

An Ethnographic Exploration of the Relationship between Environmental Perceptions and Natural Resource Use: Perceptions and Behaviors of Alaska Native Artists and Alaska Tourists

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Presentation of a research proposal

Attending the Third Northern Research Forum (NRF) Open Meeting—The Resilient North Human Response to Global Change in Yellowknife, NWT Canada from September 15-18, 2004 as a young researcher was an extraordinarily rewarding and stimulating experience. I presented the following information as a draft dissertation research proposal for my program in cultural anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I participated in the Plenary 3 and Square Hour Session entitled Cultural Resilience and the Tourist Economy.

Presenting my proposal allowed me to gather input and understand alternative perspectives on the topic of Native art and tourism which in turn has helped me develop my thoughts on my research more thoroughly. Since I presented this information, I have substantially revised my research project. The following information is intended to be informational and does not imply any partnerships with artists, tourists, galleries, museums or cultural centers and is based on the presentation I made at the Northern Research Forum in September 2004.

Statement of Interest

My research will combine environmental perceptions, Alaska Native artistic heritage and tourism. Throughout my professional and academic career I have observed the need for expertise involving both the natural and social sciences. I have been interested in the indigenous use of natural resources and tourism for the past sixteen years since my first overseas experience in Brazil. Through my doctoral program I will further refine my knowledge and experience integrating anthropology and natural science methodologies and practices. This will better prepare me to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between environmental perceptions and behavior of Alaska Native artists and Alaska tourists. My doctoral degree in cultural anthropology will be grounded in anthropological theory while integrating the theories and methodologies of natural science.

Fundamental to my research and professional interests are the issues proposed in the NRF plenary session 3—Cultural Resilience and the Tourist Economy. I am interested in exploring the relationship between environmental perceptions and behavior as it intersects with Alaska Native production and tourists' consumption of Alaska Native art. I plan to examine the relationship between Alaska Natives' artistic heritage and environmental perceptions

and, conversely, tourists' perceptions of natural resource use in Alaska Native art. As a young researcher, having the opportunity to attend the Third Northern Research Forum Open Meeting provided me with invaluable opportunities for networking and peer review of my proposed research. This experience has strengthened the quality of my research goals and expanded my network of research associates.

Introduction

Indigenous populations throughout the world use natural resources in the production of art. This production of art is an outcome of the relationship between cultural tradition and the environment. Many indigenous peoples are concerned with environmental and cultural sustainability; similarly, tourists are becoming increasingly concerned. Both the literature about the art of indigenous peoples and that concerned with sustainable tourism are vast. Yet, there is no body of research addressing the interface between Natives' and tourists' environmental perceptions and the production and consumption of Native art. This research will explore the relationship between environmental perceptions and behavior, and indigenous arts in Alaska. The information gathered will highlight differences and similarities between Alaska Native artists' and tourists' environmental perceptions and behaviors and will explore the interaction between these two groups by investigating environmental perceptions cross-culturally.

A review of the literature uncovered little information addressing how environmental perceptions of Native artists relate to the perceptions of tourists and how this may affect indigenous art. The concept that resources are harvested through subsistence practices and used in indigenous art is mentioned. Yet, these comments occur in the larger context of the art itself rather than the natural resources used and the artists' connection to the land. Lee (1999) notes "the importance of subsistence to Native art has been largely overlooked in the ongoing debate over subsistence rights."

A vast literature documents the various indigenous art forms throughout the world. It often makes reference to natural resources associated with Native art by listing the materials used in the art though not addressing the relationship between the art and the environmental perceptions of the artist. How varying environmental perceptions may impact

the production and sale of Native art in Alaska is not addressed.

Rosengarten (1994) conducted research in South Carolina that explored threats to the African-American tradition of sea grass basketry. Loss of habitat due to land development and the displacement of basket stands where baskets were traditionally sold were key threats to the art of African-American basketry in South Carolina. Yet Rosengarten did not explicitly examine how environmental perceptions factored into the threat to the basketry practices.

Now and in the past, Alaska Natives have supplemented their income through the sale of art. Accordingly, changes in the availability of natural resources and environmental perceptions could affect the generation of this supplemental income and negatively impact Native communities. The relationship between environmental perceptions, natural resources and the arts is an important yet overlooked area of research. Hensel (1996) argues that subsistence activities are part of the identity of Native people and that the art produced from these resources is equally important. Yet, the natural resources used for this art and the environmental perceptions held by the artists are equally important and inextricably connected to the people, their culture and their art.

Fair (1993) provides a background on Alaska Native art in the exhibition catalogue from the Arts From the Arctic art exhibition of 1993. In the chapter "Alaska Native Art: History, Traditions, Transitions" Fair discusses the importance of place, history and natural resources, and the spirituality associated with these and Alaska Native art. Fair states that "the availability of unprocessed materials for use in art production, a situation that is tied to personal and cultural relations with the land as well as the movement of the seasons, remains a factor deeply affecting Native artists today." She touches on the interconnected relationship between Native art and natural resources drawing upon interviews with Alaska Native artists. John Kailukiak notes the difficulty of obtaining needed raw materials in some locations: "[t]hose who are located in villages close to annual walrus migrations...are fortunate; materials they need are usually available as by-products of their annual subsistence routines." This indication of need for raw materials as well as comments by other Alaska Native artists about limited access to - or changes in - raw materials raises the

question of how environmental perceptions of varying groups of people may affect Native arts.

Steinbright (1987), in her account of nine Athabaskan artists and their artwork, discusses the resources used in the art and mentions the importance of the relationship between the people's art and their land. The impact of substituting man-made for natural materials is mentioned by those interviewed for the project. The inextricable connection between people and natural resources mandates the seeking of a clearer understanding of environmental perceptions if a better understanding of the sustainability of communities is to come about.

