



## CAREER DEVELOPMENT

## Advocating for Subsistence Rights in Alaska

SHIRLEY FISKE

PROFILES IN PRACTICE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



Janet Cohen

The growth in the number of graduate programs offering master's degrees in applied anthropology raises the question of how individuals who have substantial (10+ years) experience are doing in their career paths and how their degrees have served them.

Janet Cohen is an anthropologist (GS-190) with the National Park Service (NPS), Alaska Region. I spoke with her by phone from Anchorage on February 14, 2008. She has been with the Park Service for almost eight years, since June of 2000.

### From MAA to NPS

Janet received her MAA from the University of Maryland in 1989. After graduating, she followed up on a suggestion from a Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) colleague and got her first job doing ethnographic household surveys in Kodiak Island villages in the aftermath of the Exxon-Valdes oil spill for the state of Alaska. The state wanted to understand the impact of the spill on subsistence activities and harvests. After completing the work, she took a job in Arizona with the Navajo Tribe doing historic preservation work and cultural resource assessment on the reservation. Wanting to return to Alaska, she applied for an anthropology job with the NPS via the USAjobs website, the electronic gateway to federal jobs. While she was not selected for that position, her strong network of references, still intact from her oil spill work, led to the NPS recruiting her for another position.

### Utility of an MAA

Janet found her degree was useful particularly in her earliest jobs because her employers (the state of Alaska and Navajo Tribe) were interested primarily in applied work—conducting interviews and designing ethnographic studies—closely tied to practical skills of anthropology. In her current position at the NPS, she relies more on her experi-

ence and work history than her educational background. She commented that most of her expertise regarding the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), historic preservation and subsistence—knowledge of practice, laws and regulations—has been acquired while on the job, not from academic training.

### Working at an NPS Regional Office

Janet was recruited to work on “policy and regulations regarding subsistence,” a broad area of work in Alaska, where subsistence is a high profile issue and subsistence activities (eg, hunting, fishing, gathering and food distribution) are protected by statutes for rural residents, both Alaskan Native and non-native. She works on “the implementation of a subsistence preference” pursuant to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation

Management, the lead agency for federal subsistence management programs, employs four cultural anthropologists, including three with master's degrees and one PhD. The NPS has three anthropologists in its regional office, and the national parks employ additional full-time anthropologists, including some working as subsistence coordinators. There are approximately 30 practicing anthropologists involved in these and related efforts. Organizationally, “we have the *little AAA*, the Alaska Anthropological Association,” that holds an annual conference, has a newsletter and publications. The association “provides a forum to share information about projects and research as well as an opportunity to socialize with old friends and colleagues.”

### Salary and Benefits

Most anthropologists in federal service in Alaska are in the GS 11–13 range, according to Janet, earning approximately \$45,000 to \$60,000. In addition, Alaska residents who are federal employees get a cost-of-living-adjustment (COLA) of 23% each year. The COLA for Alaska currently being reviewed.

### Work Satisfaction

Janet expresses high work satisfaction, noting that in her office “anthropology is important” and “the Park Service seeks out the advice of anthropologists—state-wide.” Additional positive factors include interdisciplinary work settings and a variety of job tasks

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Act (ANILCA 1980), the law enacted by President Carter that created or expanded most of Alaska's national parks. The NPS is part of a federal interagency subsistence management program and manages more than just NPS resources. As Janet stated, the NPS “helps manage other federal lands (Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife and Bureau of Indian Affairs) as well,” meaning that her work is a complex, interagency job. Her job also includes being the regional coordinator for NAGPRA, helping parks comply with NAGPRA regulations. How does she use anthropology in her job? Janet “brings the anthropological perspective on subsistence—helping to interpret [to outsiders] what subsistence means to people on the ground who've been doing it for generations.”

### Maintaining Professional Contacts in Alaska

Contrary to what some readers might imagine, according to Janet, there are an unusually high number of practicing anthropologists in Alaska. Most are connected to subsistence in one way or another. The state of Alaska, Department of Fish and Game, has 12 anthropologists on staff doing field research. The US Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Subsistence

and new opportunities. Beyond the responsibilities mentioned earlier, she is tasked with providing guidance on government-to-government consultations with tribes. She is also cochair of the NPS Alaska Subsistence Advisory Committee, bringing together regional and park personnel. “I am able to be a real advocate for subsistence, especially *native* subsistence rights.” Because her job requires her to provide input on policy across the board, she is able to see the impact of what she does across many sectors.

