

The Value and Use of Traditional Knowledge and Wisdom: Partnerships for the Bering Sea

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.
--- Arthur C. Clarke

*The worldwide scientific community now agrees that an
unseen energy structure must exist.*
---- David Seckel
Cosmologist, University of California

Before exploring how Traditional Knowledge and Wisdom can be used in partnerships, it is important to understand what these terms mean. The ways in which indigenous peoples experience and understand the Bering Sea is different from the scientific western world. Accepting the validity of both perspectives is key to any partnerships between the diverse views. The following sections provide commentary and insights that are intended to begin the process for the development of mutual understanding.

Native Peoples and the Bering Sea

Scientists have been studying the Bering Sea since the late 1800s when John Muir led the first scientific expedition into the area. The amount of research done on the Bering Sea in the last 100 years could fill gigantic warehouses. Between Russia, Canada, Japan and the United States, hundreds of millions of dollars has been spent. Yet, scientists acknowledge that they do not understand the role of any single component of the Bering Sea or relationship to the ecosystem as a whole.

The Bering Sea is often described, by those with a western worldview, in terms of what it contains (its parts) and the economic value it provides. A typical article might state:

As one of the most productive and biologically diverse marine eco-regions anywhere, this northern extension of the North Pacific Ocean supports over 450 species of fish, crustaceans and mollusks, 50 species of seabirds, 25 species of marine mammals (including 16 types of whales and porpoises and six species of seals), and hundreds of coastal communities in Alaska and Siberia. Recognized as North America's last great fishery, 56% of the United States' annual fish catch comes from the Bering Sea, as does an estimated 50% of Russia's annual marine production. The region's islands and coastline provide globally significant habitat for many wildlife species.

Spanning the coastal regions of two continents, The Bering Sea covers almost a million square miles. The third largest semi-enclosed sea, it is bordered to the north by Alaska, the 53-mile wide Bering Strait and northeastern Siberia. Its southern border is framed by the arc of the Alaska Peninsula, the Aleutian Islands and Russia's Commander Islands.

While the Bering Sea is all of the things outlined above, this description reflects only one perspective - one which attempts to be objective by separating that which is being observed and the observer.

However, the scientific (objective) descriptions of the Bering Sea ecosystem are rarely used by the 65,000 Aleut, Chukchi, Inupiat, Kamchadal, Koryak, Ittelman, Siberian and Central Yupik peoples who live along its coasts and islands. The indigenous peoples who are dependent on the Bering Sea have a substantively different worldview than western society. Because they are a part of the ecosystem, their worldview is more subjective, with the observer and the observed closely connected.

Indigenous peoples experience the Bering Sea as multi-dimensional, multi-faceted and profoundly mysterious. Although, the relationship can be described in words, this connective awareness has to be experienced to be understood. For indigenous peoples, words and definitions often limit, not increase, human understanding and appreciation of Mother Earth and her ways.

The seafaring Alaska natives have a relationship of reciprocity with the Bering Sea, based on the ancient millennium-old understanding that the Sea and all of her children have a consciousness which must be respected and honored. Through active silence, using all their senses to listen, native peoples communicate with the Bering Sea.

These subjective, sensate ways of knowing are complex and multi-faceted. One gathers information from many sources simultaneously. Coastal cultures attach great significance to this knowing how to listen to the Bering Sea.

In the following quotes, native Elders describe this sensate way of knowing:

- *Use all of your human gifts to connect to her.*
- *You have eyes, ears, smell, hearing, taste, intuition and an inner knowing. Use them all and let your body wisdom help you hear the guidance of the great Sea.*
- *She will always show you how to be safe, and where to find food if only you know the ancient ways of listening.*
- *You cannot hear the guidance she gives if you are filled with thoughts.*
- *Thoughts can interfere with hearing what she is saying.*
- *She communicates through your heart and inner knowing, and so you must stay in touch with these parts of you or you will miss it.*
- *Feel her movement and rhythms-like the human body, each part of the Sea is different and moves according to the circumstances. This knowledge can help you know what to do.*
- *Watch the changes in her color at different times of the day, different times of the seasons, in different locations, and in different weather conditions.*
- *Smell the difference in her essence near shore and offshore, and in different times of the year.*
- *Feel the textures of the water because it is different under different circumstances.*

- *Watch the animals-where and how they move, because they are doing so in response to what she is saying to them.*
- *All of these ways are her language and the way she will speak to you. Clear the mind of any thoughts and she will fill you with a deeper understanding of her teachings and the mystery of all Creation.*
- *Know that to understand and connect with her, you must know yourself first, in the deepest way, otherwise your understanding will always be superficial. If you do not have proper respect for her, you will die or you will not find food. She will give warnings to you before she acts in a way that might hurt you, because her nature is compassionate. If you do not hear these warnings, it is your doing, not hers. Understand that she is part of the Great Mystery, and thus can never be fully known or understood.*

The lessons teach how to read winds, tides, currents, color, smell, movement, texture, sound and animal behavior in a holistic manner, and in the context of different times of day, different seasons and different weather. For indigenous peoples, everything is connected and no one part, including the people themselves, is more important than any other part.

