

Witness The ARCTIC

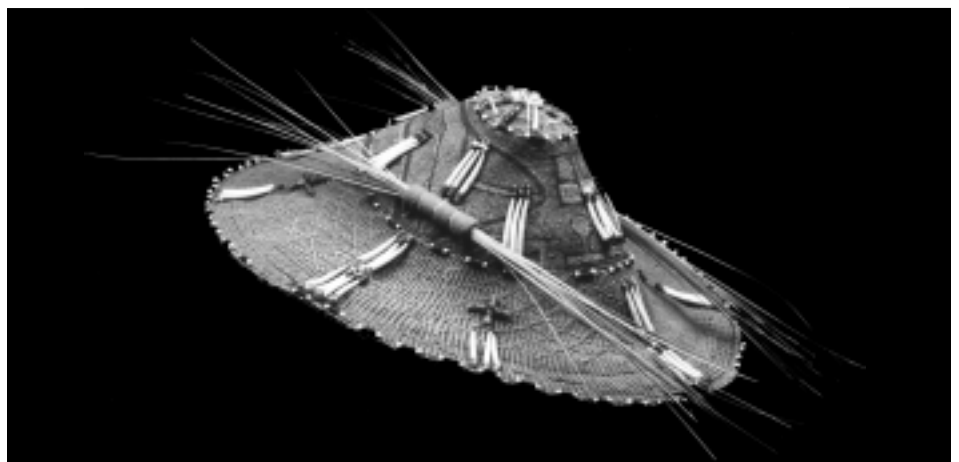
Arctic Research Consortium of the United States Member Institution

Arctic Studies Center, Smithsonian Institution

The Arctic Studies Center (ASC) was created by the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in 1988 to promote the study of arctic peoples, cultures, and environments. Building on 150 years of Smithsonian arctic exploration and science, its mission lies in cultural, biological, and environmental studies in the Arctic and Subarctic, particularly in Alaska, but also throughout the circumpolar North.

The ASC is the primary U.S. government program with a special focus on arctic cultural research and education. In keeping with the Smithsonian commitment to "the increase and diffusion of knowledge," the Center conducts field research and museum studies, builds and maintains collections and archives, produces exhibition and outreach programs, and conducts museum-based educational programs. Training of museum professionals and outreach enhancing legacies of northern peoples are central to its mission. Fellows and interns provide support for scientists and community scholars. ASC collections and research programs involve close collaboration with northern communities and Native groups in areas of exhibition, museum training, and research.

Research, collection development, and public programs are essential to Smithsonian scholarship and public education programs. ASC work is multidisciplinary, circumpolar, international, and community-based. Our fundamental concern is with the preservation of arctic cultural legacies.



A Koniag (Aluutiq) woven spruce root hunting hat collected by William J. Fisher from Karluk, Kodiak Island in 1884. Decorations include sea lion whiskers, dentalium, and glass beads (NMNH, Smithsonian Institution).

Research

ASC research explores problems and topics of the arctic and subarctic world. Center staff emphasize anthropological archeology, ethnology, ethnohistory, and related aspects of biology and natural science. Research problems commonly include a variety of cultural studies involving human-environmental interactions from the Pleistocene to modern times. The ASC also investigates modern processes of cultural contact and transformation from perspectives of history, contemporary affairs, demography, geography, and ecology.

Over the past 20 years, Smithsonian northern studies have concentrated on research in three circumpolar regions:

- Inuit-European transformations in the Eastern Canadian Arctic;
- trans-Beringian contacts and evolutionary systems in the Greater North Pacific region; and

- recent culture history and transformations involving modernization and industrial development in the Yamal region of Western Siberia.

From Trash to Treasures

Having pursued northern studies since the 1850s, the Smithsonian possesses one of the world's finest anthropological collections from arctic regions. The most important early collections are ethnological materials acquired by Smithsonian naturalists between 1858 and 1890 from the Mackenzie District, Ungava, Baffin Island, Coppermine, Alaska, and Siberia. These collections were purchased from Native people with highly prized Western trade goods. Edward W. Nelson, who collected now priceless materials in Western Alaska in 1877-81, was called by his Yup'ik friends "the Man Who Buys Good-For-Nothing Things."

