

DRIFTWOOD UTILIZATION BY RURAL COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHWEST ALASKA

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ABSTRACT

Four coastal communities (Sand Point, Togiak, Hooper Bay, and Scammon Bay) representing a transect from the Alaska peninsula north along Bristol Bay to the mouth of the Yukon river were visited during August 2003 in order to assess the economic importance and cultural significance of driftwood in their communities. These communities are typically natural resource dependent villages and whose populations are dependent upon subsistence lifestyles. Within each community, interviews were conducted with native elders and local craftsmen to examine historical and contemporary uses of driftwood. Each interview was conducted according to a list of questions designed to address both economic and cultural uses and values of driftwood.

Based upon results from the interviews in each community and an investigation of local driftwood resources, it was concluded that although the availability and use of driftwood varies considerably throughout the region, it remains an important resource for a large variety of uses. The use of driftwood as a primary heating source has declined throughout the region but its importance for other economic and cultural uses remains. Driftwood species commonly used included Western red cedar, Alaska yellow cedar, Sitka spruce, white spruce, willow, cottonwood, western and mountain hemlock, Douglas fir, red alder, and some true firs. Uses of driftwood, which in some cases is species specific, included: heating, smoking salmon, fuel for sauna or steam baths, drying racks, model boats, furniture, masks, utensils, fish traps, kayaks, for cooking, arrows and bows, doll faces, snowshoes, and dog sleds.

INTRODUCTION

Coastal communities in Southwest Alaska have been severely impacted during the past decade by catastrophic cyclical declines in salmon stock especially with the sockeye salmon. This decline has resulted in considerable economic impact on these resource dependent communities. Driftwood has traditionally been utilized by these communities for a variety of uses including for both economic and cultural needs. Our review of the importance of driftwood to these four coastal communities has helped us to better understand their dependence upon and opportunities for development of local driftwood resources.

Our assessment of driftwood as a resource began with conducting interviews with native elders and local craftsmen in each community which was based upon a list of questions designed to address several themes which included: past and present use of driftwood in the community, types of wood and wood materials found in the driftwood, accumulations and rates of decay, importance of wood carving in the community, cultural activities associated with wood, driftwood origin and delivery,

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“There are lots of things you can do with driftwood” Bruce Foster Sr., President of the Unga Corporation in Sand Point.

and economic opportunities for making and selling products made from driftwood. Results from these interviews provided us an understanding of both the importance and frustrations that the communities faced with their driftwood resources. Wisdom in the collection and use of the driftwood, in many cases, is based upon both cultural and practical considerations founded upon generations of experience and this review provided access to that collective wisdom.

Consistent themes of use throughout the region were found in the uniformity of the use of cottonwood for smoking fish and a preference for its use in firing the sauna. Dried driftwood and rot free driftwood is preferred and worth traveling a greater distance to collect than inferior driftwood. A common observation was that rough bays were the best places for driftwood. As a rule, three environmental factors are affecting driftwood deposition: winds, tide, and currents.

SAND POINT

A community located on Popof island on the south side of the Alaska peninsula. The economy is based primarily upon a large commercial fishing fleet and local cannery.

Population: 919 (2002) and 44.2% of the population are native or part native Alaskan.

Unemployment: 30.8% with 48.7% of all adults not in the work force. The median household income was \$55,417. 16.03% of the residents are living below the poverty level.

Most residents of Sand Point use heating oil as their primary means of heating their home. It was estimated that less than 25% of the homes have wood stoves to augment heating of their homes.

Sand Point is an area that receives a broad mix of driftwood species largely originating in the forests of Southeast Alaska. Most of the driftwood collected is accessed by boat and require traveling as much as 20 miles to collect. Locals consider the driftwood to be a backup source of fuel which has been primarily replaced by heating oil. Limited carving and crafting currently occurs in the community although there is an interest in diversifying the economy.

