouldn’t know how to describe who I am, without having that subsistence of salmon.”

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