Unlike many museum collections, the Smithsonian's are early, comprehensive, systematic, and well-documented. Archival holdings include first-hand field notes, photography, and unpublished reports. NMNH also houses large collections of northern fauna, flora, minerals, and paleontological remains which provide valuable baseline data for studies of global change, pollution monitoring, and paleoenvironmental reconstruction.

Policy and Partnerships

While its basic mandate lies in cultural studies, Center programs address natural sciences, humanities, and arts. Outside the Institution, ASC cooperates with NSF, the National Park Service, State Department, NOAA, and other federal and Alaskan state agencies; and with universities, Native communities, and foreign partners.

The ASC represents the Smithsonian at various federal agencies and on research boards such as Interagency Arctic Research and Policy Committee (see *Witness* Autumn 1996), the U.S. Arctic Research Commission (see page 12), and ARCUS; and advises government and international bodies on northern cultural issues. It also works with the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which recently became part of the Smithsonian.

The First Ten Years

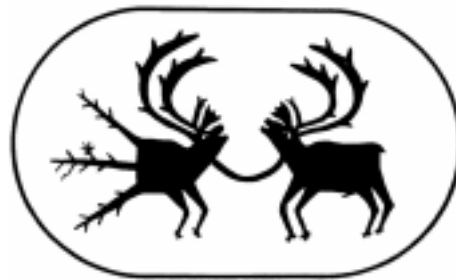
In recent years, the ASC has expanded its earlier focus on North America into international research, collection sharing, exhibition, and public education. Major initiatives have included:

- **Crossroads of Continents**—

An international joint venture with the Soviet Union led to *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Alaska and Siberia*, an exhibition exploring history, art, and interaction of cultures of the North Pacific region.

- **Crossroads Alaska/Siberia**—A smaller traveling exhibit to present North Pacific collections to local audiences in Alaska and the Russian Far East in 1993-97. A color catalog, educational materials, and media programs were produced, and 5,000 Russian language catalogs were provided free to Siberian museums, Native associations, village schools, and local communities.

- **Community Archeology**—Field archeology is an important method of strengthening community links to its past in ways that inspire Native youth and bind communities together. Community-based field projects conducted in Labrador, Baffin, and Alaska have provided opportunities for Smithsonian staff to work with local communities and for northern residents and scholars to work with Smithsonian scientists, collections, and archives.



A Yup'ik painted image from the bottom of a wooden serving dish shows a caribou linked to its spiritual likeness—its inua or an ancestor spirit. Collected by Edward Nelson in Nulukhtulogumut, near Baird Inlet, ca. 1879 (NMNH, Smithsonian Institution).

- **Archeology of the Frobisher Voyages**—One of the great sagas of European exploration is Martin Frobisher's search for a Northwest Passage in 1576-78 and discovery of "gold mines" in southeast Baffin Island. Smithsonian research in 1981 and 1990-93 brought attention to the historic remains of this first English venture in the New World and produced evidence of early European impacts on Inuit culture. The project stimulated a large international research program involving Inuit oral history, historical archeology, and environmental sciences.
- **National Park Surveys**—The National Park Service funded ASC/Anchorage in 1993-96 to conduct archeological surveys and paleoenvironmental research in Katmai, Kenai Fjords, Glacier Bay, Wrangell-St. Elias, and Lake Clark National Parks. The data advanced knowledge of human adaptations and paleodemography across a broad region, while identifying impacts of glacial advances and changing sea levels on preservation of the archeological record.

Results will assist NPS in management and research planning efforts.

- **Western Aleutian Archeology and Paleocology**—Since 1992, the ASC has participated in the Western Aleutian Human Paleocology and Biodiversity Project, an interagency (with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), international, and interdisciplinary initiative in the Western Aleutians. Building upon 19th-century Smithsonian work, the project seeks to unravel settlement chronology, dynamics of human and avian biogeography, and cultural change in a remote oceanic archipelago.
- **Historical Archeology of Russian Contact**—From Anchorage, the Center has continued research on the interaction of Russian fur traders and indigenous populations of southern Alaska at the Russian Three Saints Bay colony on Kodiak Island. Data from new contact-period sites are providing information on material culture change and village abandonment that fill major gaps in historical knowledge about the effects of Russian contact.
- **Living Yamal**—Research on the Yamal Peninsula of Western Siberia grew from the need to evaluate Western Siberian cultural resources in the face of rapid industrial development. Three archeological surveys (1994-97), a photograph exhibition, several video films, and public and scholarly materials were produced by a Smithsonian-Russian team. The project pioneered museum-arbitrated roles between industry and Native culture.
- **Outreach, Media, and Small Exhibits**—The annual ASC Newsletter, print media, radio, and TV carry information about ASC activities nationally and internationally. Video documentaries, including *Secrets of the Lost Red Paint People*, *Viking America*, *Northern Clans/Northern Traces*, and *In Caribou Country*, have been produced. The Center's prize-winning Web site (www.nmnh.si.edu/arctic) and multi-media communications offerings (in cooperation with *Live From the Poles* this spring) bring ASC work to a rapidly-growing cyberspace audience. Recent small exhibits include *Canadian*

