

LANDSCAPE *of* TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Context for working in rural Alaska

About Adelheid Herrmann

This article and the associated graphics were developed by Adelheid Herrmann, EdD. She is of Dena'ina and German descent from the community of Naknek, Alaska. Beyond her own experiences living in rural Alaska, Herrmann served as an Alaska State Representative in the 1980s traveling extensively throughout the Bristol Bay, Aleutians and Pribilof Islands regions. She initiated the 'Day in the Life of an Alaskan Tribe' graphic (page 2) concept in the 1990's and further refined it during her postdoc research (2019 to present) for the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy. As co-investigator for ACCAP, Herrmann works to build capacity in rural communities to respond and adapt to climate change.



Purpose of this article

The purpose of this article is to inform people planning work in rural Alaska about the current landscape of Tribal communities. It is meant to help researchers, academics, federal and state agencies – especially those doing climate work – understand the complexities in villages and regions. Tribes, Tribal members, and Tribal regional organizations can also use it to educate the outside world.

This article is part of Herrmann's postdoc research project, "Building capacity of rural communities

to respond and adapt to climate change: focusing workforce development within Tribal climate adaptation and mitigation planning."

How to cite this article

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EXTERNAL FORCES

Day in the life of an Alaskan Tribe

This graphic provides a snapshot of some of the entities that Tribes may deal with on a daily basis. This engagement could include attending planning, operations and government consultation meetings, responding to research requests, reviewing documents such as Environmental Impact Statements and more. The graphic is not all inclusive, but includes examples that convey the enormity of engagements and requests received by Tribes.

How to cite this graphic

Herrmann, A. (2020). A day in the life of an Alaskan Tribe (graphic). Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy. uaf-accap.org/projects/tribal-landscape

Access electronically

Download this graphic at uaf-accap.org/projects/tribal-landscape and properly cite it when used.



INTERNAL STRESSORS

Internal stressors Tribal members face

This graphic portrays some of the stressors Tribal and community members deal with in their personal lives, often on a daily basis. These stressors can be amplified by the fact that many Alaska Tribes and communities are only accessible by aircraft or boat, and some still lack basic services like running water and sewage systems.

