

Dena'ina perspectives on River Time

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Prior to colonization, how was time constructed and perceived by Indigenous peoples of Alaska?

What I'm obviously the most familiar with is my people, the Dena'ina people, and I can speak most authoritatively to that. The way time was constructed was really centered around the seasons and the animals. A good example of that is the salmon runs. The fish are there in massive numbers for a finite amount of time, and then they're gone. So are caribou, you know, when the caribou migrate through. Bowhead whales is another good example. So when those moments occur, you have to be prepared — not only be able to harvest, but also to process and store the meat. And, you know, there's a saying that says when the fish run, nobody went to bed. Anybody who has fished large numbers of salmon know what that kind of work is like and what that statement means. So, time was largely dictated by the short windows of natural abundance of the species that people relied upon.

For Native people, for the Dena'ina, the historical names for months reflected seasonal diversity. Climate change is affecting this. There are changes I've seen even in my lifetime. You used to be able to know what month you were in based on what fish species was showing up. June was King salmon, July was red salmon and Pinks, and then into August came Chums and Silvers into fall. But now, you know, the Kings are coming back later — if they come back, and there's not as clear delineation as there used to be.

Could you talk a little bit also about how traditional calendars were used and how the months were named?

The Dena'ina had an item called a string calendar, a Niṅuqeyishi, which literally means, “the thing that is knotted.” They had many different applications, including as a tool for young girls to count the days during puberty seclusion. There were other ones that could be used for every week of the year, but the point was that at certain points, if there was a significant event, they would tie a feather or a bead or something particular into the cord. And then they were used as a mnemonic device to remember the events as they occurred over the year — not unlike making notes on your calendar of a significant event.

It should be pointed out that the Dena'ina recognized 14 months instead of 12. It should be pointed out that we live in a very geographically diverse region. And what I mean by that is the weather cycles in Talkeetna are very different than what you would find down in Kachemak Bay. But generally speaking, the Dena'ina had 14 months that were named as opposed to 12. The big difference was that transition point from the 10th or 15th of September into the first snowfall. So that late fall time was considered its own month, and then in the spring that kind of break up point when the ice starts going out on the lakes and rivers, it was also considered its own separate month. But the important thing was that each one of the months told you about the significant changes occurring in that location. The Dena'ina concept of a year doesn't begin in January, it actually begins in the fall. So it goes from the fall into the winter, the spring and summer, and then resets.

Names for months differed depending on the area. In Dena'ina territory, the fourth month, or January might be called "freezing month" or "winter month" or "mid-winter." One my favorite names comes from the upper Cook Inlet region. We would call it Q'ank'elich'delditi, which literally means "the month for going about singing." And this was the coldest, darkest point of the year when there's not a lot of game moving around. So, you would gather with your family right around solstice time in December/early January. Hopefully you would have put up enough food for the winter that you had a surplus that you could eat, and celebrations would be occurring.

For most Alaskans, we have the short summer window and we're able to get out and go on the land and have fun, but historically, the Dena'ina and other Alaskan Native peoples, that wasn't necessarily viewed as the best time of year, because you're up 20, 22 hours a day catching fish, processing fish, getting berries — you're always on the go. Whereas in December it's cold, but one of my favorite Norwegian sayings goes: "there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing," and the Dena'ina would certainly agree with that. If you had a surplus of food, the winter was the time that you could relax a little bit, tell stories, have gatherings, singing, potlatches, meeting friends, and some trading later in the spring.

Another important thing that should be pointed out was the radical shift that occurred when Christianity was introduced to Native people, along with the concept of days of the week and the idea of rest on the Sabbath on Sundays and attend church. This was a very foreign concept to us. And that's why the Dena'ina developed what was called a "Russian peg calendar." It was a way of keeping track of time to know what day you were supposed to go to church and pray.

**River Time aims to recalibrate our understanding of time to natural phenomena.
Do you see any other examples of this and Alaska today?**

I think fishing is a good example of that. And tides. This last weekend I was in a Homer and I was really struck by the tidal changes that were occurring. There was a spot where the water was probably 20 feet deep, right up against the embankment. And then three hours later, there were people walking on the exposed intertidal zone. I think about River Time as a connection to a Native way of being on the land and living in this landscape — it's a slow but steady march. It's not a sprint race. You can apply that way of thinking to the way we look at our resources and resource development. You have to be patient. I guess that's what River Time means to me: learning patience and working with the environment and the seasons, and not looking at them as this force that's working against you.