

Hunting and Using Moose (*Tegllit*) in Nanwalek and Port Graham, Alaska

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Abstract

Moose (*tegllit* in Sugt'stun/Alutiiq) have always been part of the traditional food system in Nanwalek and Port Graham, Alaska. These two communities rely on a few moose per year, which are shared among many community members to supplement the food in their freezers over the winter. Despite generations of traditional knowledge, the tribes are required to follow rules and regulations set by governing bodies that do not always recognize this knowledge. Here, we present archaeological, ethnographic, and biological information about the role of moose in the Sugpiat communities of Nanwalek and Port Graham and demonstrates customary and traditional patterns of use by residents of both communities. This study provides evidence from moose bones and antlers found in archaeological sites across the surrounding region, spatial data for current and previously used harvesting areas, harvest survey results from 1987-2017, oral stories of moose hunting, methods for storing and preparing moose, and sharing and other cooperation involving moose. We provide a summary of the importance of moose in the culture of Nanwalek and Port Graham, and highlight the multi-generational activities of moose hunting, harvesting, processing and sharing as a source of connection to land and waters around the community. Although these communities are now restricted to the hunt area established by the governing bodies, their goal is to harvest their subsistence moose on the entirety of their traditional homelands.

Introduction

In 2019, the Alaska Board of Game decided that the residents of two Native villages, Nanwalek and Port Graham, Alaska, do not have a Customary and Traditional Use (C&T) Determination for moose (*tegllit* in Sugt'stun/Alutiiq) across the entirety of their historical hunting area in the Southern Kenai Peninsula of Alaska. Currently, the Board of Game permits subsistence hunting on roughly half of the area it has designated as a “subsistence use” area on the Southern Kenai Peninsula. There is a three moose harvest limit within this subsistence use area, three moose to share between 247 people in Nanwalek and 162 people in Port Graham. The Chugach Regional Resources Commission (CRRC) is working with the Port Graham Village Council and the Nanwalek IRA Council to regain a positive

C&T determination, and therefore, rights for subsistence moose hunting across their traditional hunting grounds and to practice subsistence without competing for resources, ensuring food security for the communities.

Port Graham and Nanwalek are neighboring villages on the Southern coast of the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska. There is no road access to these villages; to reach them, a flight or water taxi is required for passengers and commercial goods. Each community has one or two small community stores that sell basic groceries at a steep cost. Most wage employment in these communities comes from school district and tribal council jobs, but much of the economy is based on a traditional subsistence lifestyle. Traditional subsistence harvest of salmon,

game, and marine mammals feed the community members year-round. Based on legislation established through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, traditional hunting and fishing rights for Alaska Native people have been “extinguished,” and Native communities such as Port Graham and Nanwalek are subject to the same rules and regulations which apply to “all Alaskans” under the state constitution. Despite the generations of tribal knowledge, the tribes have no rights to manage the land they steward and resources they frequently use and depend on. While all Alaskans are encouraged to participate in the Boards process by drafting proposals or offering public testimony, members of the Alaska Board of Game ultimately determine the rules and regulations under which tribal members can hunt. In most cases, Board of Game members do not share the deep knowledge or generational understanding of local conditions held by members of these communities.

Although these communities rely on moose meat to feed them over the winter, limited hunting boundaries and harvests make it necessary for a small number of moose to supply the needs of many residents. When the moose hunters successfully harvest a moose, they share the work and the blessing from the moose harvest with their families and their neighbors. The practice of sharing comes from both necessity and long-standing tradition of many indigenous communities. One of the moose hunters interviewed for this project shared his experience in harvesting and distributing moose meat:

“It was towards the end of the season. Nobody was getting anything, so they all got into a big group and they all sat in fields close together and started calling, and they ended up getting a moose. And I just like this story about how, when nobody was getting anything, they all did teamwork, came together and got a moose to share with everybody. That was probably one of my favorites.” Zeth Meganack, Port Graham, 2024.

Moose have always been part of the traditional food system in Nanwalek and Port Graham, Alaska. Though scarce, moose bones and antlers are found in archaeological sites across the Kachemak Bay region, including on Yukon Island (de Laguna, 1934). Written records such as teachers’ reports to the Bureau of Indian Affairs provide additional evidence of moose hunting dating to at least the

1940s. Present-day oral traditions record stories of moose hunting, methods for storing and preparing moose to eat, and sharing and other cooperation involving moose. Residents of both communities continue to rely on moose as important elements of food security, cultural continuity, and connection to their homes.

Over the past several years, Tribal Members have expressed concern about declining moose populations and the continuity of subsistence ways of life more generally, including species health, impacts of changing environmental and climate conditions, and resource competition or interference between commercial and subsistence fisheries. By collecting both ethnographic and biological data, this project aims to document local history, skills, and interest to contribute to interagency resource management decisions. While the Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) has collected data on the harvest and use of moose since 1987, there has been little long-term ethnography on the importance of moose in Nanwalek and Port Graham. It is important to make all existing information available to these communities to 1) pass on traditional knowledge to protect their way of life and 2) assist the communities in advocating this way of life with regulatory agencies.



Figure 1. Aerial photo of Port Graham, by Dustin Carl.

