

## THE AHTNA HOMELAND

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### ABSTRACT

The Ahtna are an Athabascan-speaking people who have inhabited the upper Copper River and upper Susitna River Basins for about 5000 years. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ahtna were dispossessed of their homeland as non-Native Americans settled the area and imposed a legal system that did not recognize aboriginal title to the land. To assert their rights the Ahtna organized, became politically active, and eventually obtained title to about 7 percent of their traditional lands through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The transformation of the Ahtna homeland into private and public lands and the largely external control of wildlife resources by the state and federal governments are now the greatest threat and challenge to the Ahtna's maintenance of their social and cultural identity.

*The chief, Andre, told my Knik interpreter to tell me that I had no right in his country, as it belonged to him.—Lt. J.C. Castner (1900)*

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

One of the most dynamic aspects of Ahtna history has been the peoples' struggle to keep their land and maintain access to wildlife resources that have sustained them for generations. Connection to place manifests itself in the culture of a people: in forms of land tenure, land use patterns, belief systems, and governing structures that distribute use rights along familial and/or broader tribal lineages (Jacobs and Hirsch 1998:2).

Over the past 500 years, certainly one of the most extreme impacts to traditional Native land tenure systems is the result of contact with Euroamericans and attempts by the colonizers to supplant collective or communal systems of land tenure with a system emphasizing individual

freehold title based on absolute ownership and the right of alienation (Jacobs and Hirsch 1998:3). Based on the "Doctrine of Discovery," Euroamerican colonization of North America and Alaska can be viewed as the determined attempt to convert indigenous land tenure systems into the European model of private property.

In Alaska, tribal lands were turned into private property through legislation passed in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA, P.L. 92-203). Under ANCSA, Alaska Native people received nearly \$1 billion and 44 million acres of land conveyed to Native village and regional corporations comprised exclusively of shareholders who were Alaska Natives born before December

1971. Any preexisting Native institutions and forms of collective organization were ignored in the legislation. The purpose of this article is to describe traditional Ahtna land tenure and to give a brief account of how the Ahtna homeland became public domain.

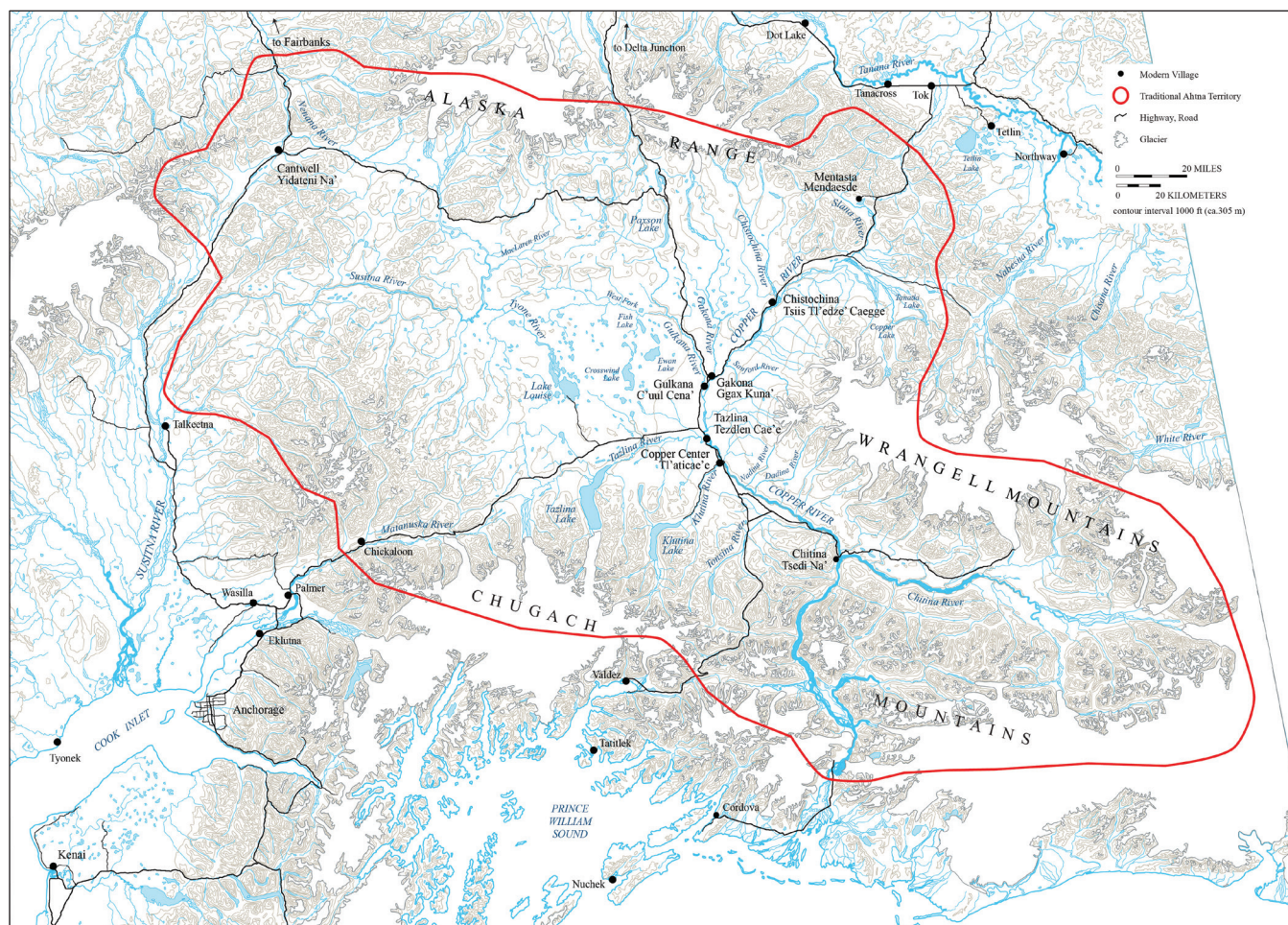
## AHTNA TERRITORY

The Ahtna are an Athabascan-speaking people who have lived in the Copper and Susitna River Basins of east central Alaska for over 5000 years (Potter 2008). Today the Ahtna homeland covers approximately 40,000 square miles and includes all of the Copper River Basin and the highlands of the upper Susitna River to the west (Fig. 1). It is rimmed by the Alaska, Talkeetna, and Chugach Mountains and includes the Wrangell and St. Elias Mountain ranges, which are home to nine of the 16 high-

est mountain peaks in North America. The Copper River, called *Atna* or “beyond river” in the Ahtna language (Kari and Fall 2016:145), rises out of Copper Glacier on the northeast side of Mount Wrangell and flows for 290 miles (464 km) until it reaches the Gulf of Alaska. The Susitna River, called *Sasutna* or “sand river,” originates in the Alaska Range and flows southwest 260 miles (416 km) into Cook Inlet.

The longevity of the Ahtna presence is evident from the 2500 Ahtna place names compiled by linguist James Kari with the aid of Ahtna elders. Virtually all major drainages, accessible hills, mountains, and ridges are named, and none of the names appear to be non-Athabascan in origin (Kari and Tuttle 2005:5).

Traditionally, Ahtna families made a living by hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering plants and berries. Life on the land had a seasonal rhythm that for most



*Figure 1. Traditional boundaries of the Ahtna homeland, with contemporary Ahtna communities. The community names are given in both the English and Ahtna languages. Today Chistochina is called Cheesh Na and Copper Center Klut-Kaah, as shown in Figure 3. Source of boundary data from de Laguna and McClellan 1981:642 and Kari 2010:viii). Map by Matt O'Leary.*



Ahtna included fishing for salmon in the Copper River during the summer, hunting for moose and caribou in the fall, spending the winter in snug semisubterranean houses, and fishing in lakes during the spring. Ahtna elders remember life as demanding but not problematic, as their ancestors had perfected a culture that enabled them to thrive and live in an extreme environment.

