



JAN 2025

FIELD SEASON NEWSLETTER

Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission

Greetings AITRC Community!

With 2025 just beginning, we've used this time to look back on the 2024 field season, reflecting on the extensive research and collaboration that has been accomplished this past year. Our projects continue to focus on subsistence species, ecosystem health, and the well-being of Tribal Citizens, all while working closely with partner organizations.

As we reflect on this year's achievements, we want to extend a heartfelt thank you to each of you—our partners, Tribal members, staff, and supporters—who make our mission possible. Your commitment to protecting our lands, waters, fish, cultural resources, and wildlife ensures that future generations can continue to rely on these resources. Every sample collected, every project completed, and every story shared strengthens our community and brings us closer to our shared vision.

We're excited to share updates from the Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission (AITRC). Here's a look into our recent efforts across ecology, wildlife, fisheries, anthropology, and regulatory activities.



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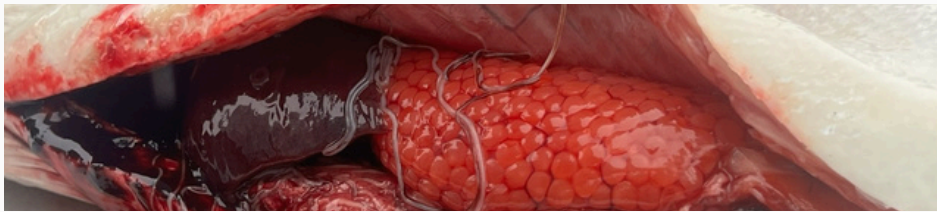
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ECOLOGY

SALMON HEALTH

In 2023, AITRC collected 148 salmon samples, with initial histology showing signs of inflammation and cell death, both indicators of stress that may impair salmon survival and reproduction. To deepen our understanding, AITRC has partnered with ADF&G and Sitka Sound Science Center, expanding 2024 sampling to also include kidney, liver, and spleen tissues, analyzed using both PCR and histology for a comprehensive view of disease prevalence in Copper River salmon. The Salmon Health project collected 62 sockeye and 11 Chinook samples this year. The initial goal for the year was 60 sockeye and 60 Chinook, but with a state closure for Chinook fishing, we did not meet that goal. The analysis is underway.



ANADROMOUS WATERS CATALOG (AWC)

AITRC's Ecology team, led by Ecologist Kelsey Stanbro, collaborated with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's Alaska Freshwater Fish Inventory (AFFI) program to conduct Anadromous Waters Catalog (AWC) surveys across Glennallen, Chitina, and McCarthy. While the number of stream nominations for this year is still being finalized, last year's efforts resulted in 56 nominations from the Copper Basin. These surveys are crucial for identifying and protecting salmon habitats, helping to ensure their preservation for future generations.



SALMON BIOLOGY COURSES

AITRC recently collaborated with Prince William Sound College (PWSC) on the Biota of Alaska course, sharing traditional knowledge and scientific insights into Alaska's ecosystems.

Starr Knighten (Ahtna Inc.) and David Hooper (AITRC) led day one with an engaging session on ethnobotany, introducing students to Alaska's plant species and their cultural significance to the Ahtna people. Day two, led by Kelsey Stanbro and Deanna Kosbruk (AITRC), focused on salmon biology, featuring guest lecturer Andrew Cyr from the Alaska Department of Health.



MOOSE HEALTH MONITORING PROJECT

The Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission entered year three of the Moose Health Monitoring Program, initiated in response to Tribal Citizens' concerns about meat quality and health risks. Focusing on essential and non-essential elements in moose in the Ahtna Territory.



2024 SAMPLE COLLECTION

Kelsey Stanbro and Tamra Jones traveled to Texas A&M this past spring to work on the analysis of the 2022 and 2023 moose samples. 41 sample kits were collected in 2024, contributing to ongoing research efforts and bringing the total for the project to 84 sample kits. Kelsey, Tamra, and Texas A&M collaborator presented results at three different meetings (Glennallen, Cheesh'na, and Chitina) in September.

