

Article

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Traditional knowledge about polar bear in Chukotka

Eduard Zdor*

Résumé: Savoirs traditionnels sur l'ours en Tchoukotka

Cette note de recherche décrit une étude entreprise de 2004 à 2007 qui avait comme objectif de créer une collection écrite de récits et savoirs traditionnels autochtones sur le rôle de l'ours polaire dans la vie culturelle, spirituelle et matérielle des peuples de la Tchoukotka.

Abstract: Traditional knowledge about polar bear in Chukotka

This research note describes a study undertaken from 2004 to 2007 with the aim to create a written collection of Indigenous narratives and traditional knowledge about the polar bear's role in the cultural, spiritual, and material life of the peoples of Chukotka.

Introduction

Polar bear is an important part of the culture of the Yupik and Chukchi peoples, who have created legends and songs, dances and religious ceremonies about it. Furthermore, it is an important food source and raw material for local people. In Russia, polar-bear hunting has been banned since 1956 when polar bear was classified as "endangered" in the Soviet "Red Book" of Endangered Species. In 1989, the former Soviet Union notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that it had reclassified the polar bear in the Bering and Chuckchi Seas as a "recovered population" and it wished to share in the harvest from this population. This resulted in the signature of a treaty that established a process to determine polar bear harvest limits for Indigenous peoples of Chukotka and Alaska.

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This research note describes a study undertaken from 2004 to 2007 with the aim to create a written collection of Indigenous narratives and traditional knowledge about the polar bear's role in the cultural, spiritual, and material life of the peoples of Chukotka.

Objectives

The first objective of the study "Traditional knowledge about the polar bear, the cultural values and practices in Chukotka" was to preserve oral traditions on the cultural role of the polar bear for the Indigenous peoples in Chukotka. This objective was reached by interviewing Indigenous elders and knowledgeable people in the region. The second objective was to create a bibliography on the role of the polar bear in the Indigenous cultures of Chukotka.

Project participants

The project was funded by the US National Park Service through the Alaska Nanuq Commission, but carried out independently in Chukotka. The project team included the following people: the project's scientific leader Anatoli Kochnev (consultant for the Association of Traditional Marine Mammal Hunters of Chukotka [known as ChAZTO] and director of the sea mammals research lab, Chukotka Unit, Pacific Research Institute of Fisheries and Oceanography); the project's technical director Eduard Zdor (executive secretary of ChAZTO); the coordinators for Iultin District Vladilen Kavry and Anna Tnanykvat; the coordinators for the Provideniya District Nikolai Mymrin and Zoia Weinstein-Tagrina; the coordinators for Chukchi District Nikolai Kalianto and Dmitri Eineucheivun; the bibliography editors Igor Riga, Svetlana Kochneva; and the translators Aivana Enmynkau and Alexandra Kapitonova.

Methodology

Interviews (2004-2007)

A three-year program was followed by the Polar Bear Commission of the Association of Traditional Marine Mammal Hunters of Chukotka. Firstly, a questionnaire and methodology on conducting interviews, written by Anatolij Kochnev and Vladilen Kavry, were presented to the Polar Bear Commission of the ATMMHC and to the Alaska Nanuq Commission. Secondly, the ATMMHC project coordinators contacted the hunters' associations in the main hunting villages of Chukotka and asked for suggestions on possible participants in the interviews. Thirdly, the research team contacted potential participants, and when the latter agreed, recorded their interviews and took photographs. The interview process was completed with a total of 107 participants in 22 villages, and a preliminary report was presented at the "Beringia Days" Conference.

Upon termination of the first phase of the project "Umka-Nanuuq," the ATMMHC and the Alaska Nanuuq Commission continued their work on developing a bibliography of all written and oral sources related to the cultural role of the polar bear in Alaska. Some experienced hunters and elders were also interviewed about possible oral traditions they might remember from their ancestors. The data were compiled from 2004 to 2006, and are currently being analysed.

Review of literature (2005-2006)

This program was done on a contract basis by individuals with knowledge and working experience in anthropology, archaeology and related domains. Because of the huge distances in Russia, the big volume of material and the difficulties to obtain information, the project was carried out for two years, and the following activities were completed: 1) a review of the existing sources and literature in ethnographic institutes in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, and others cities; and 2) a bibliography of these published and unpublished sources.

Final products

Two times a year, the ATMMHC presented reports on the project's developments at the annual "Beringia Days" Conference as well as at the annual meeting of the Alaska Nanuuq Commission and the ATMMHC. The annual progress reports were concluded by a final report devoted to the oral history of the Indigenous views on the cultural, spiritual, and practical role of the polar bear in Chukotka. This report will be an invaluable material for educational purposes, and comparative studies between the oral traditions in Alaska and Chukotka. A video documentary was also produced on the Indigenous traditional knowledge in Chukotka in regards to the relationship between the humans and the polar bear.

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