There is currently some interest in expanding the harbor to allow for visits by cruise ships. If this were to occur, this would open considerable new economic opportunities for selling crafted items and carvings from driftwood. As is, the community has a tribal hall where wood crafted items are on display but there are very limited facilities for the sale of locally made crafted driftwood.

Summary: Sand Point is a community that is both highly commercialized but also dependent upon native culture. Local craftsmen produce a variety of carved wood items for display and sale but opportunities seem more limited number participating in crafting than by the availability of the driftwood. Driftwood in the area could easily provide sufficient materials to support greater production of crafted wood items. Marketing and sales will need to be linked with the communities ability to draw outside visitors to the area. Although there is a some carving of driftwood and other limited uses such as for making kayaks and sleds, driftwood is presently seen primarily as a backup source of heating fuel for the oil furnace.

TOGIAC

A community located about 67 miles west of Dillingham at the head of Togiak Bay. Although the community is dependent upon a commercial fishing industry, the entire community depends on subsistence activities.

Population: 804 (2002) 92.7% are native Alaskan

Unemployment: 26.8% with 67% of adults not in the work force. Median household income is \$23,977 with 30% below the poverty level.

Heating fuel cost: \$2.40 per gallon with tax. Nearly all homes are heated by fuel oil and few homes have both wood stoves and oil furnaces.

Native Arts and Crafts: The community maintains a gift shop for the sale of native art which includes carved items of wood and ivory. Local wood and ivory carvers have great skill and produce high quality items for sale. An example is a carved driftwood mask with attached carved ivory images that was being advertised at \$1,200. Additionally, items made from driftwood for sale included dolls, utensils, and bowls. Historical uses of driftwood have changed somewhat but there continues to be an interest in the collection and use of driftwood for art within the community. A local carver indicated that he had collected some Western red cedar and was intending to use it to make a mask.

The Togiak River feeds into Togiak Bay and is an important source of driftwood. Although there are limited supplies of driftwood within the village, many of the community will collect driftwood by boat from locations further out into the islands in Bristol Bay to the west. A variety of species of wood are available and locals are specific in their desire to harvest driftwood for certain purposes such as cottonwood specifically for use in smoking salmon and many prefer it for sauna. Piles of driftwood are found around many of the homes and it was estimated that more than 200 homes in the community have their own steam bath. Operation of a steam bath involves loading up a barrel stove with dried wood and the charge will last about 3 hours per load of wood. Although all the steam baths are wood based, nearly all the homes in Togiak are heated with heating oil.

Summary: There are several highly skilled craftsmen (both men and women) in the community that carve and work with driftwood. Although the supply of driftwood is limited in the immediate area of Togiak, high quality driftwood logs can be found on nearby islands. The demand for driftwood for uses other than for steam baths is limited although there are opportunities for the display and sale of crafted items. There appears to be a need to provide training for the development of young craftsmen.

HOOPER BAY:

Located about 20 miles south of Cape Romanzof and 25 miles south of Scammon Bay.

Population: 1,075 (2002) 95.8% are Alaska Native or part native.

Unemployment rate is 37.27% although 65.94% of all adults were not in the work force. Median household income was \$26,667 and per capita income was \$7,841 and 27.94% of the residents were living below the poverty level.

Heating fuel cost is estimated at \$2.82/ gallon with tax

The community is seeking to develop the Naparyarmiut Arts and Crafts Cooperative.

Storms have deposited large quantities of driftwood in drift lines along the on nearby shoreline. It was mentioned that storms can also result in the removal of driftwood from the shoreline. The annual deposition fluctuates from year to year however, the large local volume of driftwood has resulted in substantial utilization for heating, sauna, and smoking meat. Collection, drying and storage in large piles is a important aspect of this community and driftwood collection is done primarily by ATV and snowmachine.

During the winter driftwood collection continues and travel may require from 5 to 40 miles in order to find quality dried wood. The driftwood is sold for about \$20 per snowmachine load and fuel for the snowmachine costs in the neighborhood of \$6.00 per tank. Most of the homes in Hooper Bay have wood burning stoves that can augment their home heating but most have oil heaters. The cost of heating fuel is about \$155.50 per 55 gallon drum or around \$2.82 per gallon with tax. This makes oil very expensive for their heating needs.