Here we present some of the available information about the role of moose in the Sugpiat communities of Nanwalek (Figure 1) and Port Graham (Figure 2). We share our findings for how moose hunting is done currently and historically, the tradition of cooperating and sharing the moose harvest, and the cultural and social significance of moose harvest

and use. We explain how subsistence rights affect tribal members and the current status of the moose in these communities. CRRC is beginning to monitor and research the population. We start with the methods used to collect data for this study.



Figure 2. Aerial photo of Nanwalek, by Dustin Carl.

Methods

CRRC Tribal Fish and Wildlife Department members and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) Subsistence Division members first met with the Port Graham Tribal Leaders on January 27, 2024, to discuss the project and develop a list of potential participants. Throughout February and March 2024, CRRC, Port Graham Village

Council, and ADF&G researchers collaborated on the development of an interview protocol to guide conversations with knowledgeable Port Graham hunters. Questions were developed about hunting techniques, processing and preparation, locations, changes over time, stories, and the future. Between May 22-24, 2024, nine recorded interview sessions were conducted with ten respondents. Interviews were conducted in Port Graham lasting one to two hours. Before the interviews began, informed consent forms from both CRRC and ADF&G were reviewed and signed by participants. Upon completion of each interview, participants were given a \$200 honorarium from CRRC. Interviews were transcribed by ADF&G and shared with CRRC, and reviewed by the interviewees for errors, misrepresentations, and confirmations. CRRC and ADF&G held a community meeting in Port Graham to discuss results with the community and answer any questions.

Other resident quotes and information were gathered from the Project Jukebox database managed by the University of Alaska Anchorage and from CRRC's Board of Game training report from 2019. From the information and data collected in the interviews and other sources, we summarize the moose hunting experience of the hunters in these two communities.

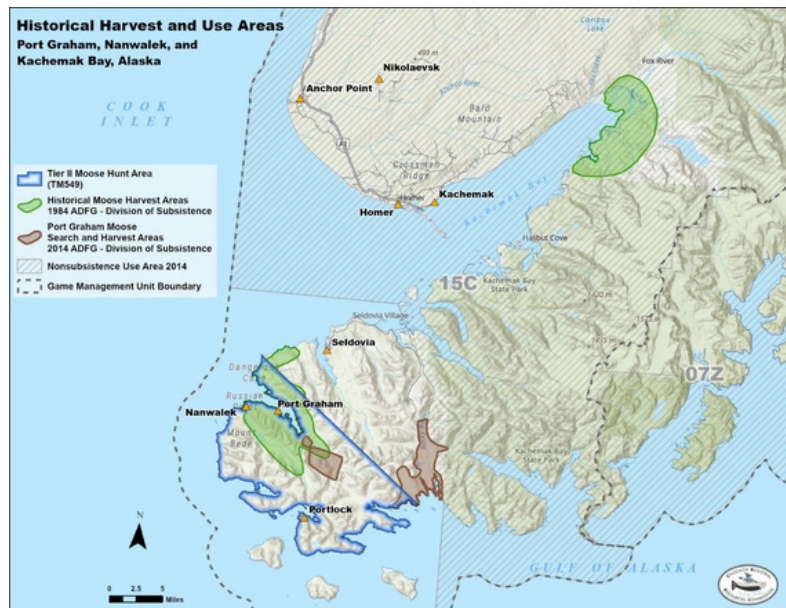


Figure 3. Historical moose hunting areas for Nanwalek and Port Graham residents. Data for this map was sourced from Subsistence Resource Harvest Area Maps (ADF&G, 2019; Stopha, 2017), and remapped by Aurora GIS, LLC.

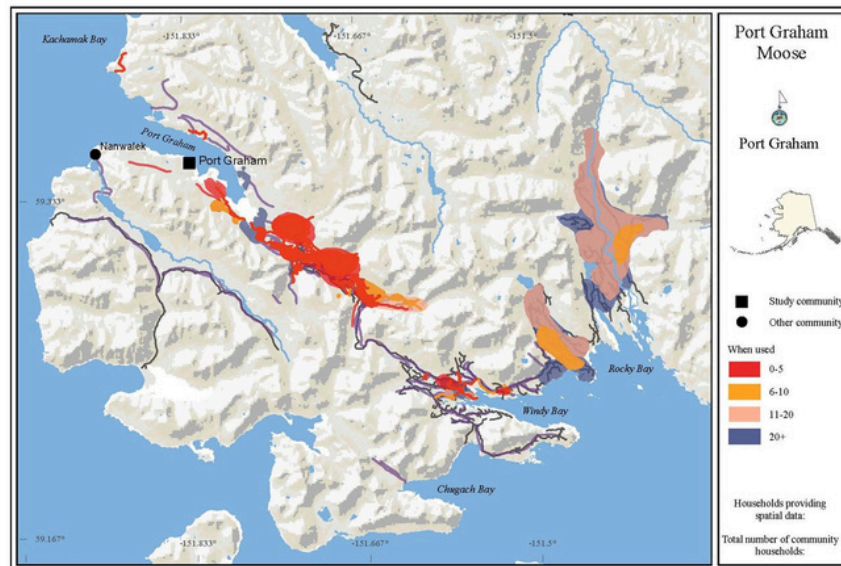


Figure 4. Moose hunting areas and routes used by Port Graham Residents concurrently used between recent years to over 20 years ago (Port Graham Residents, Port Graham, 2024).

