

# INTRODUCTION TO REINDEER HERDING ON THE ALASKA PENINSULA

Patrick Plattet and Amber Lincoln

Department of Anthropology, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 303 Tanana Loop, Fairbanks, AK 99775-7720;  
pplattet@alaska.edu, aalincoln@alaska.edu

This special issue of the *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* has emerged from close working relationships developed during a research project pertaining to the histories and legacies of reindeer herding on the Alaska Peninsula. In order to better understand the role of reindeer in the region, the National Park Service (NPS) committed to a Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU) designed and organized by Katmai Lake Clark Historic Preservation Coordinator Dale Vinson and Patrick Plattet and Amber Lincoln of the Anthropology Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Known as the DEER Study, this research Documents the Ethnohistory and Ethnoarchaeology of Reindeer on the Alaska Peninsula. While working on this project, we have encountered a diverse range of community reindeer projects and research, which have enabled us to work with various leaders, elders, and scholars in the communities of Igiugig, Levelock, King Salmon, Naknek, South Naknek, Pilot Point, Port Heiden, Kokhanok, Iliamna, and Newhalen. Having grown up hearing stories pertaining to reindeer herding, many of these residents are dedicated to seeing these stories and experiences compiled and shared. This volume is an initial step in fulfilling these research agendas.

This special issue also results from the 2013 Alaska Anthropology Association meeting theme “Back to the Source,” which tasked participants with showcasing work that demonstrated the value of collaborations between researchers and members of source communities. The theme resonated particularly well with us because of the working partnerships we had developed as part of the DEER

Study. We thought a panel at the meeting that would represent some of the research and community projects we had encountered would not only enrich our study but might also be useful for participants of different reindeer projects. As a result, we organized a panel entitled Ranges of Uncertainty: Reindeer Herding Strategies for Dealing with Instability, which attempted to reflect the diversity of past and present herding practices by bringing together people with a variety of expertise. Panel participants included mother and son Faye and Davis Ongtowasruk, who own and operate their family’s reindeer herd in Wales in northwestern Alaska; UAF anthropology Ph.D. student Tayana Arakchaa, who is working with Tozhu herders of southern Siberia; administrators of the Native Council of Port Heiden Gerda Kosbruk and John Christensen, who are interested in initiating reindeer herding around Port Heiden; and President of Igiugig Tribal Council AlexAnna Salmon and her grandmother and respected elder Mary Ann Olympic, who have documented their family’s involvement in reindeer herding at Kukaklek Lake.

This issue elaborates on the initial presentations by these experts and reveals unique aspects about Alaska reindeer herding. With its focus on the Alaska Peninsula and Lake Iliamna regions, we hope this volume adds a new comparative perspective through which to examine reindeer herding in Alaska and more generally worldwide. We also hope that the DEER Study contributes to developing existing research networks that help us all gain an awareness of current reindeer work in Alaska and beyond. Understanding the histories and legacies of reindeer

herding is important because history tends to repeat itself. Reindeer herding was introduced in Alaska over 120 years ago. It continues in places like the Seward Peninsula; the Ongtowsruk herd is one example. But herding ceased by 1950 on the Alaska Peninsula. Today the community of Port Heiden is making significant efforts to initiate herding again, and they are not the only community that has considered this option. Understanding the historic processes that led to the development and to the end of herding on the Alaska Peninsula is valuable in light of contemporary developments.

We feel such work is also valuable for scientific communities and natural resource managers. Project collaborator Dale Vinson encouraged the DEER Study in part because he understands that in order to manage parklands, NPS must appreciate the history of resource use within the lands it manages. Understanding the history of reindeer herds, where they ranged, what their population numbers were, and possibly how they mixed with wild caribou gives biologists useful information about rangeland carrying capacities and factors influencing caribou population peaks and declines.