Problem Statement

What is the relationship between Alaska Native artists' and Alaska tourists' perceptions of the environment and the use of natural resources in Alaska Native art? This is the question that I am posing in my research. How perceptions are defined, observed, and recorded, however, becomes a challenging matter to operationalize. Attitudes, values and perspectives also play a role in formulating a person's world view and distinguishing these from perceptions will be difficult.

I seek to describe the fundamental perceptions on which Alaska Natives' and tourists' environmental framework is founded. I will conduct perception research cross-culturally in order to provide interpretations of the choices affecting production and consumption. I will explain the tourist/Alaska Native artist relationship in the context of environmental perceptions. Using a holistic research agenda that explores both perceptions and their associated behaviors will give context to each component thereby creating a more complete picture of the whole situation in which the artists and tourists function. I bring a social/psychological question to anthropology and expand it through an anthropological framework.

My research design incorporates the need to both observe behaviors and examine perceptions. If I were only to observe behaviors, I would fail to examine perceptions and if I were merely to ask questions about perceptions, I would fail to obtain a complete understanding of the context of given behaviors. This research will endeavor to describe fundamental perceptions and behaviors that form the foundation of Alaska

Natives' and tourists' environmental framework as they relate to each other as culture groups. Understanding even a portion of the venue in which Alaska Native artists and tourists engage one another may help to provide interpretations of the choices each group makes (or desires to make) with respect to the environmental framework of production and consumption of Alaska Native art.

My research will conduct perception research cross-culturally using a commodity - Alaska Native art - as a point of topic. The research will integrate several disciplines—tourism (the anthropology of tourism), environmental perceptions (social psychology) and Native art (cultural anthropology); these areas are yet to be integrated as a mode of inquiry.

Why Alaska Native Artists & Tourists?

Alaska Native artists have expressed a concern about tourists' understanding of Alaska Native art and the tourists' lack of understanding about the land and resources involved in its production (Lee, personal communication, 2002). We do not know what the audience awareness on this topic is. We know nothing about the underlying framework supporting this awareness or lack of awareness. We do not know what the relationship is between tourists' and Alaska Native artists' environmental constructs—constructs that may influence their relationship to one another.

Methods

My research will employ a grounded theory approach with constant comparison to narrow the field of inquiry. Fieldwork will consist of interviews with and participant observation of Alaska Native artists, tourists visiting Alaska, and Alaska art gallery personnel.

Sample

The sample for the research will target urban Alaska Native artists who work with diverse media employing natural resources, tourists visiting urban centers in Alaska arriving by cruise ship, tourists visiting urban Alaska cities via train, tourists visiting museums, heritage centers, and art galleries, and gallery and museum personnel.

The methodology will ensure a diverse geographic representation of urban Alaska

Native artists and a diverse representation of natural resources used in Native art. Tourists will be selected randomly and controlled for age, gender, income, ethnicity and other variables as appropriate. Gallery personnel will be selected based on specific gallery attributes and key informant abilities.

Examining the use of natural resources in Alaska Native art will illuminate cultural contexts of environmental perceptions and externalize thought processes that lead individuals to make environmental decisions regarding the production and consumption of Alaska Native art. The art will be used to illuminate cultural contexts of environmental perceptions.

Research Questions

What is the interface between Alaska Native artists' and Alaska tourists' environmental perceptions?

What are Alaska Natives artists':

- Perspectives on natural resource use in Alaska Native art?
- Perceptions of the environment?
- Perceptions influence on art production?

What are Alaska tourists':

- Perceptions of natural resource use in Alaska Native art?
- Perceptions of the environment?
- Perceptions influence on art purchases?
- Tourists' levels of knowledge of the relationship between Alaska Native art and the land?

How does this interface function to influence the relationship between Alaska Native artist's and Alaska tourists?

- How do Alaska Natives artists' perceptions of the environment affect their art production?
- How do tourists' perceptions of the environment affect their art purchases?
- What are tourists' levels of knowledge regarding Alaska Native artists' perspectives on the environment and use of natural resources in Alaska Native art?

Research Sites

Fieldwork will take place in Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska as well as in cruise ship ports of call. Research will be conducted on trains and cruise ships, and in galleries, museums and cultural centers.

Techniques

This research will employ primarily qualitative and ethnographic research techniques. In-depth interviews will be conducted with Alaska Native artists, tourists, and gallery, museum and cultural center personnel. Participant observation will be used to observe behaviors of artists and tourists and the interface between them. Quantitative research in the form of questionnaires will also be used to gather data from tourists and gallery personnel.

Analysis

The data collected will be analyzed using quantitative and qualitative research methods. A grounded theory approach will be used and employ constant comparison throughout the research process—not only in the analysis stage. Content analysis will be used to evaluate environmental perceptions as described by participants. Statistical analyses in the form of descriptive statistics to address demographic data collected, and cross tabulations, t-tests, and chi square analysis may be used.

Dissemination of Results

Research findings will be presented to the Alaska Native art community, the academic arena and tourist community through public lectures, professional conference presentations, and journal publications. The research will share the findings with the artist and tourist communities involved and disseminate results to a wide audience.

Limitations

This research agenda faces several known limitations and presumably other limitations unknown at this time. Native art, tourism and environmental perception concepts, theories and literature have not been examined based on their interconnectedness. This is beneficial from the stand point of contributing new knowledge to the natural and social science arenas. It does, at the same time however, make the task of implementing the methodologies difficult. Also, I intend to describe perceptions and will not necessarily measure them—perceptions as reported by participants will be assumed to be reality as perceived by those participants. Perceptions will be based on what participants describe as

their own perceptions and how they interpret their perceptions. Judgment will not be made as to whether a particular set of perceptions is valid or invalid.

References

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