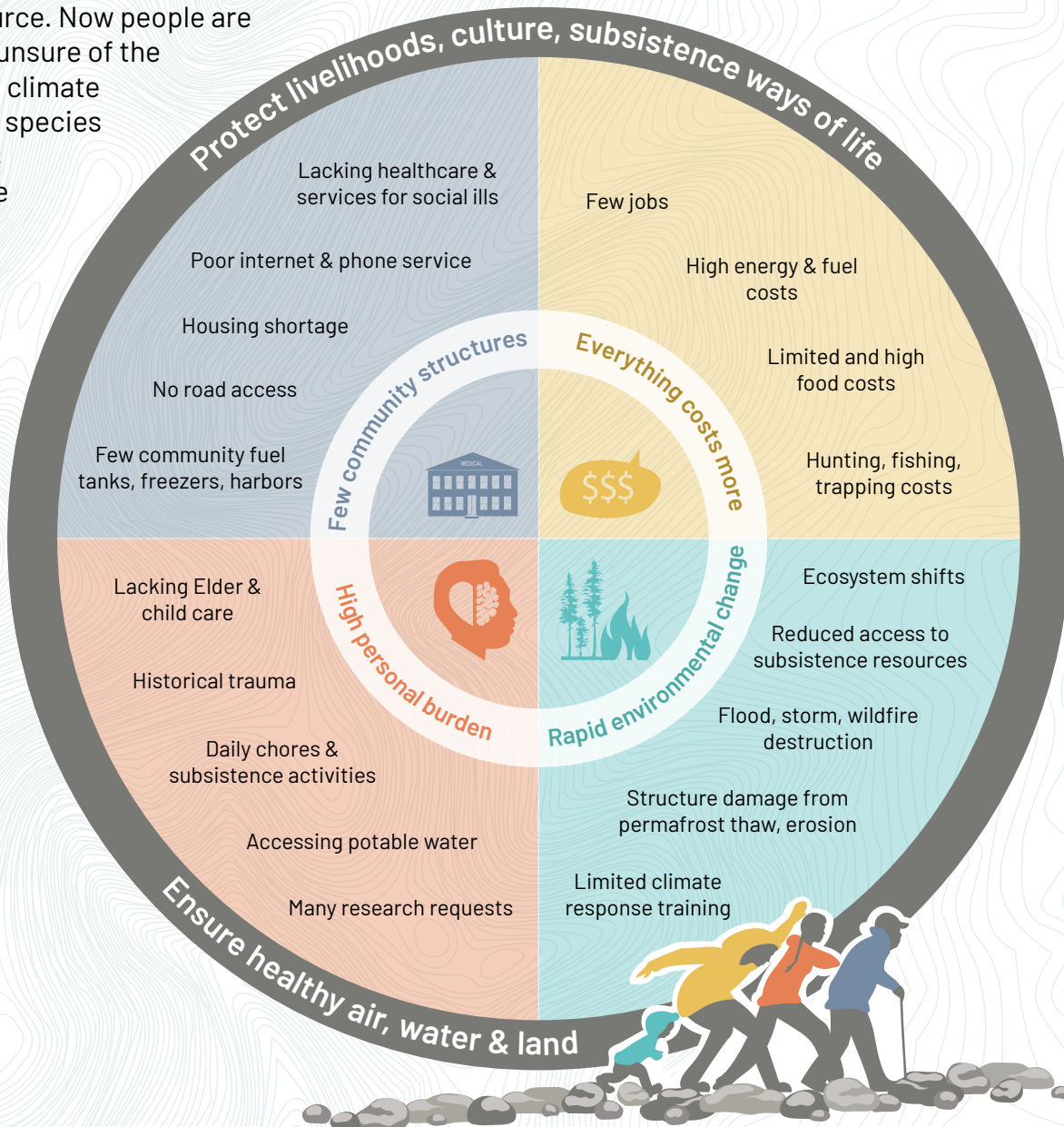
Protecting livelihoods and the subsistence way of life is a key theme in both the external forces and internal stressors faced by Tribes and communities. In the past, people could count on subsistence as a food source. Now people are worried and unsure of the future as the climate changes and species distributions shift. Climate adaptation planning offers a partial solution, but not the total answer.

How to cite this graphic

Herrmann, A. (2024). Internal stressors Tribal members face (graphic). Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy. uaf-accap.org/projects/tribal-landscape

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STRUCTURE OF NATIVE ENTITIES

To understand the complex landscape of Alaska Native representation, it is important to learn the differences between Tribes, Alaska Native corporations and Tribal non-profit organizations. Researchers and academics working in Tribal and rural communities should investigate and comply with research and engagement protocols set forth by these entities.

Tribes govern themselves

There are over 220 federally recognized Tribes in Alaska. The relationship between these Tribes and the United States is one between sovereigns, i.e., between a government and a government. This “government-to-government” principle, which is grounded in the U.S. constitution, helped shape the long history of relations between the federal government and Tribal nations.

While there are similarities between Tribes due to location or region, no two Tribes are alike. This must be considered when visiting or working with rural communities and Tribes. It is important to check if the community or Tribe has their own research and engagement protocols. Several entities have developed helpful protocols on doing research in rural communities.

Unlike Lower 48 Tribes, most Alaska Tribes do not have a land base (e.g. reservations). Governing responsibility and land ownership are held by two distinct entities.

Corporations hold land

Through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Alaska Native **regional corporations** hold title to roughly 44 million acres of land held in private corporate ownership. Twelve regional corporations currently operate in the state. There are also 174 Alaska Native village corporations that own nearly 17 million acres of land. These corporations manage their business(es) to benefit their shareholders.

Non-profit organizations deliver services

Twelve Alaska Native **regional non-profit organizations** provide social services and health care for Alaska Native Peoples. The specific objective of each organization varies but generally focus on health, cultural and educational opportunities. These non-profits deliver services through federal compacts, grant funding, collaboration with village non-profit organizations and other means. Programs include physical and behavioral health care, scholarships for Alaska Native students, cultural events, Alaska Native language preservation, protection of important sites, environmental monitoring and more.