According to Hubert Mucallum (83 years old), "Driftwood is like salmon. Any place where the salmon goes to sore is a good place for wood; any place where there is driftwood is a good place for fishing."

Since the end of World War II there has been a change in the collection and use of driftwood throughout the region. Prior to WWII communities commonly gathered together to collect driftwood which was then distributed throughout the community. Following WWII driftwood became a more individualistic activity.

Overall, people had the impression that driftwood is less abundant today than it used to be although there were period of shortages of driftwood even during the 1930's.



Nearly every home in the community has both an oil and a wood stove for heating.

About 25% of the community have their own facilities for steam bath and they all burn driftwood for the steam bath. These steam baths take an arm load of driftwood in a 55 gallon drum stove which usually lasts from 2-4 hours. A oil burning stove will burn about 5 gallons per day or day and a half at a cost of \$14.00 per day. Driftwood heating helps augment the house heating needs and can reduce the overall heating costs. The estimated fuel cost savings by burning wood is about 1/2 of the cost of the heating oil cost. For six months of winter the savings of using driftwood is estimated at about \$5.00 per day or about \$900 for the winter.

Some limited carving occurs in the community especially for dolls and masks. The use of the driftwood has significant potential for value added processing due partially to the diversity and value of the driftwood resources available. Development of a carved wood items business could have success in this community but additional training in carving and marketing would need to be provided.

Summary: Hooper Bay has a tremendous reserve of driftwood which is dependent upon annual deposition coming primarily from the Yukon river and are strongly influenced by the wind and storms. Given the number of craftsmen and availability of wood, this is a community that could substantially increase its production of wood carvings if markets were developed. Driftwood provides a very important source of fuel for heating homes in the community and is estimated to offset at least half of the fuel costs for heating oil in the community. This estimated savings in the cost of heating oil, based upon the local cost of heating oil, would be about \$900 for 6 months of winter.

SCAMMON BAY

Located approximately 1089 miles NW from Anchorage. The community is located on the south bank of the Kun river and about 1 mile from the Bering Sea.

Population: 491 (2002) 97.4% are native Alaskan

Unemployment rate :12.8% with 56% of all adults not in the work force. The median household income was \$25,625, per capita income was \$7,719 and 37.6 % of residents were living below the poverty level.

Fuel Oil cost estimate: \$3.15/gallon without tax.

Stoves: It was estimated that about 1/2 of the homes in the village have both an oil stove and a wood burning stove. A typical consumption rate of 5 gallons of heating oil for 2-3 days. Wood collection in winter is either by boat or by snowmachine. Typically, firewood collection is done in the direction of the Black river with about a 20 mile travel distance. Some driftwood can be found south towards Cape Romanzof although seas can be much rougher

in that direction than going north up the coastline. There is not a strong species preference for the driftwood for heating as long as it is dried. Driftwood collection is usually done by the individual households and not sold as a commodity.

Scammon Bay is near the mouth of the Kun river and in an area where driftwood is not immediately available but accessible by boat or by snowmachine during the winter. The community uses driftwood for a variety of uses including fish nets, carvings, sleds, heating, sauna, and smoking. The sources of driftwood are dependent upon primarily wood coming from the Yukon river system. Wind and

storm patterns influence the arrival of driftwood and collection is done primarily in the fall. It appeared that perhaps less wood is used in Scammon Bay than with Hooper Bay due to the ease and amount of driftwood available in the Hooper Bay area. Driftwood collections are made going both north and south from the village and during winter, snowmachines can travel north to get access to coastal driftwood deposits in the direction of the Black river.