Following World War II, life changed significantly. Ahtna families settled in one of the eight permanent communities along the road system, sent their children to school, and took up jobs. In 1971, the United States Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). Instead of establishing reservations, like those in the American West, the act created Native village and regional corporations. For the study area, the regional corporation is Ahtna, Inc., which today has its headquarters in Glennallen, Alaska, and owns several subsidiaries involved in various businesses. Originally there were eight village corporations, but in 1980 seven of the eight (Cantwell, Mentasta, Chistochina, Gakona, Gulkana, Tazlina, and Copper Center) merged with Ahtna, Inc. Chitina Village Corporation did not merge and remains a separate entity. In addition, there are Ahtna living in the lower Matanuska River drainage centered on the community of Chickaloon. These Ahtna are enrolled in Cook Inlet Region Incorporated (CIRI).

## ORIGINS

Up until about 10,000 years ago, a large lake covered the Ahtna homeland. The size of Lake Atna, as it is now called, is still being determined, but it extended from the Chugach Mountains north to the Alphabet Hills, east up the Chitina River valley, and west to Tahetna Pass along the Glenn Highway. Like most glacial lakes, Lake Atna eventually drained as the glacial dams holding back the waters of the lake melted. Indications are that the lake drained north through Mentasta Pass into the Tok and Tanana River drainages and south down the Copper River when the Allen, Miles, and Childs Glaciers receded (Rozell 2015).

Ahtna mythology describes a world covered with water in which *Saghani ggaay* or Raven creates an island that begins the world. In Elizabeth and Mentasta Pete's version of the story, *Saghani ggaay* wants to marry swan and tries to follow her as she migrates south, and ends up having to create an island in the ocean in order to survive. In the Petes' words:

*Saghani* he make that—a hole in the sky. He gonna marry swan. Then the swan go outside [leaves Alaska] when a cold time. *Saghani* he gonna fly too. He can't make it. Many, many hundred, thousand miles that swan fly. *Saghani* he tired and he go down. He see ocean down there. He tired, he gonna drop down [into the] ocean.

He think: "Some kind of stick coming my place."

Close to ocean stick coming [vertically]. He gonna jump on that. He get down there. He think. He think about...he see all ocean. He don't swim. He think he gonna make hook string, maybe a little stick coming. You know lake, some kind of grass lake. Like mud [*Saghani ggaay* made this world out of some kind of grass]. He gonna make ground. That's how make ground, they say. How many days make ground. He walk on top. That's the way he make this ground, they say. (de Laguna and McClellan 1960)<sup>2</sup>

According to Kari there is strong linguistic evidence the Ahtna entered the upper Copper River Basin from the Tanana River Valley (Kari and Fall 2016:145), but Ahtna clan histories record a far more complex origin history that drew together people from neighboring regions. For example, the *Taltsiine* people are said to have originated in Cook Inlet, while the *'Atts'e'* *Tnaey* people originated in Midway Lake in the upper Tanana Valley. The *Dits'i'iltsiine* people are said to have come up the Copper River from Eyak Lake, and the *Naltsiine* people are said to have floated down from the sky. The *Udzisyu* people originated from caribou found around Paxson Lake, while the *Tsisyu* people are a Tlingit clan that migrated up the Copper River and settled at Taral. It should be said that there are different versions of these origin stories. Marilyn Eskilida Joe's mother, Maggie Eskilida, told Marilyn stories about different Ahtna clans who came into the Chitina area.

My mother told me the Tlingit Eagle clan was first to come up the canyon from Eyak Lake and named *Tsedí Na'* (Chitina River) and were called canyon people or *Dits'i'iltsiine*.

As my mother explained, the *Dits'i'iltsiine* were the first to discover *Tsedí Na'* and *Tsisyu* clan came along and settled at Taral Village.

My mother told me we came from Eyak Lake and the first to come up the canyon and named *Tsedí Na'*. Then one of the groups came and wanted their own sub-clan. They were denied and "went away mad" and were finally called *Naltsiine* "Sky Clan"

but remain temperamental to this day. After influenza [epidemic of 1918] the *Naltsiine* became the bigger populated and powerful clan since so many *Dits'i'iltsiine* died.

We never used the word clan, we say we are *Dits'i'iltsiine* people or Dene'.

Sometime after the *Dits'i'iltsiine* people settled and named *Tsedi Na'*, which is now Chitina. Many family groups settled along the waterways. Then the Tlingit *Tsisyu* people came up the canyon, but all the areas near water was taken except a place they called Taral. One large *Dits'i'iltsiine* group came to the Chief and asked if they could have their own group name. They became very angry when they were denied. So the Chief named them *Naltsiine*, because they went away mad and they changed the meaning to 'Come out of the sky'.

She [also] told the story of *Naltsiine* having to go north to Paxson Lake to harvest caribou and that was when a man was found running after the herd and Sourdough Gene and Paxson John's group named the man and his starving families *Udzisyu* and allowed them to marry into the *Naltsiine* clan.

Moose and caribou were scarce in Chitina due to lack of food source, so the *Naltsiine* went out hunting. Sourdough Gene and Paxson John had a camp by what they called Paxson Lake. They set up fence in the lake with an opening for the caribou to enter. When the watchman signaled the caribou herd was coming, all the family and children lined up on both sides of the gate. The herd came around the bend and went into the lake and they closed the gate and took only the number of caribou they needed for the winter.

But as the remaining caribou turned and left, they noticed a short man running with the caribou. He had a headband, armband, ankle band and he was naked except a cloth over his front like Indians in the movies, she [her mother] said. The man spoke a different language and motioned them to follow him, he motioned that he ran with the caribou but couldn't spear them and the families that came with him were weak and starving. The *Naltsiine* told them to come and spend the winter with them until they become strong again.

Well, by the spring they became strong and learned the language and wanted to own the lake. The Chiefs met and said they are becoming very hostile too but if we give them half the lake and allow them to marry our people they would be part of us. So they brought in a long pole and held a ceremony to divide the Paxson Lake, the north part of the lake

would belong to the Caribou (*Udzisyu*) people and the south will belong to *Naltsiine* people. In recent years, some divers went searching for this pole and confirmed it was still there in the middle of Paxson Lake. (Joe n.d.)

In an interview with linguist Jim Kari, Gulkana elder Ben Neeley told the origins of the *Taltsiine* clan, who are called the "Water Clan" because they came out of Cook Inlet.

I come out of the ocean myself. *Taltsiine*. *Taltsiine* and *Naltsiine* just about paired. That's what the story said. Down the ocean I don't know where at *Tsetneltsiide* ["red colored rock," a mountain on the west side of Cook Inlet] where mountain kind of colored.

It seems that at this place ocher paint extended into the water. A red-covered mountainside. With bone shell in our nose we walk out, come out of the water, *c'enk'one'* (dentalium shells). That's our history story.

They said that the Water Clan emerged from the water. Out there beyond [our country] on the shore of the salt water where they call "red colored rock," they name that place. (Kari and Fall 2003:311)

According to Jim McKinley:

*Taltsiine* come from coast—Anchorage, other side a little island below Tyonek [Kalgina Island]. They claim *Taltsiine* come out of water. That's old timers say. They rich too, they say. They come out with *c'enk'one'* (dentalium). (de Laguna and McClellan 1968b)

The *'Alts'e' Tnaey* clan has its origins in Midway Lake or *K'ekotcenn' Menn'*, located in the Tanana River drainage just north of the community of Tetlin. The *'Alts'e' Tnaey* are unique in that they allow marriage within their own clan. Ahtna elders James Sinyon and Long Lucy John (de Laguna and McClellan 1954) explained *'Alts'e' Tnaey* are called the "one way" people, the "single-minded" people, or the "fierce" people, and they have such an aggressive reputation that their enemies never seek revenge.