Inuit Sculpture (Canadian Embassy), *Arktis/Antarktis* (KAH/Bonn), and *Oil from the Arctic* (Smithsonian Institution/American History).

Current Projects

The major rationale for ASC program development is the integral relationship between research and public programs. Past success, new links to Alaska and Russia, and international and local partnerships provide a foundation for a variety of future programs.

- **Kamuy: Spirit of the Ainu**—For several years the Center has been developing a special traveling exhibition featuring the history, culture, and art of the Native Ainu people of northern Japan and southern Okhotsk Sea from 10,000 BC to the present. Coming at a time of Ainu cultural rebirth and political recognition, the exhibition is being produced in partnership with the Ainu people and will emphasize the formation of Ainu ethnicity.
- **West-Viking: Norse in the New World**—A major exhibition is planned for the millennium era at the 1000th anniversary of Leif Eriksson’s discovery of America. Exploring Viking expansion from Europe across the North Atlantic to Iceland, Greenland, and the New World, West-Viking will review Nordic history through Icelandic sagas and recent research in archeology, environmental studies, and history. With an emphasis on discovery, Native-Norse interaction and the creation of modern nordic ethnicity in North America, the exhibition will also explore the myth of the Viking past and its modern popular expressions.
- **Jesup II**—The exhibition, which will feature studies of culture change and transformation in the greater North Pacific region, is the Center’s evaluation of historical change 100 years after the pioneering Morris Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897-1902. Jesup II includes joint publications, training of Siberian/Alaskan Native researchers, sharing of archival and collection resources, and new museum and field research programs.

The Alaska Regional Office

The Alaska Regional Office of the Arctic Studies Center was established in 1994 by the National Museum of Natural History, the Anchorage Museum of History and Art (AMHA), and the Municipality of Anchorage. The five-year agreement established a Smithsonian presence in Alaska to provide access to Smithsonian cultural resources. An Alaska office also strengthens ASC research capabilities by placing it in direct contact with Native Alaska and its cultural resources. Affiliation with the Anchorage office of the National Park Service has allowed the ASC to pursue archeological surveys in national parks in addition to conducting outreach and public programs. In 1997, a grant from the NMAI added an education outreach coordinator to the Anchorage office.

For its first four years, the Center occupied an office in the Anchorage Museum with additional space for research and collection storage. Early in 1997, it moved into new offices adjacent to the Museum made available by the City of Anchorage. Plans announced in 1996 call for expansion of the AMHA complex to bring the ASC back into the Museum proper. This will enable the Center to fully integrate its research, collection, and training activities with Anchorage Museum programs.

An Alutiiq Exhibition

Having a regional office in Alaska provides ASC with opportunities to undertake collaborative research and public programs that foster discussion and information exchange with Alaska Native communities. In September 1997, the Anchorage office of ASC, the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak, and the Kodiak Area Native Association co-hosted an elders conference in Kodiak to discuss themes and materials for the forthcoming exhibition *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*. This exhibit will feature previously unreported 19th-century collections made by William J. Fisher. The meeting was attended by 38 Alutiiq elders and many younger cultural leaders from 17 communities in Kodiak, Prince William Sound, Cook Inlet, and the Alaska Peninsula.