Moose Hunting

Moose may be hunted on foot in the vicinity of both communities (Figure 3). ATVs and highway vehicles are also used on local roads and trails. At times, hunters have traveled by skiff as far as Fox River Flats at the head of Kachemak Bay, though such trips are long and costly. Hunting locally is more common (Figure 4).

Starting in September, moose hunting is a fall activity that provides food for the winter. Moose hunting fits into the seasonal round of hunting and fishing, coming after salmon fishing and after or along with berry picking. A Port Graham moose hunter shared his stories of how his father took him out moose hunting so he could learn as a youth:

“My dad was taking me, just out in the back valley here, when I was probably like nine. So, I been getting toled around for doing any kind of subsistence hunting around here since I was like nine years old.”

Port Graham Resident, Port Graham, 2024.

These stories are typical for the moose hunters in this area, but not all have a chance to hunt, especially when traveling to other hunting areas requires an airplane trip and access to a vehicle away from home. In all prior harvest surveys (data available for 1987, 1989-1993, 1997, 2003, 2014, 2022), residents of both communities used moose (ADF&G, 2025). Typically, each community would

take one to three moose a year. An elder from Nanwalek shared his experience with moose harvesting in a recording from 1996:

“I get one almost every year now. That is a lot of meat. I end up giving almost every family here in the village pieces of it but I do use a lot of that myself. ... Seems like just about everybody gets some moose meat.” Nick Tanape, Nanwalek, 1996.

The effort of harvesting a moose is difficult, and many respondents hunt in pairs or groups for efficiency and safety. The process of hunting and dressing a moose usually requires a partner, and it is common practice to get more help in packing it out. Moose harvest becomes a group event, and sharing the harvest is an important part of it.

Cooperation and Sharing:

Cooperation is part of all aspects of moose hunting, from preparation to sharing of food. Even when hunters go on foot, when word of a successful hunt reaches the village, many people go to help process and retrieve the moose. An elder from Port Graham described this process to the Alaska Board of Game in 2019:

“They will go out and they will hunt the moose, but we have a group of people that will come out there with them after the moose is caught and help butcher it and bring it back and disperse it to the community.” Timothy Malchoff, Port Graham, 2019.

As with other traditional foods, moose is shared within the communities, between communities, and among wider sharing networks throughout the state. Another moose hunter from Port Graham shared his experience of being raised in Port Graham and how the moose meat is shared:

“Last year we broke it up amongst probably over three quarters of the village. All got moose meat out of it. So, that’s just the way we were raised here. Anything that we got, we had to make sure to provide for the elders and take care of the ones in need first.”
 Quentin McMullen, Port Graham, 2024.

When available, moose is an important food source for many households, even in years when no one in the community harvests a moose. The use of moose for Port Graham and Nanwalek households has been recorded by the ADF&G in their study years starting in 1987 (Figure 5), and since these data have been recorded, there has been some use of moose in each community. Based on a survey by Chugach Regional Resources Commission (CRRC, an inter-Tribal organization) in 2017, the majority of households in Port Graham (89%) and Nanwalek (69%) answered that they use moose at some point every year (Figure 6). In most study years, some

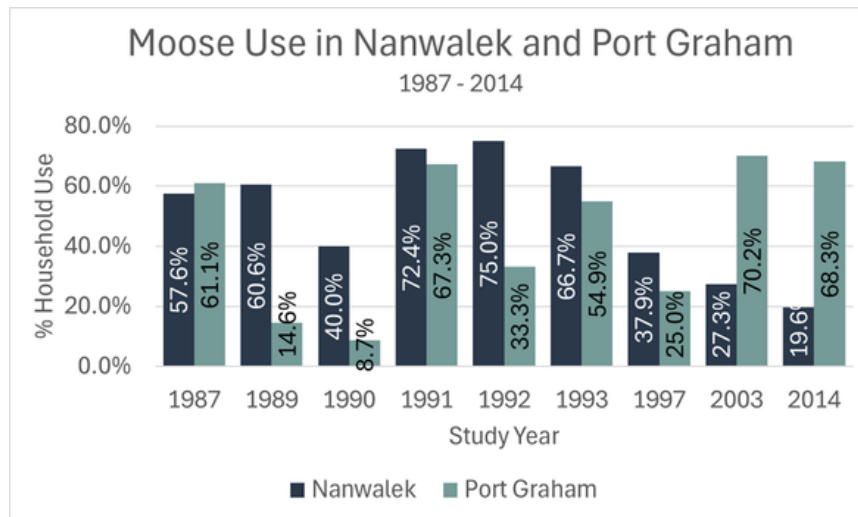


Figure 5. Moose “Use” data collected by ADF&G from 1987 to 2014 in Nanwalek and Port Graham (ADF&G, 2019).