*'Alts'e' Tnaey* means "one way people." They don't go back. They got one-way mind. When they get mad, they never go back. Whenever they get something in their mind, they are going the same way, don't go back. (de Laguna and McClellan 1954)

Chistochina elder Ruby Sinyon (n.d.) said that in the precolonial period, the frontiers of the Ahtna nation extended beyond the current ethnographic boundaries

documented by de Laguna and McClellan to include portions of far western Yukon Territory, a part of the upper Tanana River drainage, and as far down the Copper River as the boundary with the Eyak nation. There was a common language and three different language styles: chief's talk, used primarily in potlatches; medicine people talk; and a trail language, used when trading. The narrower boundaries, as outlined by de Laguna and McClellan (1981:642), are the result of two wars and epidemics that greatly reduced the Ahtna population.

The first of these wars, called the "Medicine Man War" by Ahtna elders, occurred sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century between two medicine men hired to fight a rogue medicine man who came from the east, either the upper White River or Kluane Lake area. The rogue medicine man was said to have molested a niece and was too powerful to be held accountable by her clan and family. To obtain revenge, the girl's family hired two medicine men, who were paid in the form of certain rights to territory and trade. According to Ruby Sinyon (n.d.), "when that war start, them Medicine People make big medicine and make themself like Chiefs" (i.e., men who held and controlled territory). At the height of the conflict, the rogue medicine man introduced blankets infected with smallpox, wiping out one entire village at Platinum Creek or *Det'aan Caegge* ("falcon mouth") on the upper Nabesna River (Ainsworth 1999:48).

Coinciding with the "Medicine Man War" was a trade war involving various Dene nations. Long before the arrival of Europeans in Alaska, the Ahtna were part of a trade network that extended from Siberia across Alaska into Canada (de Laguna and McClellan 1981:650). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the trade became increasingly competitive as European traders moved into Alaska and different Native nations attempted to secure lucrative advantages as middlemen (McClellan 1975:184). The trade war, according to Ruby Sinyon (n.d.), seemed to have started on the lower Tanana River and spread east. As local populations dwindled because of epidemics and the wars, mercenaries were hired to fight.

The wars and epidemics had long-lasting effects on Ahtna society: the overall population declined, and there was an acute shortage of women. The death of so many women probably had a long-term effect on birth rates and marriage patterns. More women died because in times of starvation men received most of the food in order to keep up their strength so they could continue to hunt. As Catharine McClellan points out, in many northern

Athabascan cultures men received preferential treatment over women and children when it came to food. For example, it was customary for women to eat after the men had finished (McClellan 1975:243). Undoubtedly, when food was short women fed their children first in order to keep them alive, and because women often acted as caregivers they were probably exposed to disease more frequently than men. Life was hard, and childbearing and constant hard work weakened women's resistance to starvation and disease. For many hunting societies evidence suggests that women's life expectancy was lower than men's (McClellan 1975:242–245). The shortage of women created difficulties in gaining alliances that secured access to territories and resources since matrilineal relatives could not be refused access to resources.

According to Ahtna oral history, the axis of the fur trade shifted from west to east, that is, from Siberia eastward across Alaska, to a north-south axis as goods flowed north from Russian posts in Cook Inlet and south from Hudson's Bay Company posts on the Yukon, Porcupine, and McKenzie Rivers. In the end, the wars and epidemics created what some Ahtna elders have called the "great silence," as the Ahtna nation was weakened and its frontiers reduced. Wilson Justin said this was the Ahtna nation encountered by Lieutenant Henry Allen in 1885 (Wilson Justin, pers. comm., 12 April 2019).

Historically, anthropologists' estimates of precolonial Ahtna populations have been based on the idea that hunter-gatherers' populations were small because resources were scarce and it was hard to make a living. Catharine McClellan (1975:221) believed that population never exceeded 1000; Russian historian Andrei Grinev (1993:54) estimated the population at about 1500; and Joan Townsend (1980:131) thought there were about 800 Ahtna in the time of Russian contact. Native people maintain that the population was much higher, citing the fact that there were many villages all up and down the Copper River. They also note that various epidemics, including the smallpox epidemic of the 1830s and the 1918 influenza epidemic, killed many people. Anthropologist Robert McKennan, who visited the Upper Ahtna at Batzulnetas in the winter of 1930, wrote that:

... the older Indians all stoutly maintained that formerly their number was much greater. They said that previous to the coming of the White man great numbers suddenly died of disease. The earliest explorers on the Yukon all were met with a similar story.... Possibly these stories of an epidemic date



back to 1851 when the Chilkat introduced scarlet fever to the upper Yukon whence it spread down the river. (McKenna 1959:19)

Today there are just over 2000 shareholders in Ahtna, Inc. Approximately 600 Ahtna live in or near seven communities along the Copper River. An eighth community, Cantwell, is located on the Parks Highway near Denali National Park (Fig. 1). Many other Ahtna live in Glennallen, Anchorage, and Fairbanks, and some live in the Lower 48 states.

## TRADITIONAL LAND TENURE

In the nineteenth century, the Ahtna were comprised of four regional groups, each corresponding to a distinct geographical area and speaking one of four dialects of the Ahtna language: Lower, Central, Upper, and Western Ahtna (Fig. 2).

Lower Ahtna territory incorporated the entire Chitina drainage and part of the Copper River as far upstream as the mouth of the Tazlina River. Central Ahtna territory included the Gulkana River drainage as far west as Crosswind Lake, while Upper Ahtna territory encompassed the upper Copper River above the mouth of the Gakona River, including the Slana River drainage. Western Ahtna territory included Tyone Lake, the upper Matanuska River drainage, the upper Susitna River drainage, and a portion of the upper Talkeetna River drainage.

In the nineteenth century, each of these four regional groups was organized into bands related through blood and marriage. The Lower Ahtna bands were the Chitina/Taral band and the Tonsina/Klutina band. Today many of the descendants of these two bands live in the village of Chitina. The Central Ahtna were made up of a single band referred to as the Gulkana/Gakona band. Many descendants of this band live in the villages of Gulkana,