AFN & ANTHC, largest Native organizations

The **Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium** is the largest Tribal health organization in Alaska. ANTHC meets the health needs of Alaska Native and American Indian Peoples living in Alaska. The **Alaska Federation of Natives** is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska. Its membership includes 209 of the federally recognized Tribes, 185 village corporations, 9 regional corporations, and 10 regional nonprofit and Tribal consortium. Both ANTHC and AFN have programs addressing climate and infrastructure issues.



Alaska's 229 federally recognized Tribes. On the electronic version of this article click the map to access the Bureau of Indian Affairs interactive map of Tribe locations.

HUMAN CAPACITY ISSUE

People are spread thin

Outside researchers and academics working in rural Alaska should know that leadership and staff at Tribes and Tribal organizations often lack capacity for work beyond what they are already tasked with. Additional requests are taxing to individuals at the local level and entire regions. In many communities, a few people do most of the work running things, in some cases due to a fixed number of available jobs. Without a paradigm shift this structure is exhausting and not sustainable.

Abundant funds, too little capacity

Planning is not a new concept to rural communities, Tribes, regional Tribal non-profits, or other entities working in rural Alaska. They have developed planning documents with local, regional, state and federal governments for years. However, as communities react to climate-related catastrophes it limits their capacity for strategic longterm planning and engaging with research.

An influx of federal dollars from 2020 to current (2024) made more funding available to rural Alaska. Funds for climate resilience, adaptation and mitigation planning were at the forefront. Though multiple federal agencies have funding opportunities, low capacity at the local/Tribal and regional levels impedes applying for, receiving and managing funds. Capacity challenges include:

- grant writing/management/reporting;
- managing multiple grants and complying with state and federal regulations;
- absence of climate adaptation and mitigation plans makes it difficult to meet requirements for additional funding.

These capacity issues could change, and need to change by developing new systems and mentoring the next generation of leaders. For example, a General Accounting Office report from May 2022 reviewed 20 programs across federal agencies. Each had at least one characteristic that could pose an obstacle to villages' obtaining assistance, such as project cost-share requirements. Implementing changes within agency regulations or policy — where feasible and appropriate — could help Alaska Native villages better obtain federal assistance.

Adelheid Herrmann is also leading the **Fiscal Pathways** project — a case study in Bristol Bay — to assess the effectiveness of federal funding. The work proposes to help remove funding obstacles so that Tribes can better adapt to and mitigate climate change effects.

Complex governing system

Communities and regions often have multiple governing entities. This may include the Tribe, village or regional Native corporation, cities and boroughs. There can be a disconnect between governing bodies, often confusing outsiders trying to work with Tribes or communities. There are some examples of models whereby these governing entities work well together.

The many layers of governance is also taxing for Tribal administrators. They must understand government-to-government consultation, Federal Indian law (including the Self-Determination Act), and the federal and state lay of the land in order to know which agencies to approach for funding and support.

CLIMATE GRIEF & WELLNESS

Photo by Kentaro Yasui, USFWS

Climate change grief (solastalgia)

Climate change in rural Alaska is personal. The unpredictability and potential destruction of lifeways, subsistence foods, sacred lands, and personal and community property can manifest as trauma. Researchers and academics working in rural Alaska should know that **climate grief (solastalgia)** adds additional stress for individuals and communities that may already be traumatized by historical wrongdoings.

Healing and wellness rooted in culture

Much of this section is based on work by LaVerne Xilegg Demientieff, LMSW, PhD, Professor and Chair of the UAF Social Work Department. For over 20 years she has focused on wellness, healing-centered engagement, trauma-informed care and resilience, specifically with Indigenous populations.

Examples of resilience and wellness are rooted in all cultures across Alaska and the world and apply at the individual and community level. Many cultural and traditional practices incorporate healing and wellness strategies. The challenges we face as human beings – whether depression or anxiety, addiction or climate change – can create disconnection from self, family, spirit, land, friends, partners, culture and identity. Creating connection and getting back into relationship can help people heal and move forward.

Traditional Indigenous practices and ceremonies include a variety of coping mechanisms, ways to connect and get back into balance:

- Elders model love, compassion and forgiveness;
- Elders teach us the importance of relationships to people, land, animals, nature and spirit.