AITRC is working with Tamra Jones, a Tazlina tribal citizen, to complete her master's thesis at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Final results will be published in peer-reviewed journals. AITRC is thankful for the support of Ahtna Inc., the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Bureau of Land Management and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park in handing out sampling kits. We would especially like to express our gratitude to the participants who contributed samples.





KLUTINA BASELINE ASSESMENT

As part of AITRC's ongoing commitment to monitor the Klutina River and Road, we've undertaken a comprehensive baseline assessment of the region's terrain and environmental conditions. AITRC focused on aquatic data, while Ahtna Inc. collected traffic data. Using advanced geospatial technologies, satellite imagery, and field data, this effort provides a thorough understanding of the landscape's dynamics. With flooding, erosion, and subsistence as top priorities, establishing an accurate baseline will guide future conservation efforts. This summer, AITRC's assessments on the Klutina River focused on terrain, land cover, and recent wildfire impacts, supporting ongoing conservation and ecosystem health initiatives.

Looking forward, AITRC plans to use biological indicators as a measure of ecosystem health by utilizing eDNA sampling and minnow traps. We're also exploring stream restoration projects to improve habitat connectivity and water quality. AITRC's baseline assessment of the Klutina River is a crucial step in preserving the ecosystem. The data gathered will guide future conservation efforts to ensure the river remains healthy for generations to come.

You can explore the project further through an interactive StoryMap available on AITRC's website or scan the QR code. We have paper copies available at the AITRC Office!



Water temperature monitoring

In collaboration with the Copper River Watershed Project, AITRC deployed 42 remote stream temperature loggers across 21 sites in the upper Copper River basin for year-round data collection.

These loggers will be left in place to gather stream temperature data, with retrieval scheduled for this spring after ice-out. Any loggers lost to ice will be replaced, and adjustments to anchoring systems will be assessed as needed.

As part of a broader state-wide initiative, temperature loggers will be deployed at approximately 10 additional sites this summer. Data will be collected again in the fall before ice-up, cleaned, and uploaded to the open-source AKTemp database. Additionally, AITRC will begin monitoring around 45 USFWS stream temperature collection sites in the Gulkana River starting this summer.



Tanada Weir

Our fisheries biologist, Dan Gorze, helped with set-up of the Tanada Creek Weir (WRST – NPS) in mid-June. AITRC is learning weir operation in order to take over this critical historic data set in 2025. AITRC will be applying to funding opportunities to continue this long-term index and to implement the use of artificial intelligence for salmon enumeration.

Juvenile salmon abundance

In partnership with the Prince William Sound Science Center, AITRC successfully completed year three of hydroacoustic surveys in Klutina Lake, focused on assessing juvenile sockeye abundance. These surveys, which use advanced acoustic technology to gather data on fish densities, were complemented by a pilot trawl study aimed at verifying target species. The combination of these methods will help ensure more accurate population estimates for juvenile sockeye in the lake. Looking ahead, AITRC has applied for funding to expand these surveys to additional lakes in 2025, with a decision on the funding request currently pending. This expansion would provide critical data for improving sockeye management across the region.

Fred Dahl of Chitina, and AITRC THPO staff are monitoring an AKDOT crew while they build a boardwalk to protect culturally sensitive sites along the O'Brian Creek trail.



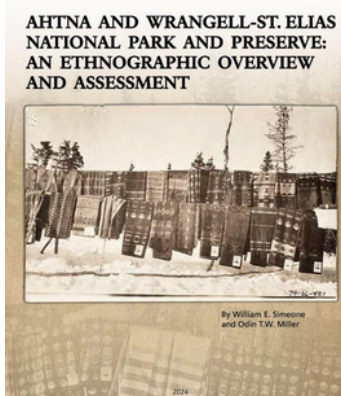
TRIBAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

Following the discovery of graves along the O'Brien Creek trail, AITRC at the Native Village of Chitina request, participated in facilitating a solution with the Alaska Department of Transportation to protect these culturally significant sites while maintaining access for personal use fishing. It was decided to build temporary bridges and boardwalks, until a more permanent solution can be figured out. In June, AITRC and Native Village of Chitina staff monitored DOT crews as they built these structures to ensure that there was no further disturbance. We are grateful to the DOT crews showing respect to Ahtna culture.