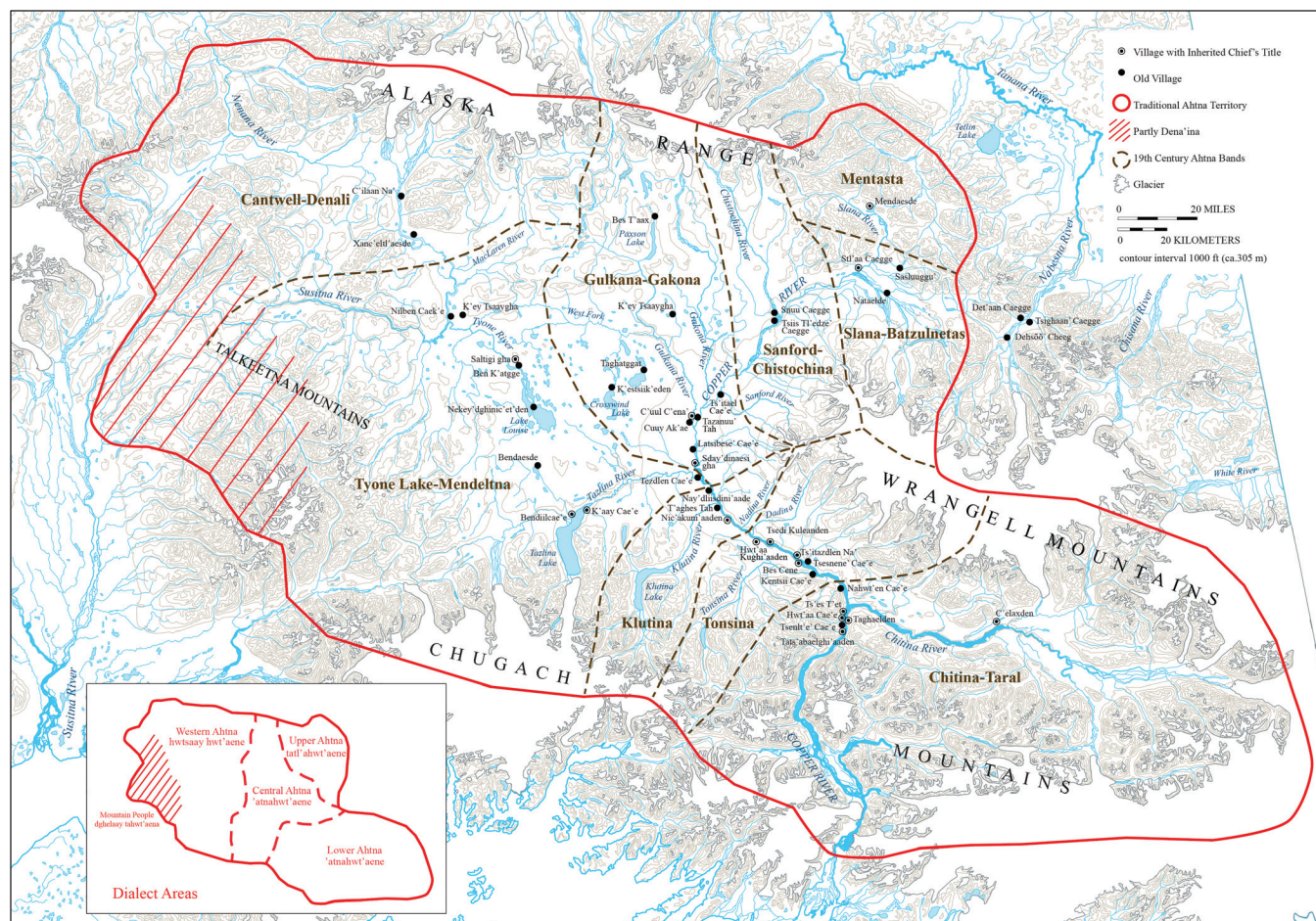


Figure 2. Nineteenth-century Ahtna regional group boundaries and dialect areas; also identified are Ahtna bands and settlements (some of which have inherited chief's titles). The area shaded with stripes is the territory of a band that had Dena'ina and Ahtna members. Information derived from data collected by de Laguna and McClellan (1981:642) and Kari (2010:viii). Map by Matt O'Leary.

Gakona, and Copper Center, now called *Kluti-Kaah*. The Upper Ahtna were composed of three bands: the Sanford/Chistochina band, the Slana/Batzulnetas band, and the Mentasta band. Members of these bands now live primarily in Mentasta and Chistochina, now called *Cheesh na'*. Western Ahtna bands were the Tyone/Mendeltna band, the Cantwell/Denali band, and a third band composed of Ahtna and Dena'ina speakers who inhabited the upper Talkeetna River. In the nineteenth century, Western Ahtna from Tyone Lake and *Nilben Caek'e*, a village located at the confluence of the Tyone and Susitna Rivers, moved west into the upper Nenana River drainage. These Ahtna first settled in Valdez Creek and later in Cantwell. In the early twentieth century, Western Ahtna from Old Man Lake moved to the mining community of Chickaloon at the confluence of the Matanuska and Chickaloon Rivers. Their descendants now live in Chickaloon, Sutton, and communities along the Glenn Highway (de Laguna and McClellan 1981:642; Kari and Fall 2003:298).

Ahtna bands were composed of people who belonged to one of several matrilineal clans, but one clan was usually dominant and asserted its inherent right over a specific territory (Justin 1991). The Chitina River, for example, was considered *Udzisyu* country; the upper Copper River belonged to the *'Alts'e' Tnaey* clan; and Tyone Lake was *Tsisyu* but became *Taltsiine* as the *Tsisyu* men married *Taltsiine* women. Bacille George said Paxson Lake was "owned" by the *Udzisyu* clan but they "potlatched" half the lake to the *Naltsiine*, which included the right to hunt caribou as they swam across the lake.

Gulkana side they give it to *Naltsiine*. Big chief they give it to. Lots of caribou go swimming in the lake. They get lots of money selling the [caribou] skin. That's two of them [clans] belong that lake. (de Laguna and McClellan 1968a)

The significance of place is conveyed in the Ahtna language. For example, the word for a person or people is *koht'aene*, literally translated as "those who have a territory." The name of each regional band combines a place name with the word *hwat'aene*, indicating "people of a place or people who possess an area." So, for example, Lower and Central Ahtna are *Atnahwat'aene* glossed as "people of the Copper River." Upper Ahtna are *Tat'ahw'aene*, or "headwaters people," and Western Ahtna are *Hwtsaay hwat'aene* or "small timber people." Certain Ahtna leaders, called *denae*, were referred to as *nen'k'e hwedenae'* or "on the land person" and described as "men who lived

and died in a particular place," signifying their close association with a specific place. According to Lt. Allen (1887:128), in 1885 the upper Copper River drainage was controlled by four *denae*.

Hunting territories encompassed a variety of landscapes with stretches of river where salmon or other fish could be caught, forested hillsides where fences could be built to corral or snare caribou and moose, open rolling tundra where women snared ground squirrels, and high mountain peaks where men hunted Dall sheep and goats. There were furbearers in the woods and swamps: fox, lynx, marten, mink, beaver, and muskrat. In the lakes and streams were grayling and trout, ducks and geese, and beaver and muskrat. Grouse and ptarmigan lived in the willow patches.

Each band had one or more winter villages surrounded by summer salmon fishing sites, upland hunting camps, winter traplines, spring lakeside camps, and hunting areas. Winter villages were often comprised of one or two substantial multifamily semisubterranean houses. These villages were linked to outlying camps and traplines by an extensive system of trails or routes traveled by foot and, after 1900, by dog team. Seasonally used fish camps included shelters, drying racks, or underground caches and were located on either the Copper River or a major tributary. Hunting camps were in the surrounding mountains or on major lakes such as Klutina Lake and Tanada Lake. Hunting territories were identified with the men, while salmon fishing sites were considered the domain of women and associated with the women's clan of that village (de Laguna and McClellan 1981:644; Reckord 1983a:33).

Ahtna recognized territorial rights based on continual use and occupation. Territorial boundaries were enforced, but obligations based on kinship and clan affiliation required food resources be shared, especially in times of shortage. As a result, many people had some recognized right to resources in another band's territory (Reckord 1983b:76–78). Uninvited interlopers, however, risked being killed on sight (de Laguna and McClellan 1981:644). Below, an unidentified Ahtna man describes what could happen to strangers who trespassed.

[If] they hunt your country, men, get fight. Other men you see [in] you country, got to beat 'em up good, not so come back your country.

Old days is bad. Got law. [If] they see each other, different people, just kill'em. Never stop. That's why no Indian much in this world, I think. Out in the woods find ten or fifteen [strange] men, and



kill. If don't talk our language, [we] kill 'em. Really danger them days. Lots of people say that. That's why people don't go 'round and meet each other. That's why [we] stay [with] own nation all the time. Thirty or forty go together [travel in large groups]. And have watchman. Every time they go somebody country just kill. Bad people that country. Still kill 'em off.

When new people come, got to watch out. Don't give them a chance. Got to know why they are coming. Got deputy to ask why they are coming. Then everything good, o.k. (McClellan 1975:227)

American explorers observed several instances where non-local Native people were reluctant to enter a "foreign" or "alien" territory. For example, Quartermaster Clerk John C. Rice encountered a group of Ketchumstuk Natives at Mentasta who told him "they [the Ketchumstuk Natives] had no right in this section of the country and were prepared to defend themselves if necessary" (Rice 1900:786). Later during his trip, Rice reported that his Ketchumstuk guide refused to trespass into another territory because the penalty was death unless he could show a permit from the local chief (Rice 1900:786).

Trails were crucial arteries along which people and goods passed. There were three different types of trails. The first type was used for commerce that linked the Ahtna homeland with the territories of other Native peoples who traded with the Ahtna: the Tlingit, Upper Tanana, Dena'ina, and Tutchone. Along these trails moved furs, copper, tanned skins, dried salmon, and other products. Trade trails were controlled by a chief or *denae* and used only with their permission. Jim Tyone described what he called "big trail" or *ba' zes*, indicating it was a trail used to move dried fish or *ba'*. Big trails were also used to move fur or *desnen' koley*, literally "that which has no paternal relatives." As Tyone explained:

There's all these big trail. *Ba' zes* they call it. They used to be pack, everything he use. Skin, everything, his clothes.