Stress, trauma and anxiety impact how people engage with others in all areas of their lives. It can make it difficult to be present, remember, recall and retain information. People can become triggered and reactive instead of proactive. Climate adaptation work requires teamwork to make important decisions, communicate clearly and collaborate. Learning wellness strategies and creating communities of care and practice can help people stay engaged.

Demientieff and co-authors put important lessons from Elders into the **Five Cs framework**: “When we learn about how trauma impacts our mind and bodies, we are more **compassionate** with ourselves and others. When we are **curious** about what causes pain and grief, we can help to create **connection** and **ceremony** for healing. Healing happens when we are in our bodies and in relationship to others in our **community**.”

Well-being in climate adaptation

Though the importance of ‘well-being’ is listed in many Arctic reports and funding opportunities, they lack a clear definition. Rachel Donkersloot, PhD, and co-authors created a **definition centered on salmon** that provides broader perspective on the term: “We define well-being as a way of being with others that arises when people and ecosystems are healthy, and when individuals, families and communities equitably practice their chosen ways of life and enjoy a self-defined quality of life now and for future generations.”

Few resources are available to help Tribal members facing multiple internal stressors, climate grief and other associated traumas. The **Alaska Tribal Resilience Learning Network** is one group hosting trainings for Tribes and Tribal organizations that bring well-being into the climate adaptation planning space.

TAKEAWAYS

Alaska climate funding and research is simultaneously needed and taxing

With northern regions warming up to four times faster than the rest of the world, more funding is directed toward the Arctic and Alaska for climate change research, planning and adaptation. The federal government offers a multitude of funding sources and there are associated opportunities through the State of Alaska. Entities such as the Alaska Federation of Natives, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, the Alaska Municipal League, RuralCAP and others are working to provide information and assistance so rural communities and Tribes benefit from these potentially once-in-a-lifetime funding opportunities. Simultaneously, Arctic research is shifting to center Indigenous knowledges and co-production with communities and Tribes. In 2024, the National Science Foundation began requiring researchers to gain approval from Tribal governments for proposals that may impact Tribal resources or interests.

This energy toward Arctic climate research and Indigenous priorities is both needed and taxing for Tribal communities in Alaska. If done appropriately and proactively, these funding sources could be a huge economic development driver for rural Alaska. Providing equitable funding to rural communities should be an ongoing theme that is embedded into federal government policy.

Engaging with this funding takes a tremendous amount of time, planning, relationship building and coordination between rural entities and the federal and state governments. Often capacity at the local level cannot keep up with the demand to harness the opportunities. Rural entities also may have difficulty complying with reporting requirements. This is especially true in rural communities that still do not have basic services like high-speed internet.

Do your homework before engaging with Tribal communities

The graphics in this article visualize the overwhelming number of external and internal forces that Tribes and Tribal members deal with daily. The “Day in the life of an Alaskan Tribe” schematic shows dozens of outside entities that Tribes engage with and receive requests from. These are important factors to consider when approaching communities. Your project may be scientifically significant, but have little meaning to the community nor address their questions.

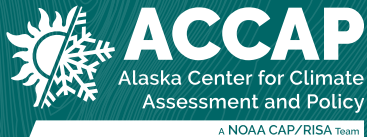
The second graphic “Internal stressors Tribal members face” focuses on activities and stressors that individuals juggle while trying to protect their livelihoods, culture and subsistence way of life. These internal stressors are additive to all the external forces Tribes and rural communities deal with. This is especially true for people working in public service related jobs – Tribal administrator, city or borough manager and health aides.

Tribal organizations such as **Kawerak, Inc.** have established research protocols that provide detailed guidance for those wanting to work within their regions. Other groups like the **Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat** create a communication network among communities helping to direct the narrative for outside groups who are interested in collaboration. These resources avoid a reactive approach to all of the incoming requests. Additional protocols, engagement processes and co-production methods are available in other regions and communities. Before beginning work in a Tribal community, look for existing community-based engagement recommendations/procedures, investigate who does what in the community and what research was done in the past. Also consider ways to address issues like data sovereignty even if the local entities lack capacity to set up data management systems themselves.

“How do you know that a system is healthy? That a community is well? That the individual has a strong spiritual soul, heart, mind and connection? You know by the way that they adopt the sharing component of community.”

Wilson Justin

Indigenous leader, quote from a Salmon and Society Workshop in 2016



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