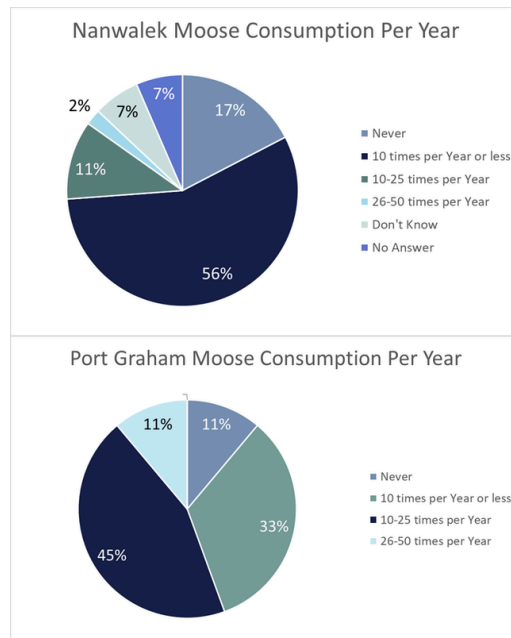


Figure 6. Moose consumption per year from 46 households surveyed in Nanwalek and 18 households surveyed in Port Graham in 2017. (CRRC, 2017).

households in Nanwalek and Port Graham attempted to hunt for moose, except for Port Graham in 1997 (Figure 7). Even in years when one community was unsuccessful in harvesting moose, residents of both communities reported the use of moose because of the strong tradition of sharing between Nanwalek and Port Graham. In every study year, households in one, the other, or both

communities reported either receiving or giving away moose (Figure 8). Moose harvest and use can also be an important opportunity for a young tribal member to learn about the history of their environment and the importance of providing for their community from elders with a lifetime of this experience.

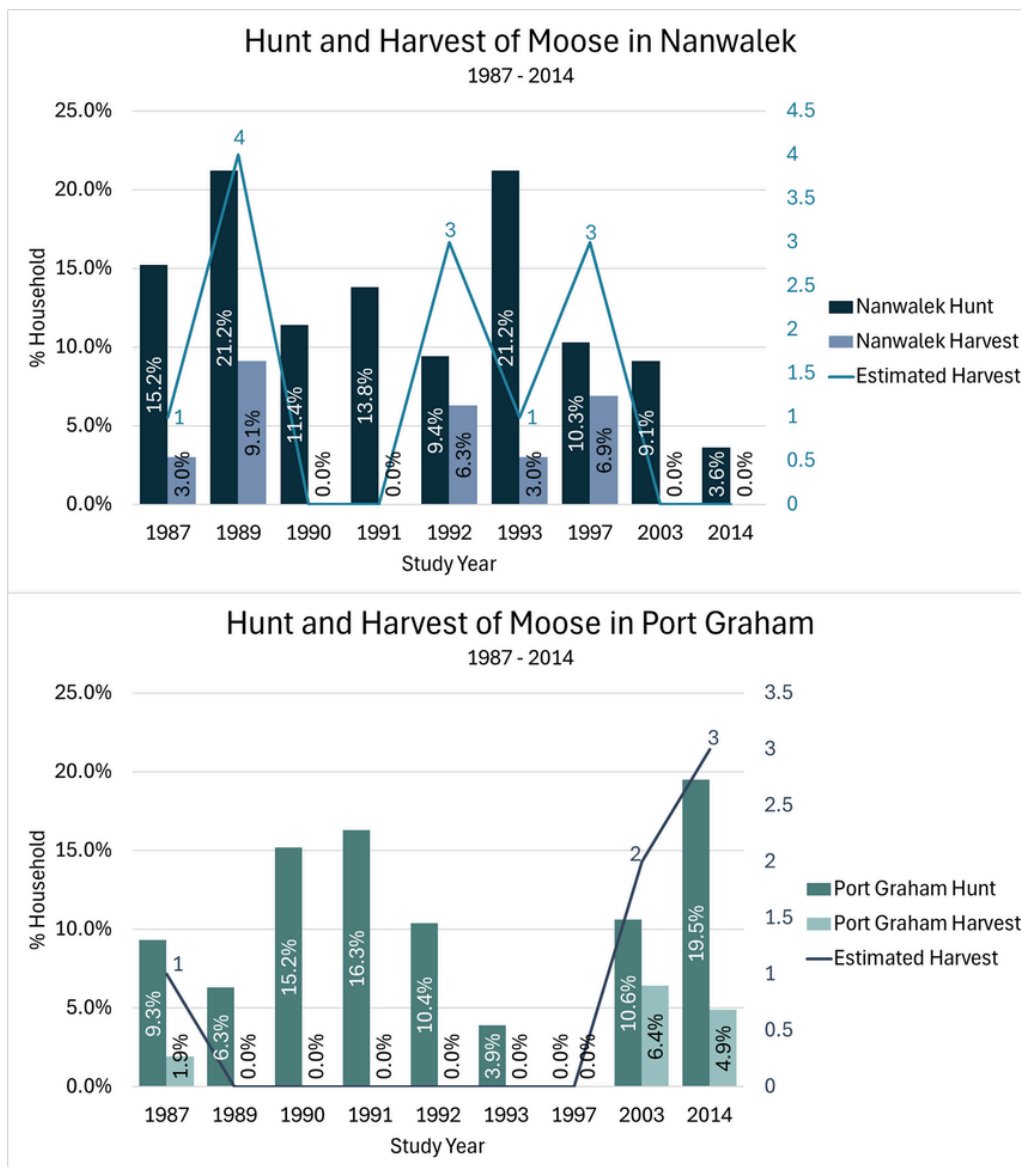


Figure 7 Moose hunt and harvest data collected by AFD&G from 1987 to 2014 in Nanwalek and Port Graham (AFD&G, 2019).