*Yu' ghenaa desnen' koley, desnen' koley what they call.*

/For clothing they used furs 'ones with no relatives'

*Skin 'uze' desnen' koley dae' kiidi'l'a.* You heard that? *desnen' koley?* Skin.

/the name for furs is 'ones with no paternal relatives'. (Tyone 1981)

The second type was interregional trails linking different parts of Ahtna territory. These were owned or controlled by specific clans. On the west side of the Copper River, the Ahtna trail system led to all the major lakes, including Tonsina, Klutina, Tazlina, Crosswind, Ewan, Tyone, Tanada, and Copper Lakes (Kari and Tuttle 2005). A third kind of trail was used by local peoples to get from their fish camps to winter houses, caches, lakeside camps, and hunting areas.

In an interview with anthropologists Frederica de Laguna and Catharine McClellan recorded in 1968, Elsie and Frank Stickwans talked about the hunting territories and trails of the Ahtna who lived at Dry Creek, the mouth of the Tazlina River, and Copper Center. At the end of the interview, the Stickwans said that people from different villages sometimes shared a territory.

Interviewer: Where did Dry Creek (*Latsibese' Cae'e*) people hunt?

Stickwans: They had trail from Dry Creek to Crosswind Lake (*Kaghalk'edi Bene'*), about 30 miles. Then to Tyone Lake (*Hwtsuughe Ben Ce'e*), all the way, that trail.

Then trail to Susitna River (*Sasutna'*), Valdez Creek (*C'ilaan Na'*). All the way to Cantwell (*Yidateni Na'*), I guess, just foot walk trail so wide.

Interviewer: Where did they have caribou fences?

Stickwans: At Crosswind Lake and Tyone Lake. That's where I see, old fence there long ago, at Tyone Lake. All down.

Interviewer: Who built the [caribou] fence at Crosswind Lake?

Stickwans: Old timer—old Jacku (Jacquot). Lived up at Old Man Lake (*Bendaes Bene'*). That's him home. Two places he had home. The other was at Ten Mile Lake. He was *kaskae*.

Interviewer: What is the next place below Dry Creek?

Stickwans: Next place is Tazlina River mouth (*Tezdlen Cae'e*). Big village too. Villages on both sides, can hear singing other side (*Nay' dliisdini'aade*). People from *Tezdlen Cae'e* go to Tazlina Lake (*Bendiil Bene'*), some to Mt. Drum (*Hwdaandi K'elt'aeni*). Go up to salt water [warm spring]. They pass salt water, way up to Sanford River (*Ts'itaet Na*)—up Sanford Mountain (*Hwniindi K'elt'aeni*).



Interviewer: Doesn't that belong to people up the line?

Stickwans: Yes, they come together. They go up there. Andy Brown tell story about it. He tell story.

Interviewer: They come together for?

Stickwans: Sheep, caribou. Copper Center (*Tl'aticae'e*) people go up to Sanford River and Sanford Mountain. Chief Ewan go to Ewan Lake to hunt. Go around Ewan Lake. Go other side of Tangle Lake (*Ten 'Aax Bene'*). (de Laguna and McClellan 1968c)

Ahtna regional territories can be thought of as multi-dimensional space consisting of people, animals, plants, earth, water, and air—a terrain lived in and lived with. Wilson Justin put it this way when he talked about his home territory of the upper Copper River:

So when I say "Nabesna" I'm not talking about where I was born, I'm talking about the idea that my family and my clan lived, hunted, died, and spent their time in the area called Nabesna. Not just where I was born, but the whole area.

When I say Nabesna, I'm not talking about a specific plot of ground, 20 or 30 acres that I was born in. I'm talking about the trails that led through to Nabesna, the trails that lead up and down the river, the hunting trails that go to the sheep [hunting] sites—the camps that we... have used for hunting areas for centuries.

So you don't say "I'm from Nabesna" in a street sense. You say, "I'm from the area where my clan has obtained exclusive use and jurisdiction over many, many, many thousands of years[.]" (Ainsworth 1999:43)

## THE AHTNA HOMELAND BECOMES PUBLIC LAND

The Russian claim to Alaska was based on the Doctrine of Discovery that originated in a papal bull issued in 1452 by Pope Nicholas V. The substance of the decree was that any Christian nation had the right to take possession of any lands "discovered" and not "under the dominion of any Christian rulers." Over the next several centuries, Nicholas's bull—as well as another issued in 1493 by Pope Alexander VI, giving Spain the right to conquer lands "discovered" by Columbus—gave rise to the Doctrine of Discovery used by many European countries, as well as Russia, to justify colonization of the New

World. In 1823, the Doctrine of Discovery was adopted into United States law by the United States Supreme Court, which said that Christian European nations had assumed "ultimate dominion" over the lands of America during the Age of Discovery and that Native Americans had lost "their rights to complete sovereignty, as independent nations," and only retained a right of "occupancy" in their lands (Johnson v. McIntosh 1823:574; Wheaton 1916:270–271). So, in Western terms, Russia had a legal right to cede Alaska to the United States.

The 1867 Treaty of Cession stated the United States now had dominion over Alaska that included all land not owned by an individual. In the treaty "uncivilized tribes," which included the Ahtna, would be subject to such laws and regulations as the United States might later adopt with respect to aboriginal land rights. The question of whether the Ahtna had any right of ownership or title to their homeland was not addressed. In 1884 Congress passed the Organic Act, one of several federal statutes intended to protect lands actually used or occupied by Alaska Native people. The Organic Act demonstrated that the United States government was willing to acknowledge individual Native ownership of land, such as a fish camp or home site, but also implied that Native people could not claim title to vast tracts of tribal property (Case and Voluck 2012:24).

Soon after the purchase, the new territory became a military district, but neither the army nor any other government agency paid much attention to Alaska or the Copper River. While the purchase had no immediate effect on the Ahtna, the change in government meant Ahtna territory became "White man's country" as made clear by then U.S. Senator Dillingham of Vermont. Dillingham chaired a congressional committee and visited Alaska to report on conditions and make recommendations regarding legislation.

The business of Alaska is carried on by citizens of the United States. It is claimed by them to now be a "White man's country." To all intents and purposes, such is the fact. In every contest for gain, the White man has been the gainer. (Dillingham 1904:29)

The Ahtna did not see it that way and on many occasions made their territorial claims very clear to Americans who entered their homeland. Lt. Allen was made well aware that he could not proceed up the Copper River without a guide. According to Ahtna elder Nicholas (Andy) Brown, Chief Nicolai of Taral told Allen, "We have law in our village that you can't stay here. You've got

to get your own place to stay. We got law here and it's the same all the way up the river" (Reckord 1983b:77). Then, according to Brown, Nicolai made the point that Allen was not like the Russians, therefore Nicolai would send a man so that nothing happened to Allen and the guide would tell other Ahtna, "They not Russians. Americans look like good people to us. Don't bother them" (Reckord 1983b:77). In fact, Allen is well remembered by the Ahtna as a "slim, nice looking boy" who was friendly, and not Russian (de Laguna and McClellan 1958). Once they realized Allen had not come to avenge the deaths of the Russians, the Ahtna treated him as an envoy from another nation and offered to guide him.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast Lt. J.C. Castner, who entered Ahtna territory in the summer of 1898, reported "these Indians resent the presence of white people in their country, and were sullen and inhospitable while I was with them." An Ahtna chief named Andre told the lieutenant in no uncertain terms that he had "no right in his country as it belonged to him," to which Castner replied, "I would go where I pleased, whether he liked it or not" (Castner 1900:704). Later on Castner and his group, which included three Native guides whom Castner referred to as "the Matanuska," "the Knik," and "the Upper Copper River Indian," encountered a Native man high in the Alaska Range. When they were almost through a pass, the "Matanuska" spotted a man coming toward them. Castner writes that the nearer the man got:

the more nervous the Knik and Upper Copper River Indian got. The Matanuska gazed carelessly at his approach. The first two feared he was a Tanana. Being on his hunting grounds, something one Indian seldom dare do to another, they feared he would kill them.... (Castner 1900:706)

Both William Treloar (1898), a prospector on his way to the Klondike, and Lt. Abercrombie (1900:598) wrote the Ahtna had explicit territorial boundaries that would be defended with violence if necessary. Abercrombie reported the Ahtna had by:

common consent or conquest, divided the [Copper River] valley into geographical districts. Each band keeps to its own territory while hunting and fishing, and resents any intrusion on the part of a neighboring band. (Abercrombie 1900:598)

However, to the vast majority of non-Native Americans, the Copper River Basin was American territory, uninhabited and unencumbered by any recognized

legal title and open for settlement and development. One of the first priorities of the United States government was to impose a system of private ownership that would supplant the Ahtna system of collective or communal land tenure and protect the rights of miners and prospectors who filed mining claims. Under this system non-Native people began to claim lands occupied by Ahtna.