In return for such nurturing, sustenance and wisdom the Sea provides, indigenous peoples honor her through stories, dances, art, storytelling, ceremony and song. The hunters return parts of the animals (that have given of themselves) back to the Sea, so the animal's spirit may return again to take physical form. Prayers are said for her. Offerings are made in the spirit of reciprocity, so she can continue to provide for the health and well being of her people.

Interestingly, the lessons learned from the Sea are just beginning to be validated by modern day quantum physics. Coastal indigenous peoples understand that all parts of the Bering Sea are connected. The relationships between these parts are complex, in a constant state of flux and always striving to achieve equilibrium. As in the chaos theory, outcomes can never be truly predicted, except in the broadest sense, because of the limitless variables involved.

In addition, the Bering Sea is more than the sum of its parts, because the parts act synergistically. Every part affects every other part making it impossible to isolate any single component to understand the whole. These aspects may not be articulated in words, but all can be found in the context of the cultures, teachings and ways of living of coastal peoples.

The Bering Sea is more than a physical body of water. She has moods and emotions. Elders teach that one must be aware of what mood the Bering Sea is in and therefore the emotion that will manifest, be it calm, anger, rage, tempestuousness or playfulness. To the watchful, she gives notice of her impending emotions. Those who do not heed her moods can end in disaster.

Annually, an average of 17 commercial fishing boats sink into her depths. She can create waves as high as 60 feet in a short time. She goes from flat calm waters to 10-foot seas in 15 minutes.

The Bering Sea's moods and emotions can be profoundly touching. Her magic is in her color, movement, rhythm, sound and smell. It's as if the Sea connects with and speaks directly to the salty water that is the major component of human bodies. She echoes human feelings of joy, melancholy, playfulness, introspection, awe and childlike wonder. She brings back memories through experience of the familiar. Her endless mystery fosters a feeling of humility and reverence. Her rhythms teach about cycles and how to create music and dance.

Living with the Sea affects a person's place in the universe. Through her, there's a connection with the spiritual in all Creation and she can be a spiritual guide.

Young natives are immersed in the cultural environment based on the Bering Sea. Youths, taken hunting and fishing, observe the actions and behavior of the adults. The lessons: how to be man-quiet, observant, respectful, present in the moment, alert, aware, caring for others, supportive, cooperative, patient and intuitive. They learn how to respect and honor animals. The ethic of sharing what is taken, and giving back in return for what is taken is emphasized.

Going out into the Bering Sea with the adults is a rite of passage of adolescence; bringing home food from the first hunt or first fish caught is a rite of passage into manhood. Girls learn the same qualities of patience, caring, sharing, paying attention, being respectful and cooperative in the gathering, care, preparation, cooking and serving of natural foods taken by the women on the shoreline or brought home by the hunters. All children learn the spirit of cooperation essential for survival and the well-being of the Bering Sea, wildlife and human beings. They become true stewards and WisdomKeepers.

Through culture and experience, Russian and Alaska Natives come to know the Bering Sea. It is a knowing that is subjective and objective, physical and spiritual, scientific and intuitive, external and internal. The Bering Sea is provider, teacher, mother of culture, father of physical and emotional sustenance, and guide into the mysteries of Creation and self-knowing.

Today the Bering Sea is in trouble. Populations of many species of fish, seabirds and marine mammals are plummeting. Among the victims: four species of eider, two species of murres, two species of kittiwakes, red-faced cormorants, northern fur seals, steller sea lions, harbor seals, spotted seals, sea otters, salmon, herring, sandlance, capelin, and pollock.

The magnitude of these declines threaten the viability of the coastal cultures, economies and ways of life. The pattern is similar to what is happening to the rainforest cultures of South America from deforestation of their lands. Scientists and environmentalists ponder

the cause for these severe and sustained declines while Bering Sea natives worry that their way of life may disappear.

In the end, the best response to the crisis may be a combination of the traditional knowledge and wisdom of the Bering Sea peoples with the western ways of objective science. The Elders teach that *nothing is created outside until it is first created inside*. Perhaps humility in the face of the unknown and the unknowable is something that must be restored. Ultimately, there may be little humans can do to restore or control any part of this mystery called the Bering Sea. However, human beings can learn to live in harmony with it.