This fall, AITRC working with consulting archaeologists completed a survey of sites in the O'Brien Creek area. Several house pits and other cultural items were located. A particularly exciting artifact found in the bank of the Copper River was a copper awl. It was located between dark layers of soil. These dark layers marks the floors of a house pit. Multiple dark layers indicate that the site was used as a house for several generations. The archeologists are having a lab test soil samples to estimate the age of the floors and therefore provide a range of ages for the awl. The results from the survey will provide valuable information we will use to increase the protection of these historic places.

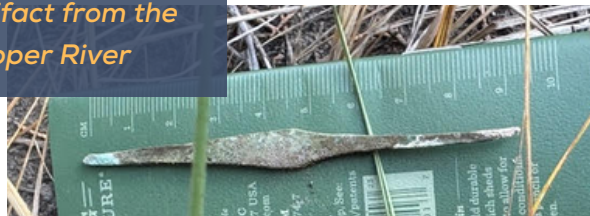
AHTNA ETHNOGRAPHY

The 'Ahtna and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve: An Ethnographic Overview and Assessment' has been published! This publication is the result of extensive research and collaboration, co-authored by AITRC's former anthropologist, Oden Miller, during his time with our organization.



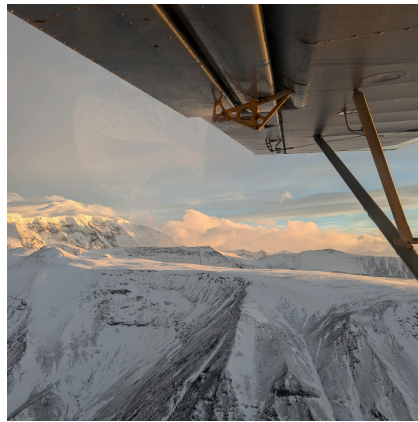
The publication is now available for public access through the Publications tab on our website. Additionally, limited hard copies are available at the AITRC office for those who prefer a printed version.

Copper Awl artifact from the Copper River



One of the archeology crew members from Northern Land Use Research Alaska using a ground-penetrating radar to locate potential cultural sites in the O'Brien Creek area.

WILDLIFE



MENTASTA CARIBOU RESEARCH

AITRC, in partnership with the Cheesh'na Tribal Council, received funding from USFWS through the Tribal Wildlife Grant (TWG) to assist WRST in their already established Mentasta Caribou Herd Monitoring. The capture and collaring of the Mentasta and Chisana Caribou Herds was conducted in the first week of October. AITRC contributed GPS collars, staff time, and equipment (ultrasound). In addition, AITRC has requested samples from historic and upcoming captured caribou to conduct nutritional analysis and disease testing, an expansion of the Moose Health initiative that AITRC's Ecologist has been working on over the last couple of years. Based on capture success rates and winter survival, AITRC will transition to research calving and recruitment rates in spring/summer 2025. As we have funding through December 2025. This would allow for a more holistic understanding and aid in updating the management plan.