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Fellows, volunteers, and interns provide assistance and receive research training. Each year the ASC hosts several foreign scholars under its Visitor’s Research Program, while the Community Scholars Program brings northern Native artisans and scholars to Washington, DC to work with Smithsonian collections. ■

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A Millennium Plan

Based on the accumulated experience of the past 15 years, the ASC has formulated a plan for future development of the Anchorage Office that builds upon the following elements:

- **Research**—Continued cooperation with NPS survey and assessment programs. Opportunities for expanding archeological research into Western Alaska may also appear, especially if Jesup II finds financial support.
- **Research Associates and Networks**—Anchorage Office programs will be expanded in collaboration with Research Associates, university researchers, regional museums, and community scholars.
- **Training and Intern Residencies**—ASC will work to expand current Smithsonian fellowship and internship programs in collaboration with the University of Alaska and others.
- **Library**—Arrangements are being made to acquire a major anthropological research library as the research core of the Anchorage office. This library will add immensely to the existing library of the Anchorage Museum.
- **Collections**—Alaskan access to Smithsonian (especially NMNH) collections are central to the Alaska Office rationale and an expanded Anchorage operation. In 1998, part of our E.W. Nelson Western Alaskan collection will return to Anchorage, soon to be joined by portions of the W.J. Fisher Kodiak collection, to remain in Anchorage for five years as part of the Center's rotating Alaska ethnographic reference collection. Within a few years this loan collection could grow to represent all key cultural regions of Alaska. Rotating periodically between Anchorage and Washington, over time many of the Smithsonian's Alaskan collections could be seen in Alaska. The NMAI has also indicated interest in developing an Alaskan loan program. Together, the two collections might provide up to 1,000 ethnographic objects at a time in Alaska.

A Center for Museum Studies

New facilities and access to a small reference collection would provide ASC/Anchorage with the basis for an expanded museum-based research and education program. Together with other institutions, the Alaska Office has the potential to become a regional museum-training center. Access to Washington as well as local resources would provide students and ASC staff with materials to develop an Alaskan center for museum studies that could be an important asset to university degree programs, attracting students from Alaska and other circumpolar regions, including Russia. Japan's expanding education and research presence in Alaska will also provide museum connections. The major ASC interest, however, would be Native and rural Alaska, as museums and cultural legacy programs are expected to play an expanding role in regional

economies. Models for the operation of such a center have already been established through the ASC workshops, conferences, and traveling exhibitions.

Conclusion

During its first decade, the ASC succeeded in building internationally acclaimed exhibits, research programs, training, and publication projects. Thanks to these efforts, Smithsonian collections have been brought out of "the nation's attic" into the North and have been introduced to a new constituency of scholars and northern peoples around the globe. With its program well defined and a new foothold in Alaska secured, the primary ASC objective for its second decade is to consolidate its Alaska program while maintaining its commitment to the time-tested values that have nurtured the Smithsonian for the past 150 years. ■

Museum Training Seminars

As part of its educational mission, the Anchorage office has offered a series of museum training seminars to meet the need for trained museum personnel to staff Alaska's rapidly growing roster of museums and cultural centers. These offerings include:

- **Tribal museum and museum education seminars**—Conducted yearly since 1995 at the Alaska Federation of Natives meetings in Anchorage.
- **Preserving our Heritage: A Seminar on Community Research and Cultural Documentation**—Anchorage (October 1995). ASC provided assistance to the Alaska Native Human Resource Development Program, University of Alaska, in conducting this seminar; 40 students, statewide participation.
- **Preservation of Cultural Objects**—A workshop at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art (May 1996). A five-day intensive training program attended by 25 participants from 16 Alaska museums; taught by Smithsonian ethnographic conservators Carolyn Rose and Greta Hansen.
- **Alaska Native Museums and Culture Centers: Planning and Management**—A workshop at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, February 1998.
- **Museum Studies Distance Delivery Classes**—In cooperation with the University of Alaska Fairbanks and Ilisagvik College in Barrow, six undergraduate courses for a museum studies minor (1994-present). Remote participation by audio-conference from 25 communities. Class visit to NMNH in March 1996 to study Alaska collections. Student internships and projects at ASC and the Anchorage Museum.
- **Tatitlek CD-ROM Project**—Village students worked with research materials provided by ASC and technical training from the Chugach School District to create an interactive catalog of objects in the William J. Fisher collections, December 1995.
- **Museum Studies in Anthropology**—Undergraduate course taught through the University of Alaska Anchorage, spring semester 1997.
- **Lectures and Presentations**—Given at conferences, arctic science meetings, museums, and community meetings around the state of Alaska. ■