While community connections and resource management are tangible applications of the work in this volume, we certainly feel that all of these papers contribute to wider discussions in anthropological debates. This volume offers a comparative perspective for understanding different types of pastoralism, herding challenges, uncertainties associated with natural environments and political atmospheres, and creative solutions that communities have found to reduce levels of economic risk. Reindeer herding is a way of securing meat, milk, clothing, and transportation. For communities interested in maintaining, initiating, or reinitiating herding, food security is always a main objective. As members of the Kawerak Reindeer Herders Association, the Ongtowsruks work to promote their shared goal of developing a viable reindeer industry. But of course, reindeer herding is more than just an economic value, and anthropologists and community collaborators are particularly well suited to demonstrate this point.

For those communities that have subsisted for centuries on local fish and meat such as caribou, moose, sea mammals, and small game, beef is not a ready replacement. The activities, practices, rituals, memories, and stories that are part of herding are essential to the way people understand themselves and make sense of the world. As people satisfy nutritional needs with reindeer meat, they

also remember and discuss the past activities that led to eating the meat, such as traveling and processing food. Individual memories are built on top of stories that one hears from older family members while engaging in these activities. Both knowledge and history are transmitted in this way. Thus, stories and knowledge are layered upon physical activity and upon sensuous memories like the taste of reindeer meat or the feel of a fawn parka. Using the same resources that past family members used to prepare cuisine, tools, and clothing gives one a historical perspective. It develops an appreciation for those who came before you. And for these reasons, we agree with those who feel that reindeer are not only good to eat but also good to think and live by. The papers that follow are illustrations of this point.

In the first article, Plattet and Lincoln explore the legacies of reindeer herding on the Alaska Peninsula. By incorporating information from historical archives with contemporary interviews and ethnography, we demonstrate how this short but intensive pastoral tradition has given rise to residents' expectations about their environment, relationships with caribou, and responses to restrictions associated with obtaining *Rangifer* products. In particular, we describe how many residents conceive of the Northern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd today as hybrid *Rangifer*, caribou mixed with reindeer.

Amber Lincoln provides a historical overview of reindeer herding in the Alaska Peninsula from Lake Iliamna to Port Heiden between 1905 and 1950. Tracing oral history and archival records, Lincoln examines the establishment of government reindeer stations and the development of private herding enterprises by families. This paper facilitates comparisons between the history of herding on the Alaska Peninsula with that elsewhere in the state. It also sheds light on the many individuals, both Native and non-Native, who devoted much of their lives to reindeer herding in this region.

AlexAnna Salmon traces the history of one particular reindeer station on the Alaska Peninsula—that of her great grandfather, Alexi Gregory, at Kukaklek Lake. Through the vivid stories of her grandmother, Mary (Gregory) Olympic, Salmon highlights the herding pattern used by her great-grandfather, which incorporated hunting, fishing, and trapping activities. Salmon then shows how these historical experiences and stories of herding played a role in determining how individuals and village corpo-

rations choose lands as part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971.

Broadening the scope of this special issue, herder Davis Ongtowsruk of Wales gives his own account of day-to-day reindeer operations in contemporary Northwest Alaska. In a group discussion with his mother Faye and UAF researchers Lincoln and Plattet, Ongtowsruk details herd management in Wales, including protecting reindeer from predators, corralling, counting and marking reindeer, and preparing and selling reindeer products. While reviewing his family's history of acquiring the herd, Ongtowsruk also describes various reindeer technologies. He highlights herding innovations developed in collaboration with the University of Alaska Fairbanks Reindeer Research Program and discusses his aspirations for the future.

In a comparative report, Tayana Arakchaa looks at the reindeer herding practices of the Tozhu in the Republic of Tyva (South Siberia, Russian Federation). More than a source of meat, reindeer are hunting partners and facilitators; they are used for riding and as pack animals. Reindeer are at the core of the Tozhu *aal*, or nomad's camp, in the mountainous taiga of northeastern Tyva. On the basis of her ethnographic fieldwork in several *aal* in the summers of 2012 and 2013, Arakchaa shows how critical the articulation between hunting (for sable and musk deer) and reindeer herding is for examining how the Tozhu are coping with social and climate change in post-Soviet years.