As Janet describes, it is her job to “help bridge the understanding of traditional and contemporary subsistence practices so that managers understand the values that go with subsistence. The next step is how to make policies and regulations fit better with peoples' lives and subsistence practices.” In her NAGPRA work, she helps the Park Service understand affiliation issues. “People have historical ties, and are still living in some parks,” so it is vitally important for land managers to understand how people are tied to the land and what it means to them. Janet is particularly dedicated to and pleased to be encouraging training and presentations to increase public awareness of these issues in Alaska. For example, she helped

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organize a late February training session on the Foundations of American Indian and Native Alaskan Law and Policy, which was well-attended by dozens of professionals from a range of backgrounds.

**Frustrations and Bureaucratic Challenges**

Janet is particularly critical of the “political nature” of subsistence in Alaska, which she believes has gotten worse every year over the last several years. There is growing conflict over access to resources in Alaska, and user groups have differential access to political power. Technically, subsistence has priority, but recreational and commercial interests wield a lot of power in Alaska. Because of fisheries’ commercial value to the state, there is still a great deal of resistance to subsistence activities. Consequently there is significant pressure on executive branch agencies implementing the subsistence regulations. In the end, some decisions are made on the basis of politics rather than a thorough consideration of how a policy might affect peoples’ lives in communities.

Having worked for state and tribal governments, Janet brings a more balanced or objective perspective to her job with the federal government. She notes the “slowness of bureaucracy,” and the effects of the inherent NPS human resource policies on the current Department of the Interior rhetoric of “partnerships with local communities” and “community relations.” She observes that “superintendents come and go quickly, so the nature of the job doesn’t lend itself to continuity in general,” making it difficult to build and maintain partnerships.

**Engaging MAAs**

In reflecting on how AAA might attract and engage more MAAs, Janet notes, “The schism between practice and academia, perceived or real, is there in the world and gets reflected in our professional organizations. The AAA is not as comfortable nor *simpático* [for many practitioners] as SfAA, with its small, intimate size and accessibility [to] members. The sheer scale of AAA would need to be changed with separate regional meetings, sub-meetings or alternative events that welcomed MAAs and practitioners.”

**The Next Step**

Janet has accepted an invitation to be acting superintendent for 60 days for Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Chinle, Arizona. Janet’s background in anthropology and her experience working with the Navajo Tribe and the NPS in Alaska should serve her well in Chinle, particularly as she engages with Dine (Navajo) people who live within park boundaries. ☞

**GRANT RECIPIENTS**

To be included in a future Grant Recipients column, submit your grant information and photo to Jona Pounds at [jpounds@aaanet.org](mailto:jpounds@aaanet.org).

**Carnegie Corporation Grant**

**Robert W Hefner** (Boston U) received a Carnegie



Corporation grant for scholars of Islam for his book project: “Islamic Education and Democratization in Indonesia.” For more than a century, Muslim educators have struggled to respond to the challenges of modern learning, politics and pluralism. Hefner will examine how social and political developments since 1990 have given rise to rival varieties of Islamic education, and the implications of these rival models of religious schooling for Muslim ideas and practices of pluralism, gender and democracy. More information is available at [www.carnegie.org](http://www.carnegie.org).

**ACLS Contemplative Practice Fellowship**

**Jacqueline H Fewkes** (Florida Atlantic U) received an ACLS Contemplative Practice Fellowship ([www.acls.org](http://www.acls.org)) for a collaborative



project with Terje Holm: “Transforming Learning Ethnomathematics through Contemplative Practices.” This project involves developing a team-taught interdisciplinary course titled “Ethnomathematics: A Contemplative Approach,” which

addresses how mathematical knowledge has been constructed within a variety of valued

systems, with culturally specific meanings and spiritual implications. The project includes researching bibliographical sources and planning course activities that allow students to develop methods of concentration, deepen their understanding of a cross-cultural intellectual heritage and cultivate mindfulness about the nature of knowledge.

**Social Science Research Council Grant**

**Sharon Kivenko** (Harvard U) received an SSRC grant ([www.ssrc.org](http://www.ssrc.org)) for her project: “Dancing Through ‘Performance-scapes:’ Reflections on Transnationalism, Embodiment and West Africa Performance.” How do transnational processes influence embodied practices? Can transnational social networks be traced through global flows of embodied performances? Migrant artists mobilized by changing sociopolitical and socioeconomic climates offer insights into the effects of transnationalism on processes of the body. Postcolonial nationalisms, African diasporic imaginings and international consumerist demands for “world beat” performance genres offer motivations and vehicles through which West African artists and their embodied forms enter into international performance spaces. These are the spaces in which “African dance” communities are imagined, and the places from whence global networks of African dance culture are launched. Through an investigation of the roles that Malian performing arts play in the construction of transnational dance communities, this project speaks to the ways in which cultural flows of music and dance embodied by West African migrant artists and their foreign protégés contribute to translocal discourses on transnationalism. ☞



**Seydou Couliba, founder of Troupe Komee Jose, invited to dance at a wedding, Bamako August 2007.** Photo courtesy Sharon Kivenko