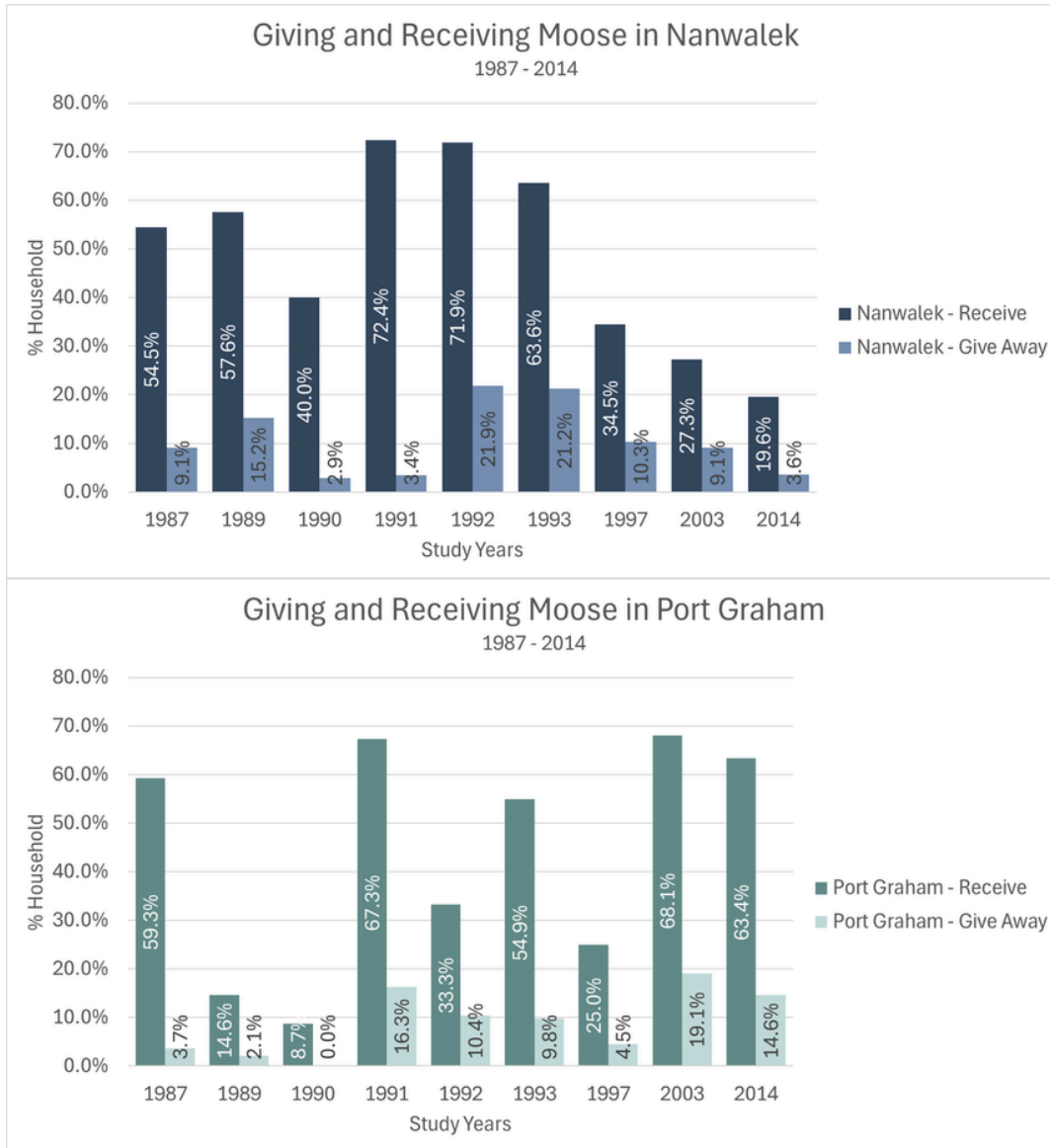


Figure 8 Data for giving and receiving moose in Nanwalek and Port Graham collected by ADF&G from 1987 to 2014 (ADF&G, 2019).

Social and Cultural Significance

Moose hunting is often a multi-generational activity, and younger hunters learn from those with experience as they develop the knowledge and skills to provide for their communities. Processing, preparing, and preserving moose also involves people of all ages, as they learn the steps and skills needed to make healthy food. Recipes are often passed from generation to generation, being shared with all community members (Figure 9). A moose hunter that lived in both Nanwalek and Port Graham shared her experience in passing down lessons to the next generation:

“I’ll take one of my hunting days and I’ll dedicate it just to my kids. My grandkids, I should say. And I’ll take them out with me. You gotta take them out and let them experience walking in the woods, and you know, just gotta be quiet, gotta listen, you gotta look, you gotta look for signs. And so, they just love it. And because of that my daughter is teaching her kids, and her youngest one is five. And she took her out last year. Moose hunting.” Lydia McMullen, Port Graham, 2024.

