

## Traditional Environmental Knowledge



Few environments in the world have proved themselves to be as challenging to human ingenuity and at the same time as beautiful as the Brooks Range mountains of Arctic Alaska. In turn, few people are as well adapted to its underlying rhythms and often capricious nature as the Nunamiut Inupiat, the inland Eskimo of Anaktuvuk Pass.

With a history of occupation stretching back hundreds of years, they are a people utterly attuned and superbly adapted to the extremes of this demanding environment: possessors of a complete understanding of the nature of the land and its resources, what it can provide them and the respect they owe it in return.



Jessie Ahgook 1882 - 1971

One of the grand old men of the Nunamiut who knew this land as only his people could, or do.

Through its oral history program, the museum has actively pursued a wide array of topics relating to the Nunamiut's detailed Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of the Brooks Range environment, including weather- Lore, plant-lore, the ethno biology of wildlife, ice and snow conditions, geological and mineral resources, plus many more.



The ability to recognize and avoid thinly frozen overflow was key to avoiding problems when traveling, and just a small part of traditional Nunamiut ice lore

Through these compilations not only do we help perpetuate the transmission of this knowledge from old to young, but we also serve as a repository of traditional knowledge. This represents a resource for outside visitors through which they can learn insights into a foreign environment through the eyes, minds and hearts of its native people. Scientists too are finding our collection of information of interest as our museum staff is currently being written into funding grants for outside projects to research Nunamiut TEK concerning fish, caribou and tundra vegetation.



A thorough understanding of fish ecology and behavior could reap a fisherman great rewards.

Today, as interest in the form of commercial entities, scientific inquiry, and adventuresome travelers in search of one of America's last remaining Eden's grows, the values and knowledge of the people who call this land their home can be all the more valuable and instructive. Instructive not only in how to safely and wisely conduct oneself in the arctic environment, but also bringing new awareness and understanding of the people and the place.

What the Nunamiut and the museum have brought into being is a nearly one of a kind array of information that environmentalists -from active researchers to armchair adventurers --can appreciate and learn from, all gaining new knowledge and new perspectives to enrich their lives.

Still, much remains to be done. The research and documenting of detailed environmental knowledge itself takes time and resources. It is dependent upon the active involvement of a dwindling number of elders who see the value of the effort and share what they know for the enrichment of their own people and those who come amongst them. The museum is one way in which this rich legacy of environmental knowledge and subsistence technology of a unique people with hundreds of years of experience can be preserved, shared and applied as a dynamic and valued part of the world's rich heritage.