WOLF RESEARCH

AITRC, in partnership with the Native Village of Tazlina, received funding from USFWS through the TWG to research the range, distribution, and seasonal diet of wolf packs within GMU 11. Wolf captures occurred in November 2024 and will occur again in March 2025. Through this research, AITRC conduct research within NPS boundaries north of McCarthy Road. This is an AITRC-led project with approved research permits from NPS, ADFG, and Ahtna Inc. Once adequate snowfall is available, two AITRC technicians will conduct site investigations of clustered GPS points to collect biological samples and set up trail cameras at potential kill-sites, rendezvous sites, and denning sites via snowmobiles and aircraft. In addition, AITRC is working with local trappers to collect supplemental biological samples to better understand the diet throughout Ahtna's Eastern Territory. This funding will continue through December 2025, and after the preliminary analysis is complete, additional funding may be pursued, focusing on insights from the ongoing wolf research.



REGULATORY

MIGRATORY BIRD CAMP

We are thrilled to share that this year's Migratory Bird Camp was a huge success! We brought together over 50 participants to share knowledge, connect with the land, and learn valuable skills. Throughout the week, both children and adults rotated through engaging activities such as fire making with AITRC's Anthropologist David Hooper, berry picking for delicious blueberry pancakes, and gun safety and clay pigeon shooting with Dan Gorze and Sterling Spilinek. Participants also enjoyed canoeing and water safety lessons with Bruce Cain, crafting survival bracelets with Frank "Ike" Hobson, and learning traditional skills like duck harvesting and processing, plant identification, jam making, and bird identification walks. This year's camp was not only a time for learning but also a chance to connect with each other and the land. We can't wait to see everyone again next August for another incredible experience!



AITRC AND WRANGELL ST. ELIAS- WEEKLY IN-SEASON COPPER RIVER SALMON TELECONFERENCE

This past fishing season, AITRC partnered with Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve (WRST NPS) to host weekly teleconferences focused on the Copper River salmon harvests and returns. These calls provided a valuable outlet for local fishers, managers, and biologists—including representatives from ADF&G and WRST—to share observations, discuss river conditions, and address factors affecting salmon runs. Public participation was strong and the feedback we received emphasized the value of these discussions. Attendees appreciated having a space to hear updates from managers and biologists while sharing their own insights and experiences. Thank you to everyone that was able to attend!

We plan to continue the teleconferences next season, with an expanded outreach effort led by AITRC's Outreach Coordinator. We're exploring creative ways to make information more accessible, such as QR code stickers linking to teleconference details, updates, and summaries on our website.

We are grateful for the collaboration and look forward to continuing this partnership next year. To learn more about these efforts, scan the QR code below or visit AITRC's website for summaries of this season's discussions.

**WEEKLY IN-SEASON
COPPER RIVER SALMON
TELECONFERENCES**

JOIN US EVERY THURSDAY

- 11 am
- Zoom or in-person at AITRC's office

Join via Zoom

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8798812979?pwd=auVhcnVlQm81LWZlZDZlMjZlQm81>

Meeting ID: 879 881 2979
Passcode: 38058

The purpose of these calls is to share and learn from others' observations about Copper River salmon harvests and returns during the fishing season along with river conditions and other factors that may affect harvests and returns



New Faces

Meet our Newest Team Members!

Introducing New AITRC Team Members: Bailey Roberts, Patricia 'Patty' Schwalenberg, Peter Taylor, David Miller, and Ethan Vollema.

We are thrilled to welcome five outstanding additions to the AITRC team, each bringing unique skills and experiences to enhance our mission of sustainable resource management and community engagement. Together, they strengthen our capacity to serve the community and protect our shared resources for future generations.



Bailey Roberts

Bailey Roberts joins us with a strong background in environmental education and outreach. You may have seen her around this summer in her role as a Fisheries Technician for AITRC. Raised in Virginia, Bailey brings extensive experience working with children and young adults in various educational and outdoor settings. Her previous roles in teaching and outdoor leadership have prepared her well for fostering community connections and leading engaging educational programs. Her dedication to conservation and community service continues to guide her work here at AITRC.