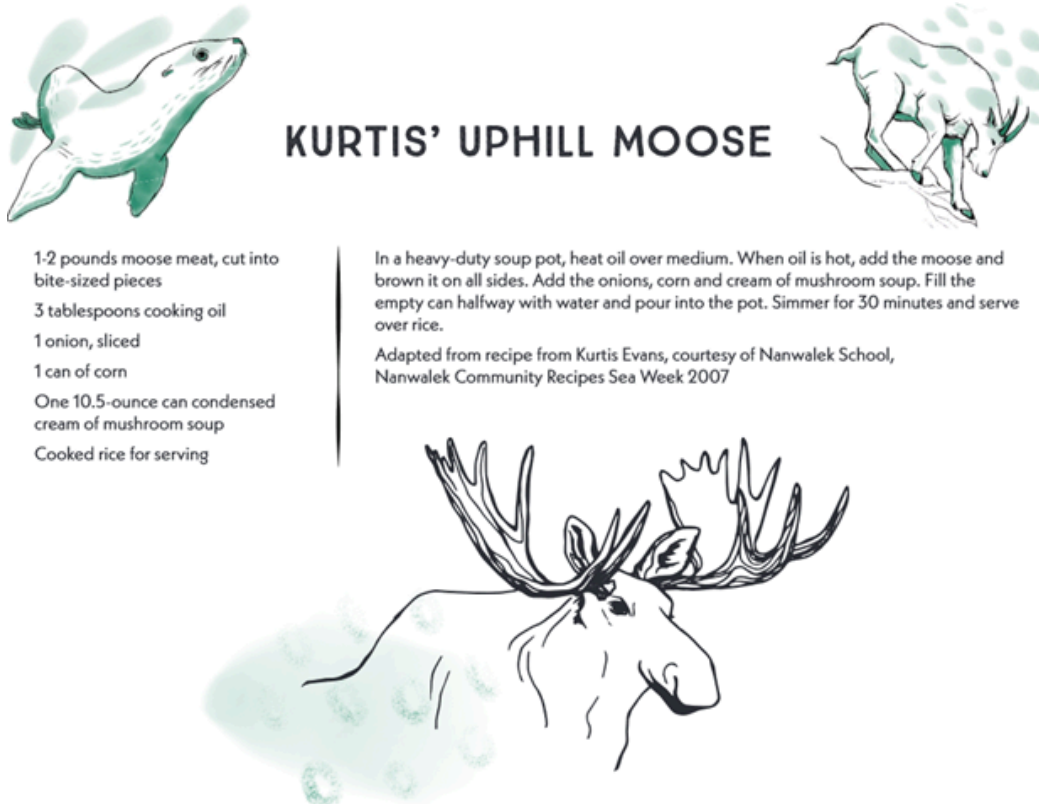


Figure 9 One of Nanwalek's ways to prepare and enjoy moose, from the "Chugach Regional Resources Commission Recipe Book Featuring Traditional Foods".

Sharing is an essential part of Sugpiaq culture, with moose as with other foods. Sharing and cooperation reinforce the social and cultural ties among individuals, households, communities, and generations. Sharing also helps take care of those in need, including Elders and individuals or families who do not hunt for themselves. Like many members of his tribe, the chief of Port Graham shares his thoughts on the social aspect of moose harvests:

"We eat together, we cut it up together, we share with the community together. Which builds on values. It reinforces those cultural values, doing it together, in a group." Patrick Norman, Port Graham, 2024.

Moose hunting, along with other traditional activities, also reinforces connections to the lands and waters around the community. Successful hunters must know the landscape, the vegetation, and the animals to navigate and to recognize signs of moose. They recognize an animal that will provide healthy food and leave any animals that show signs of sickness. Everyone involved in processing moose brings experience, skill, or the

willingness to learn how to use the whole animal and how to preserve meat and organs. A Port Graham resident shared a lesson he was taught by his parents about how subsistence connects with spirituality:

"And what mom and dad taught me was that hunting is spiritual. It's not just sustenance. And that's tradition. And they pray and give thanks when coming back. And, from a successful hunt, and they pray before distributing. So, they taught me a very spiritual side. And they taught me a little bit more about respecting the land." Calvin George, Port Graham, 2024.

Although the tradition and need of subsistence is still strong within the tribal communities in Alaska, it is governed not by the tribal leaders but by the board appointees on the Alaska Board of Game.

The Right to Subsistence

When Alaska became the 49th State in 1959, the first Alaska State Legislature created the Board of Game, consisting of nine citizens appointed by the Governor and confirmed by a majority vote of the

legislature. The legislature separated the Board of Fish and Game into separate Boards in 1975, and that is the structure that continues today. The Alaska Board of Game has the responsibility and authority to establish the hunting and trapping regulations of game for the various user groups, including tribal citizens. Alaska state law (AS 16.05.258(a)) requires the Alaska Board of Game to identify game populations or portions of populations that are customarily and traditionally taken or used for subsistence.

