

Kelwaq: alerting the community to danger

By Michael Bradley & Tara Melinkovich

St. Lawrence Island lies between Alaska and Siberia in the Bering Sea and is one of the most remote, yet exotic, places on earth. It is a haven for walrus and nearly three million sea birds that nest during the summer. It is also the home to about 1,400 Siberian Yupik Eskimos who maintain a traditional lifestyle. Bowhead whales, seal, walrus, reindeer, and fish make up the traditional diet.

Isolation has helped residents maintain their traditional culture. Most residents are bilingual, but Siberian Yupik, a language shared by residents of northeast Siberia, is the primary language. The island has been inhabited for at least 2,000 years.

Survival in the Arctic is always precarious. Starvation is no longer a threat, but older generations remember when it was. They also remember that, after Western contact, epidemics killed 80 percent their neighbors. Despite these challenges, the indigenous people of Alaska did not just survive; they thrived through a rich adaptive culture and lifestyle.

While some threats have been conquered, Alaska still faces potentially more disasters than anywhere else on earth. Volcanoes erupt and, each year, earthquakes, avalanches, landslides, wildland fires, floods, and whopper storms occur. Tsunami warnings are less common, but could signal catastrophe.

For the past six years, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) has received generous grants to help Alaska Native communities improve their capacity to respond to and manage emergencies and disasters. Workshops are held in the



Sunrise at Gambell on St. Lawrence Island

communities, where local plans can be developed and disaster exercises conducted to test a community's plans and programs.

William "Pete" Petram, who conducted most of these workshops, has become known throughout Alaska for his knowledge and willingness to assist small communities. He knew he needed to conduct on-site exercises when his trainees explained how hard it was to convince their communities about the importance of "what if" scenarios, when everyday life seemed so perilous. He started conducting readiness exercises in smaller communities, including four days on remote St. Lawrence Island.

Near the end of Petram's workshop on St. Lawrence Island, community members gave him the Siberian Yupik name "Kelwaq," which means, "a person who alerts the community to strange or unusual dangers and things that might happen."

"Now I had worked enough in tribal communities to know how special it was to be given an Eskimo name," he said. Not until later, when he learned a Kelwaq was up there with a Shaman, in the order of importance, did he realize what a real honor this was.

He plans to return to St. Lawrence Island to see if the tools he provided are working, and how to improve them. He promised that, as long as his travel budget holds, he will come and help out whenever they need it. ■

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St. Lawrence Island, part of Alaska, but closer to Russia