## COMPETITION OVER WILDLIFE RESOURCES AND THE INSTITUTION OF GAME LAWS

Americans began not only to claim land but to take vital food resources the Ahtna needed to feed their families. Conflict over wildlife resources in the region began in 1889, when a commercial fishery targeting Copper River stocks of salmon developed on the Copper River delta (Thompson 1964). The Ahtna complained that the presence of the canneries was affecting their fishing, but nothing was done. In 1915, the commercial fishery expanded into the Copper River, and a cannery was constructed at Abercrombie Rapids, located at Mile 55 on the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad. As a result the commercial harvest jumped from 653,402 fish in 1915 to 1,253,129 in 1919 (Gilbert 1921). By 1916 the situation for Ahtna fishermen became acute. Ahtna elder Frank Billum (1992) said his uncle Douglas Billum and Joe Bell's dad fought against the commercial fishery. They went to a judge in Chitina and told him, "No fish, our Copper River Indian may have no fish to eat anymore." They told the judge to put a stop to the cannery down at Abercrombie Canyon. "And by golly, they fight that case and I think those federal governments say no, stop the cannery, in that river so salmon could come up." Eventually the Ahtna's complaint came to the attention of the U.S. Bureau of Education, the agency then responsible for the welfare of Native people in Alaska. Arthur Miller, an agent of the bureau working at Copper Center, drafted a formal petition on behalf of the Ahtna.

In response, the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries launched investigations along the Copper River in 1916, 1917, and 1919, which confirmed local observations and testimony (Bower and Aller 1917; Thompson 1964). During the winter of 1915–1916 and the summer of 1917, J.H. Lyman, a warden for the Alaska Fisheries Service, visited several upriver communities and recorded their harvests (Lyman 1916). Lyman reported that in both 1914 and 1915 upriver fishers harvested over 40,000 salmon, but in 1916 there was a drastic decline in the harvest attributed directly to

the activities of the in-river commercial fishery. In 1916 Lyman recorded upriver harvests of 8883 salmon and 6078 fish in 1917 (Simeone and Valentine 2007:21).

Despite these reports, the U.S. Department of Commerce was reluctant to restrict the commercial fishery within the Copper River because it believed that the problem lay not with the commercial activity but with Native people who could never compete “if they continue to adhere to their primitive methods of fishing and to their original customs and attitudes of indifference toward continued and persistent effort and industry” (Bower and Aller 1917).

Nevertheless, the imminent destruction of the salmon runs was well documented (Gilbert 1921), and regulations partially closing the Copper River to commercial fishing were adopted for the 1918 season. Stocks were still depressed in 1921, and in September of that year all commercial salmon fishing was prohibited in the Copper River and its tributaries and lakes. The commercial fishery in the Gulf of Alaska remained open (Simeone and Valentine 2007:29).

Ahtna also faced competition over wildlife resources as prospectors flooded into Ahtna territory, killing large numbers of animals and altering the local environment by burning and clearing. As early as 1899 geologist Oscar Rohn wrote that based on his observations, animal populations in the Copper River Basin were in decline (Rohn 1900:415).

The Ahtna complained to government agents, such as J.H. Romig, that game was in short supply, that White man’s food made them ill, and that if they were to make a living they could not live in one place while their children attended school. They had to follow their traditional patterns and move with the seasons (Romig 1909). In 1908, the government teacher at Copper Center, Frank Russell, wrote to his superiors in the U.S. Department of Education about the deplorable conditions facing the Ahtna. They had little to eat and were facing debilitating diseases such as consumption (pulmonary tuberculosis). Russell stated the Ahtna “have been imposed on by the White man in every way possible. The White men have done as near as everything to bring things to their present condition” (Russell 1908).

The general consensus among the government agencies was that the Ahtna had to give up their seasonal way of life and settle down. “Nomadic habits, formerly a necessary means of obtaining a living here, must soon give place to settled and fixed habits” (Romig 1909).

To exacerbate problems facing the Ahtna, Congress, in June 1902, enacted the first legislation regulating hunting and fishing in Alaska. Introduced by Boone and Crockett Club member John Lacey, a Republican from Iowa, the 1902 Alaska Game Act was a reaction to the wholesale killing of game primarily in the Lower 48 states and largely by non-Native hunters. To curtail market hunting, the act created seasons and bag limits and prohibited the sale of meat, hides, and heads out of season. The act did contain a broad subsistence clause allowing the killing of animals and birds by miners and Native people when in need of food, but the clause was not a pretext “to kill game out of season, for sport or market,” and under no circumstances were “hides or heads of animals killed be lawfully offered for sale.”

The effects of the new law were outlined in a letter written on behalf of John Goodlataw, by Frank Foster, a lawyer in McCarthy. Foster wrote:

[Goodlataw] cannot compete with the Swedes or Bohunks in the [Kennecott] mines, the only labor market, nor will the white man hire him. He says this country belongs to him and his ancestors and now the government which stops him from getting the where withal to buy sugar, flour, and tea under the plea of game protection has permitted and is permitting the cannery people to take practically all of the salmon from the Copper River as they come up to spawn, making it impossible to catch enough for dog feed or food for himself and his family.

The only source of revenue left to him after the salmon supply was cut off, was the sale of sheep meat to miners and prospectors too busy to hunt for themselves. He would like to have the department ruling [prohibiting the sale of moose and sheep meat] relaxed as to Indians. There are only a few of them, and they are fast disappearing. (Quoted in Mitchell 1997:183)

W. Nelson, chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey (the agency inside the Department of Agriculture that administered the Alaska Game Law) responded that to allow Native people to sell game “would nullify the very object of the prohibitory regulation” (Mitchell 1997:184).

In 1925, Congress enacted a new game law that delegated to the secretary of agriculture the authority to regulate Native subsistence hunting. This act superseded all other game laws and authorized the establishment of a five-member Alaska Game Commission, none of whom were Alaska Native. One of the biggest problems was how the Game Commission treated Alaska Natives.



Regulation 8 of the act allowed Alaskans to kill game and birds “when in absolute need of food and other food was not available.” It restricted this right to explorers, prospectors or travelers, and “uncivilized natives” who had not severed their tribal relations by “adopting a civilized mode of living” or “exercising the right of franchise.” Residents, nonresidents, and civilized Natives had to purchase hunting and trapping licenses, but no license was required of “uncivilized Natives.” The definition of civilized was attached to the right to vote, or “adopting a mode of civilized living” and was aimed particularly at Tlingit and Haida who lived in towns (Woldstad 2011:42).

Beginning in the late 1920s, federal game wardens started to enforce game laws in the Copper River Basin, and some Ahtna were arrested. Ben Neeley recalled that his father was arrested for shooting a moose when Ben’s mother was ill with tuberculosis (Neeley 1987). Katie John said that in the 1940s, a federal game warden came to Batzulnetas and told her father, Charley Sanford, that he was no longer to use fish traps in Tanada Creek. Katie remembered, “now this warden tell him something, and my Daddy don’t understand. He feel bad. My daddy left Batzulnetas.” He never fished there again (Simeone 2006). The imposition of game laws deprived the Ahtna of making a living from the land and pushed them to assimilate, abandon their old way of life, and fit into the new order imposed by the Americans.

## EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN VILLAGE

Considerable pressure was placed on the Ahtna by the U.S. government to give up their traditional way of life and settle in permanent villages. Gathering Native people into enclaves to control and aid in their assimilation was a favored policy of the government and religious organizations. One method was to threaten Ahtna families with truancy laws, forcing them to spend winters near a school and give up moving to the trapline, or send the children away to boarding school. Enforcement of game laws and competition for wildlife resources added to the difficulty of living in a traditional manner. To feed their families, Ahtna had to look for other ways of making a living, which usually kept them close to non-Native settlements. In 1916, Chief Goodlataw, for instance, testified that salmon canneries on the lower Copper River had caused a shortage, but Ahtna living at Taral, Chitina, and Wood Camp had found other ways of making money. For example, in 1918 an investigator for the Bureau of Fisheries wrote that:

Practically all of the natives who are physically fit worked for the Alaska Road Commission, stating as their reason “No fish, fish all gone, no use for native to try and catch fish so long as the Government allow cannery in the canyon.” (Wingard 1918)

The *Hwtsaay Hwt’aene* or Western Ahtna who now live in Cantwell are one example of Ahtna who moved to take advantage of economic opportunities offered by non-Natives. In 1903 gold was discovered at *C’ilaan Na’* or Valdez Creek. The mine subsequently offered a source of employment that provided cash that could be used to purchase firearms, ammunition, traps, and staple foods like flour, sugar, and tea. Chief Andrew Secondchief was one of the first to move his family, and by the 1920s almost 50 Ahtna had settled at Valdez Creek. In 1916 Cantwell was a construction camp for the Alaska Railroad and soon became a jumping-off point for miners and freight going to the Valdez Creek Mine. In 1919 John Carlson and Jack West built a store at Cantwell for prospectors, miners, and trappers working in the area. By 1936 there was an airstrip with an airplane stationed throughout the summer. In 1942 the closure of the Valdez Creek Mine by the War Production Board, and the employment offered by the railroad, convinced Ahtna families to settle permanently in Cantwell.

The move from Valdez Creek to Cantwell was gradual. At first some people moved to Brushkana Creek, and then on to Cantwell. People moved back and forth along the improved trail, hunting, camping, fishing, and gathering. Cantwell resident Nome Stickivan recalled that in the late 1930s his family lived in Cantwell in the winter and in the spring moved to Valdez Creek, where Stickivan’s father worked a mining claim. Mr. Stickivan remembered that the family trapped all winter, staying in cabins along the trail between Cantwell and Valdez Creek (Dessaur and Harvey 1980:28).

Most of the villages in the Copper River Basin were established close to roadhouses or trading posts located at the mouth of major tributaries of the Copper River. At some of these locations, the government established schools that drew Ahtna from outlying camps and villages. By the 1940s, many old villages such as Batzulnetas, Upper Tonsina, Slana, Suslota, Nabesna, Chisana, Tyone Lake, and Valdez Creek were deserted. Today there are eight federally recognized Ahtna tribes: Cantwell, Mentasta, Chistochina, Gakona, Gulkana, Tazlina, Copper Center, and Chitina. As members of federally recognized tribes, the residents of these villages are eligible for the special

programs or services provided by the U.S. government because of their status as Native Americans.

## STATEHOOD AND FEDERAL LEGISLATION

By the end of World War II, the Ahtna were dispossessed of their lands, and their rights to make a living in the traditional manner were gone or severely curtailed. Most of the land was in the public domain and open to any resident for hunting and fishing. Highways crisscrossed most of traditional Ahtna territory, making it one of the most accessible regions in Alaska. Population within the territory grew rapidly. In 1930 there were just over 59,000 people in Alaska; by 1940 the territorial population had risen to 72,524 people, and in 1950 the population was 128,643. By contrast, in 1950 there were only 808 people in the Copper River census area, but the population more than doubled by 1960 to 2193 (Rollins 1978). The local economy operated on cash, but only a few Ahtna obtained employment. As the non-Native population grew, they increasingly dominated local politics and came to take a proprietary view of the surrounding territory.

In 1951 Ahtna elder John Billum Sr. filed a land claim with the Indian Claims Commission, which had been created by Congress to assist tribes in recovering the fair value of the aboriginal title lands taken by the U.S. government. The Ahtna claim included a map showing the boundaries of traditional Ahtna territory stretching from Cantwell to the Canadian border and south to the Bremner River. While the commission never acted on Billum's claim, his claim subsequently formed the basis for later Ahtna land claims. In the 1960s, a lawyer from Washington, DC, contacted Billum's son, John Jr., to say he could get compensation for the Billum family as well as title to the land. John Billum Jr. refused, saying that the "land was used by all our people; we'll see what they want to do" (Ferguson 2012:67).

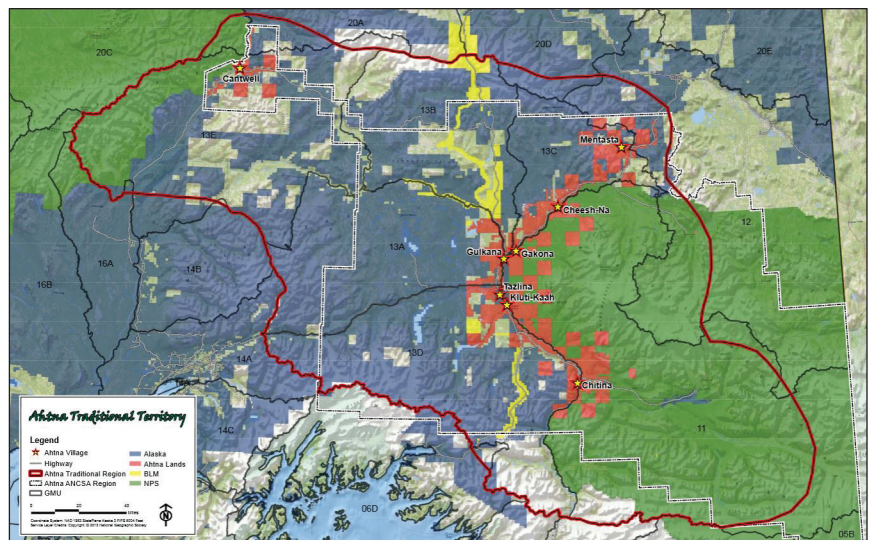
In 1954, the Ahtna joined the Alaska Native Brotherhood and established ANB Camp 31. Eventually, members of Camp 31 formed their own regional organizations: *Ahtna' T'Aene Nene'* in 1965 and the Copper River Native Association in 1972. Those involved in these organizations were the

same men and women instrumental in creating the Alaska Federation of Natives, passing the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and forming Ahtna, Incorporated.

On January 3, 1959, Alaska became the 49th state. Statehood meant different things to different people. For developers, Alaska was a land of opportunity, a source of wealth for the rugged individual, remote from government interference and control. Conservationists saw Alaska as a place of incomparable beauty, essentially an undisturbed wilderness that needed to be locked away to preserve the land in an unaltered state. Sandwiched within this debate, the Ahtna looked for a way to protect their cultural heritage and way of life.

Limited protection came with the passage of ANCSA in 1971 and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) in 1980, but it existed only within the context of an American legal system that recognized private and public land. After passage of ANCSA, 12 of the 13 Alaska Native regional corporations received land. Altogether the Ahtna were entitled to 1.77 million acres, or 2765 square miles of land, only about 7 percent of their traditional homeland. Today the remaining 93 percent of the Ahtna homeland is owned by the State of Alaska, the federal government, or private landowners (Fig. 3).

Recently Roy S. Ewan, past president of Ahtna, Inc., made the point that ANCSA was not passed to appease the Native people of Alaska, nor was it a land giveaway.



*Figure 3. The boundaries of traditional Ahtna territory as conceived by Ahtna, Inc. It also shows ANCSA lands and federal and state lands within the Copper River Basin and Upper Susitna River drainage. Source: Ahtna, Inc.*

The settlement was Native people's right; it was their land to begin with. We base our claims on aboriginal right you know, aboriginal use of the land. That's what we based our settlement on. Our claims just like anybody who would put in a claim for life insurance policy or something like that.