Alaska has a unique dual-management approach to wildlife management, where federal lands are managed by federal agencies and the remaining lands are managed by the State of Alaska. This was caused by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). After congress passed ANCSA in 1971 to convey 44 million acres of land and provide compensation to Native corporations, they then had address subsistence rights by passing ANILCA in 1980.

In March 1987, the Alaska Board of Game made a positive Customary and Traditional (C&T) finding for moose around Nanwalek (then called English Bay) and Port Graham and created a registration subsistence hunt with the same boundaries as the current TM549 Tier II hunt. At the time, the state was in compliance with ANILCA and there was a rural preference in state law, so this registration hunt was limited to Nanwalek and Port Graham residents (and was developed based on a proposal submitted by these communities). Meanwhile, the neighboring community, Seldovia, asked the Alaska Board of Game to reconsider its non-rural status. In March 1988, the Alaska Board of Game reclassified Seldovia as rural, and established the current non-subsistence area boundary (Figure 3). In March 1989, the Alaska Board of Game considered subsistence hunt proposals from Seldovia for this expanded “rural” area for moose. The Alaska Board of Game made a negative finding for moose because most of the moose taken by Seldovia residents were taken outside this local area. After a new subsistence law was passed in 1992, the Alaska Board of Game met to review existing subsistence hunts and C&T findings for compliance with the new law. The Alaska Board of Game decided not to make any new C&T findings at these compliance meetings, meaning the positive finding for moose in

Port Graham and Nanwalek from March 1987 was readopted (and the hunt became Tier II), but the C&T status of the moose population in the rest of GMU 15C outside the non-subsistence area was not addressed. In 1992, the ADF&G made a list of game populations missing C&T findings, but the Alaska Board of Game at the time declined to act on new findings.

In 2019, CRRC wrote a letter requesting that, before acting on any moose proposals, the Alaska Board of Game should make C&T determinations for moose in those areas of Unit 15C outside the non-subsistence area for which no finding has been made. The Board of Game is required to make such findings pursuant to the state's subsistence law (AS 16.05.258(a) and 5 AAC 96.615(a)(1)). At the time of the letter was sent, the Alaska Board of Game had not determined if the portion of the Unit 15C moose population located between the TM549 hunt area and the boundary of the Anchorage non-subsistence area was positively associated with C&T subsistence uses. If the Board of Game were to make a positive C&T finding for moose in this area, CRRC's request could result in the issuance of more TM549 permits, or otherwise more liberal moose hunting opportunities throughout the subsistence portion of Unit 15C.

At the meeting on March 16, 2019, the Board of Game made a negative C&T use determination (i.e., determined that moose are not associated with customary and traditional uses) in the remaining area outside the non-subsistence area. The vote was two for and four against. After the negative ruling, the Port Graham Village Council worked with CRRC to develop a project to collect data for customary and traditional use of moose within the community. CRRC partnered with ADF&G to interview moose harvesters and users in the community to record their traditional ecological knowledge and conducted moose population surveys in an attempt to increase the moose harvest limit.

Current Status of the Moose

On March 14, 2023, CRRC conducted an aerial survey for moose in Unit 15C outside the non-subsistence use area and shared the data with ADF&G (Figure 10). There were 22 moose (21 adults and 1 calf) and ten fresh moose tracks observed, but the moose responsible for those

tracks were not directly observed, and therefore not included in the official survey results. Of the 22 moose observed in the survey, 18 (82%) were observed in the area outside of the TM549 hunt area open for the community members for subsistence hunting. Residents of Port Graham and Nanwalek traditionally hunted moose outside of the boundaries of the TM549 hunt, both before and after the law was enacted (Figure 3; Figure 4).

These results were around the average of the normal minimum counts done by ADF&G, so even though it did not result in an increase in the moose harvest limit, it did not result in a decrease. Although these results did not produce the desired action, the two tribes and CRRC will continue

advocacy efforts for the subsistence rights of the tribal members. The harvest of moose within the traditional hunting grounds of the tribes is still necessary to feed these communities and continue their traditional practices.

Conclusion

As traditional knowledge keepers, the tribal members of the two communities hold the responsibility for stewardship of their traditional lands and natural resources for future generations. Tribal knowledge and experience should count as much or more than written sources by third parties. Not to discredit written sources, but Tribal knowledge and experience are based on extensive

