

BEST-BSIERP *Bering Sea* PROJECT

UNDERSTANDING ECOSYSTEM PROCESSES IN THE BERING SEA 2007–2013

Documenting Nelson Island Natural and Cultural History

CAPTURING A WEALTH OF ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE

Between 2006 and 2010, the Calista Elders Council (CEC), the primary research organization for Southwest Alaska, worked with elders and community members from five Nelson Island communities on the Bering Sea coast to document the natural and cultural history of their homeland.

How We Did It

CEC staff traveled with elders out on the land to document historic sites and landscape features on and around Nelson Island (Figure 1). CEC staff also hosted a number of topic-specific gatherings, two- and three-day meetings with elder experts devoted to a single topic, as an effective means of both documenting traditions and addressing contemporary scientific concerns. Unlike interviews, during which elders answer questions posed by those who often do not already hold the knowledge they seek, gatherings (like academic symposia) encourage elders to speak among their peers at the highest level (Figure 2).

Work with Nelson Islanders resulted in two major publications. *Ellavut/Our Yup'ik World and Weather: Continuity and Change on the Bering Sea Coast* (Fienup-

Fig. 1



Simeon Agnus points out a land feature near Arayakcaaq at the mouth of the Qalvinraaq River, July 2007. Michael John sits to his right and Theresa Abraham to his left.

The Big Picture

Coastal communities throughout Alaska, as elsewhere, are undergoing profound environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural changes related to their reliance on marine ecosystems and, increasingly, a global economy. Social scientists, as well as community members, increasingly seek to understand community vulnerability and sustainability. To do so, it is not sufficient to say that changes are taking place. We need to understand how community members interpret these changes—not just what is occurring but why people believe it to be so. CEC's collaborative approach, grounded in community initiatives and local elder gatherings, is a powerful tool that can simultaneously help natural and social scientists understand the unique cultural perspectives that underlie the actions and reactions of coastal residents, and give voice to community understandings of the world in which they live.

Riordan and Rearden, 2012) is a 450-page ethnography documenting the *qanruyutet* (oral instructions) that continue to guide Yup'ik interactions with *ella*—translated

variously as weather, world, universe, and awareness. The book's ten chapters reflect gathering topics, including weather, land, lakes and

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Fig. 2



Elders and youth discuss place names during a CEC gathering in Cheforak community hall, March 2007.

rivers, ocean, snow, ice, survival, and environmental change (Figure 3).

Our project also produced the bilingual book *Qaluyaarmiuni Nunamtenek Qanemciput/ Our Nelson Island Stories: Meanings of Place on the Bering Sea Coast*, winner of a 2012 American Book Award. Elders actively support the documentation and sharing of traditional knowledge, which all view as possessing continued value in the world today (Figure 4).

Community members have embraced the idea of using the web to share information gathered during the Bering Sea Project. In collaboration with National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), Earth Observing Laboratory, CEC has developed a place-based web-site including the location of over 400 historic sites and geographic features, as well as oral accounts relating directly to over 100 sites. Community members voted unanimously for open access to their site, which can be viewed at <http://mapserver.eol.ucar.edu/best>.

Expanding on our Nelson Island project, CEC is presently working with ELOKA (Exchange of Local Observations and Knowledge in the

Arctic) to link separate mapping efforts in Bering Sea coastal communities into a comprehensive map web service covering 200 miles of coastline and over 6,000 place names. Like the NCAR site, the new site—<http://eloka-arctic.org/communities/yupik/>—has the capacity to display a wide variety of information (audio, video, text, and photographic), and will serve as an invaluable resource for the region, both educational and capacity building, for years to come.

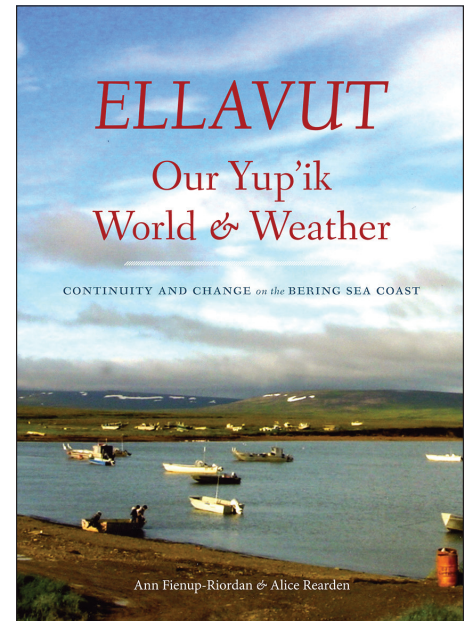
Why We Did It

Nelson Islanders express an urgent need to document their unique natural and cultural history. Many recognize that such documentation must happen in the near future or not at all. Although there will always be elders, the present generation of elder experts are the last to have received a traditional education in the *qasgi* (communal men's house) before the advent of organized religion and formal education. Elders were the primary teachers in the past. Venues to share their knowledge have drastically declined, and contemporary elders actively seek arenas to share their knowledge. Our project provided a unique opportunity for elders, community members, scientists, and local organizations to work together toward this common goal, enriching lives locally while at the same time sharing knowledge globally.

Ann Fienup-Riordan, Calista Elders Council (CEC)
Mark John, CEC
Alice Rearden, CEC

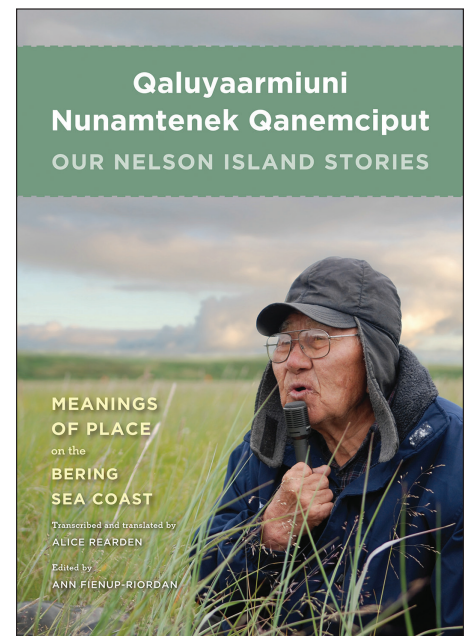
The Bering Sea Project is a partnership between the North Pacific Research Board's Bering Sea Integrated Ecosystem Research Program and the National Science Foundation's Bering Ecosystem Study. www.nprb.org/beringseaproject

Fig. 3



Ellavut/Our Yup'ik World and Weather: Continuity and Change on the Bering Sea Coast by Ann Fienup-Riordan and Alice Rearden.

Fig. 4



Qaluyaarmiuni Nunamtenek Qanemciput/ Our Nelson Island Stories: Meanings of Place on the Bering Sea Coast edited by Ann Fienup-Riordan, with translations by Alice Rearden.