Summary: Although Scammon Bay does not have the local driftwood deposits such as found at Hooper Bay, it does have relatively close deposits of driftwood and a number of local craftsmen that can produce carvings and value added wood items. Due to the relatively remote location of the village, development of a centralized marketing and sales cooperative could work to enhance the value-added utilization of driftwood in the Scammon Bay area. Driftwood is a very important component of the home heating costs and at \$3.18/ gallon for heating oil, driftwood can make a substantial savings in the winter heating bills, perhaps as much as \$1,000 per household. The economic value of driftwood includes cultural uses of driftwood for steam bath (sauna) and for items such as traditional doll faces. Scammon Bay is an industrious community with good opportunities to further enhance utilization of driftwood resources for value added products.

Evidence of crafting activities in the Scammon Bay area can be seen in the diversity of arts and crafts participated in my local residents.

Basket Weavers: Mary Ann Sundown, Mamie Ulak, Lucy Akerelrea, Dorothy Kasayuli, Mary Utteryuk, Alice Amukon, Lizzie Strongheart, Lydia Yunak, Selma Walker, Dorothy Tunutmoak,

ARTS AND CRAFTS PEOPLE OF SCAMMON BAY

Ivory Carvers - Xavior Simon, Mike Utteryuk, Willie Kasayuli, Gary Hunter, Felix Walker, Ole Hunter

Wooden Spoons- Xavior Simon, Mike Utteryuk, Willie Kasayuli, John Henry, Gregory Strongheart, and some others.

Uluaqs- Nathan Kaganak, Mike Utteryuk, Gregory Strongheart, Willie Kasayuli, Felix Walker, Lars Hunter

Wooden Masks- Willie Kasayuli, Mike Utteryuk, Felix Walker

Harpoons ,Spears- Mike Utteryuk, Gregory Strongheart, Felix Walker, and most of the men in town.

Sled Builders- Bruno Kasayuli, Dan Akerelrea, Mike Utteryuk, and most of the men in town.

Boats - Herring Fish Boats- Sabastian Kasayuli and some others.

Regular boats- Almost every man in town.

Snow Shoes - Some of the men in town.

Leota Sundown, Gemma Hunter, Agnes Aguchak, Norlita Hunter, Elizabeth Hunter, Rosalie Hunter, Anna Marie Tungwenuk, Caroline Ulak, Evelyn Ulak, Betty George, Angeline Amukon, and some of the high school students.

Grass Doll Makers : Lydia Yunak and Mamie Ulak

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CONCLUSIONS

Driftwood utilization by coastal communities in SW Alaska is very important for both economic and cultural or ceremonial uses. Although each community visited had differing species and quantities of driftwood available, there were some consistent themes for their use. Driftwood is uniformly used for traditional sauna or steam baths. Many craft items are made from the driftwood but limited marketing and sales opportunities have served to limit the economic impact of value-added processing.

Traditional uses of driftwood for making sleds, utensils, masks, snowshoes, and dolls are crafts handed down from generation to generation and continue to find local interest and participation.

Observations by local residents would indicate that the availability of driftwood seems to be declining on a regional basis. The deposition of driftwood by storms, wind, and currents has tended to cause yearly fluctuation which in some cases has extended for several years of short supply of driftwood. Communities in the Bristol bay region receive some driftwood from Southeast Alaska but are most heavily dependent upon supply of driftwood from large rivers such as the Kuskokwim and the Yukon. Deposition on the coastline especially after breakup in spring are important to the annual supply of driftwood and unfavorable storms and winds can cause substantial loss of driftwood for the year. Fluctuations and shortages of driftwood extend back many years such as the shortage that was reported for the region in the 1930's.

Driftwood collection has changed considerably from earlier days before snowmachines and ATV's. Community based collection of driftwood changed following WWII and has become an individualistic activity. Some industry has developed for the collection of sale of driftwood but is not a significant source of income for the communities. Several highly skilled crafts are made from driftwood but more sales are needed in order to provide enduring and substantial economic impact to the region. Marketing in support of a distribution channel may need to be further developed on a regional basis to further assist the development of an economic crafts industry with driftwood. Driftwood as a source of heating varies across the region but its use is especially important for traditional sauna or steam baths and for smoking salmon.



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