Patty Schwalenberg

Patty Schwalenberg, is a seasoned leader in natural resource management and a member of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians. Since moving to Alaska in 1992, she has been an advocate for Tribal fish and wildlife management. Patty's career includes Executive Director of the Chugach Regional Resources Commission and leading the AMBCC. Her achievements include establishing fish hatcheries, mariculture farms, and Alaska's first Tribal Natural Resource Education Program. Recognized with the Chief Sealth and Caleb Pungowiyi Awards, Patty's work continues to benefit Tribal communities statewide.



Peter Taylor

Peter Taylor is a mining geologist focused on making mining more ethical and sustainable. At AITRC, he studies abandoned mines in the Ahtna traditional use area, exploring paths for remediation and helping the Ahtna people steward their natural and cultural resources. Peter began his career mapping and prospecting near the Maclaren River and gained expertise managing large exploration projects in the Laramide Cu-Porphyry belt and Nevada's gold trends. Later, he moved to Alaska to work at Hecla Greens Creek, where he became Production Geology Manager. Peter is proud to bring his expertise in responsible mining to support Ahtna communities.



David Miller

Born and raised in Glennallen, Alaska, David began working at the age of 12 as a groundskeeper for the Copper Valley Community Library and the Caribou Hotel, where he maintained lawns, cleaned, and cared for flowers. He also worked for Glenn Storage, pouring concrete and mowing lawns. Through CRNA's YETI program, he connected with AITRC, inspired by Sterling Spilinek's care for an orphaned moose. David joined Wrangell-St. Elias National Park's Youth Conservation Corps, where he learned about park history and backcountry maintenance under Jesse Heinaugh and Cameron Bovee. These experiences led to his role as AITRC's Tribal Stewardship Coordinator.



Ethan Vollema

Ethan Vollema is working as a Wolf Technician, where he is excited to learn more about the land as well as the wolves they are tracking. Growing up in Glennallen, he comes from the Stickwan family, his Mother being Elizabeth Vollema, Grandmother Cathy Dewitt, and Great Grandmother Elsie Stickwan. His tribe being the Native Village of Tazlina, and clan being the Naltsine Clan. With experience working in the backcountry, he is confident that these trips will go well and will be able to handle anything that comes his way. The adventure and new experiences make him eager to work for AITRC.

General Updates

RECENT EVENT PHOTOS

See what weve been up to!



AMBCC Fall meeting



Community Moose Talks



Non-invasive genetic sampling methods for bears guest lecture



2 Day Drone Mapping and 3D model processing Course



Halloween Costumes!



SAVE THE DATE!

April 25th and 26th -
AITRC Annual Meeting

BOARD MEMBERS

AITRC Welcomes a new Chair and several new Board Members. AITRC is excited to introduce our newest Board of Directors members and our new Board Chair. Their wealth of knowledge and dedication to protecting Ahtna's lands and resources will help guide our mission for future generations.

We are proud to list the following individuals as our Board

Anne Thomas - Chair
Chitina Native Corporation
Nicholas Jackson - Vice Chair
Gulkana Village Council
Robert Sequak - Secretary/
Treasurer
Native Village of Gakona
Rene Nicklie -
Native Village of Cantwell
Evelyn Beeter -
Cheesh'na Tribal Council
Honalee Sanford -
Mentasta Traditional Council
Lishaw Lincoln -
Native Village of Kluti-Kaah
Grant Rebne -
Ahtna Incorporated
Shanna Pete -
Native village of Tazlina
Katie Finnesand -
Native Village of Chitina



Until Next Time...

Stay up to date with all the latest from Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission! We'll be sending out more newsletters and emails to recap the key activities and achievements from our previous activities, as well as highlight exciting events to look forward to. Be sure to check our website for our updated events calendar, which makes it easier than ever to stay informed about our upcoming initiatives and gatherings. We're excited to keep you connected and engaged!

We are excited about the future and the important work ahead in preserving and managing our natural resources. Stay tuned for more updates, and don't forget to follow us on social media to stay connected with our community efforts.

Instagram: @ahtnaintertribal
 Facebook: Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission
 Website: ahtnatribal.org

Thank you for reading!

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