I want that to be clear because this was not a gift from Congress or anything. We had a claim, a legitimate claim. A right to the land, we claimed it under aboriginal rights. We were the only people here before the Russians. Before anybody. It was ours all along. (Ewan 2012)

The one thing Ewan regrets is that subsistence was left out of ANCSA, and he thinks Congress misled Alaska Natives into believing the subsistence issue would be taken care of, though, he said, "we were never told how."

The only thing that disappoints me is subsistence. We should have made it all part of the settlement [ANCSA]. We were misled, I would say, by our congressional delegation and our governor at that time. (Ewan 2012)

Today the State of Alaska maintains regulatory jurisdiction over Ahtna, Inc. lands, and all Ahtna are required to purchase hunting and fishing licenses from the state, even if the individual shareholder/tribal member intends to hunt only on Ahtna land. Additionally, all hunting and fishing laws, including seasons and bag limits, are imposed on Ahtna shareholders—even though these regulations may be at odds with traditional practices. Ahtna have been given token representation on boards and commissions concerning the regulation of fish and game, but the overall thrust of fish and game management does not reflect traditional Ahtna concepts of the relationship between humans and the environment.

Non-Native people generally perceive the Ahtna homeland as vast, largely unoccupied, pristine wilderness. This view contributed to the decision to make much of Ahtna traditional territory into a national park under the auspices of ANCSA and ANILCA legislation. ANCSA had reallocated lands in the Copper River Basin and made Ahtna recognized landowners. ANILCA created a huge domain of public property in the form of Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve.

Legislation required the National Park Service (NPS) to involve Native Americans who are traditionally associated with a park when making decisions regarding planning, interpretation, and resource management. The protocols require the NPS to consult with the tribes on

park management concerning subsistence resource management and other issues of park planning essential to a cooperative relationship (Ainsworth 1999:9). So far only two Ahtna tribes, Mentasta and Chistochina or *Cheesh Na*, have entered into government-to-government relations with the park.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) agreed to a cooperative management demonstration project with the Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission (AITRC), which had been established in 2011 "to conserve, manage and develop fish, wildlife and plant resources of the Ahtna region according to culturally relevant values" (Ahtna, Inc. 2016). The agreement between DOI and the AITRC formalizes the subsistence wildlife management partnership by stating both entities will work cooperatively on wildlife management on public lands within Ahtna's traditional territory and on Ahtna lands that are in-holdings or adjacent to these public lands. Priorities include conservation and sustainable subsistence harvest of wildlife populations, habitat conservation and enhancement, harvest and population monitoring, trespass control and enforcement, and access for subsistence hunting.

According to the DOI, "This agreement is an effort to help preserve their [the Ahtna's] traditional way of life, put food on the table, and improve wildlife habitat and populations for everyone" (Ahtna, Inc. 2016). Michelle Anderson, president of Ahtna, Inc., said the agreement between AITRC and the DOI is:

a solid first step to bring increased wildlife decision making back to Alaskans. Our need to be involved in decisions impacting our traditional food sources is so much more than meets the eye. Under this contemporary approach to wildlife management, Ahtna people are at the table providing traditional knowledge and practical 'on the ground' experience. (Ahtna, Inc. 2016)

## CONCLUSION

The history of relations between the United States and Native Americans can be viewed as a struggle over land. For aboriginal people, the land provided everything: their food, clothing, shelter, and identity as a people. In the Ahtna language *koh't'aene* are those people who have a territory, and each Ahtna band was referred to as the "people of a place." Like other Native Americans, the Ahtna had a communal system of land tenure. Territorial rights were recognized, and outsiders wishing to trespass or use resources had to seek permission or face the consequences.



At the same time, obligations based on marriage and clan affiliation required the sharing of food, especially in times of shortage.

Colonization of Alaska began with the Russians. Under the Doctrine of Discovery, Russia gained the legal right to sell the land to the United States. Americans ignored the territory until gold was discovered, then proceeded to make it clear to Ahtna and all Alaska Natives that it was now “White man’s country.” From that point on, aboriginal land rights were either ignored or restricted to small tracts of land, such as an individual fish camp or cabin site. The majority of the land became public property.

As the Ahtna lost control of their land, they also lost control of resources that had sustained them for generations. The consensus among many non-Native Americans was that the Ahtna would have to change, would have to give up their traditional way of life and settle down or face extinction. Many Ahtna acquiesced and settled in permanent villages along the road system, but they did resist and organize, joining the Alaska Native Brotherhood in 1954. Eventually, the American view of land prevailed when ANCSA was passed and individual Ahtna became shareholders in a village and regional corporation. Under ANCSA, Ahtna have obtained control of about 7 percent of their homeland, with the remainder becoming private property or under the jurisdiction of state and federal agencies, including the National Park Service, which controls a large portion of the Ahtna homeland. While ANCSA made the Ahtna into shareholders, it also catalyzed them into further action, including establishing government-to-government relations with NPS and entering into a cooperative management demonstration project with the DOI that will enhance the Ahtna’s ability to pass down a culture that has allowed them to thrive for generations.

## NOTES

1. A version of this article originally appeared as the introductory chapter in the book *Ahtna: The People and Their History*, *netseh da’ tkughit’e’* ‘before us, it was like this’ (Simeone 2018) published by Ahtna, Incorporated for distribution to Ahtna shareholders. Following suggestions by two peer reviewers, the article was modified and expanded to include additional information about specific topics such as the impact of epidemics and conflicts over wildlife resources.

In the preface to the 2018 publication, Michelle Anderson, president of Ahtna, Inc., wrote that she hoped the book would not only generate pride and

interest among Ahtna but also encourage non-Ahtna to learn about Ahtna history and culture and “understand why we fight so hard to protect our lands, our foods, and our way of life.”

2. The heart of this work is drawn largely from the transcripts of interviews conducted by anthropologists Frederica de Laguna and Catharine McClellan. The notes came from two sources: the archives of the Alaska Native Language Center, and Dr. William Workman and Karen Workman, who obtained a cache of material on the Ahtna from Dr. Jack Campbell.

Between 1954 and 1968, de Laguna and McClellan spent summers in the Copper River Basin interviewing Ahtna elders about their traditional culture. When they began working with Ahtna elders, both had considerable experience in Native communities. Their skill, empathy, and knowledge are reflected in their writings but especially in the notes, which provide a huge amount of information and insight into traditional Ahtna culture. Both de Laguna and McClellan took copious notes and recorded interviews, which they later transcribed and typed up. While information from the de Laguna and McClellan field notes has been referenced in various academic publications, few of the direct quotes have been published.

3. The Russians sent several expeditions into the Ahtna homeland. Members of at least two of these expeditions were killed by Upper Ahtna at *Nataelde* or “roasted salmon place” (also known as Batzulnetas) in 1794–1795 and *Stl’aa Caegge* at the mouth of the Slana River in 1848 (Kari 1986:75, 107). The idea of revenge killings was an important concept in Ahtna culture, so it was natural for Ahtna to think Allen had come seeking revenge.

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Frank Charley, Willow Creek George, Douglas and Maryann Billum, John and Molly Billum, Mildred Buck, Frank Billum, Henry and Etta Bill, Marilyn and Wilbur Joe, Sophie Lincoln, Eleanor Dementi, Louise Mayo, Jane Nicholas, Jake Tansy, Bud Carlson, Roy Tansy, Sr., Nome Stickivan, John Nickolai, Jack John Justin, Andy Brown, Arthur and Martha Jackson, Nicholas (Nick) Jackson, Frank and Elsie Stickwan, Virginia Pete, Markle Pete, Joe and Martha Goodlataw, Maggie Eskilida, James Sinyon, Long Lucy John, Fannie Sthienfield, Jeanie Maxim, Tenas Charley, Walter Charley, Christine Craig, Christopher Gene, and Morrie Secondchief.

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