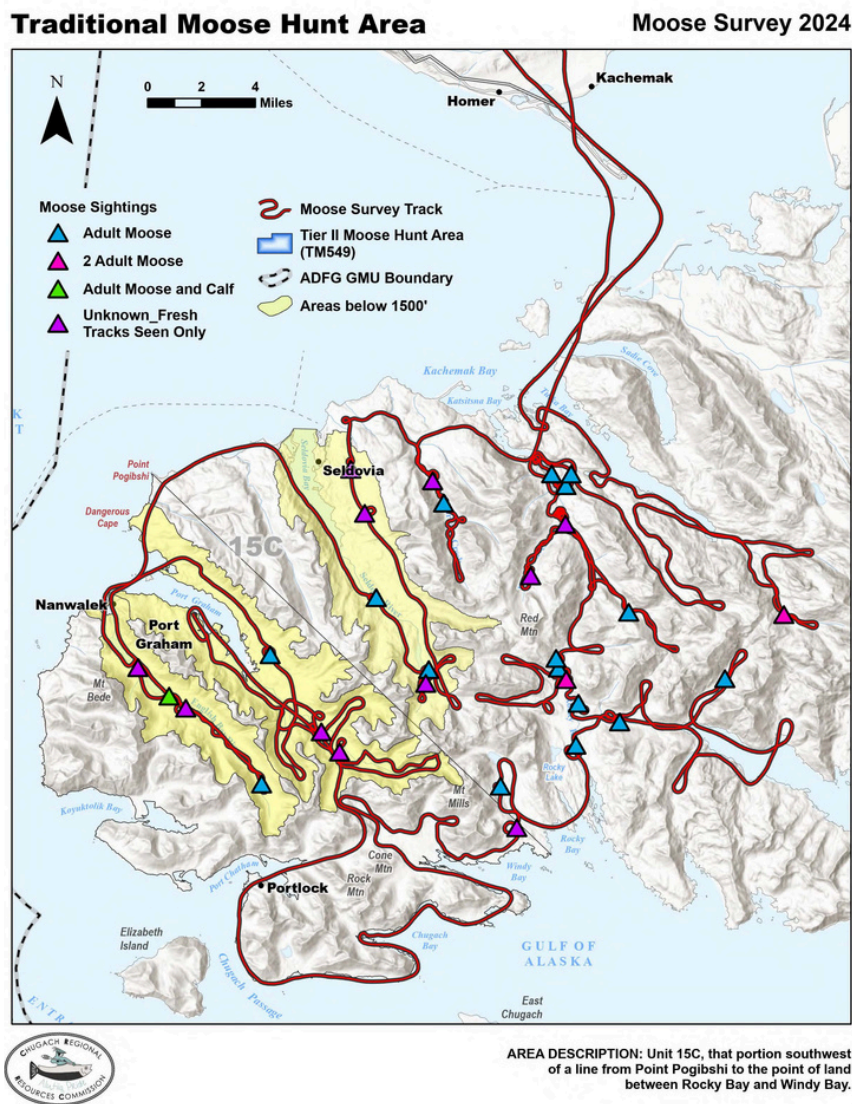


Figure 10 Results from CRRC's aerial survey for moose conducting in the Alaska Game Management Unit 15C outside the non-subsistence use area on March 14, 2023.

and intimate knowledge of the area and all that live there and should be more widely used as credible sources. Traditional knowledge and experiences were rarely kept in written form, and that has kept tribes at a disadvantage when asked to provide evidence for the history of customary and traditional use. Just because it was not written, does not mean it did not happen. Patrick Norman shared his thoughts on what it means to be knowledge keepers and the responsibilities that come with it:

“My own personal view of this is that we have an obligation to hold the land, not only for ourselves presently, but for the use of future generations to come... we hold it or are stewards of it on behalf of the future generations that are going to come behind us... we have a responsibility to make sure all of our land is available for future generations coming after us.” Patrick Norman, Port Graham, 1997.

The 2019 negative customary and traditional use finding by the Alaska Board of Game does not reflect the two communities’ practices or beliefs. As described and presented here, CRRC is building a collection of information, data, and interviews regarding the historical use of moose in the area to quantify, evaluate, and report information about customary and traditional uses of moose in the communities of Nanwalek and Port Graham. This report includes historical and current subsistence use information on moose use that may have been missed when the 2019 C&T determination was developed in a short two weeks. The Tribal residents of Port Graham and Nanwalek understand subsistence as a culture, a way of life. Subsistence for Alaska Native peoples is associated with tastes, smells, and feelings. It is relationships, togetherness, and community. When mismanaged, and regulations restrict people from practicing cultural ways of life, they lose pieces of who they are.

Effective collaborative management of fish and wildlife in Alaska is often challenged by a lack of cultural understanding and effective communication between managers and the local communities that depend upon those fish and wildlife to sustain their ways of life. Meaningful communication among Tribal citizens is essential for Tribal communities to engage with and influence fish and wildlife management decision-making. Tribal investment is essential for providing opportunities for Tribal

citizenry to meet and fully discuss fish and wildlife concerns and develop proposed solutions that can be delivered to fish and wildlife managers through regulatory change proposals and public testimony. Frequent communication and collaboration between Tribal, state, and federal management partners are critical. Productive negotiations are dependent upon how well stakeholders know and understand each other and their concerns of mutual interest. Strong relationships are the product of shared experiences. Tribal testimonies are vital sources of evidence that can greatly influence fish and wildlife management decision-making. Through the work described here, CRRC aims to sustain Tribal customs in ways that reflect and respect Tribal knowledge and practice. With the knowledge provided to us through this project, we will advocate for the subsistence rights of the tribal members in Port Graham and Nanwalek, present our findings to the Alaska Board of Game, and help them regain their right to subsist for moose on their traditional hunting grounds and increase the harvest limit that feeds their families.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this research.

AI Disclosure

The authors did not use AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript.

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