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Learning old ways

School attendance increases as students gain confidence and skills in outdoors program

 By JOEL GAY
 Anchorage Daily News

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Rachael Evan had to ask someone to pull an unruly wisp of her long black hair off her face because her own hands were covered in crimson blood.

In a classroom overlooking the snow-covered Yukon River, Evan and classmate Victor Belkoff were skinning a fat 40-pound beaver and blood oozed out where they had sliced too close to its bulging belly.

"Be careful not to pop the guts," Evan's partner warned. "It spoils the meat."

A few feet away, freshman Charitina Nick had hung a 3-foot-long river otter by its tail and was peeling its luxurious dark brown hide like she was rolling down a stocking. The work was going well, she said, considering it was her "first time cutting otter."

Nick's bloody fingers contrasted sharply with her stylish gold hoop earrings, purple beaded necklace and frosted hair. But fresh blood has become a common sight to Russian Mission students.

High school kids here shoot moose in fall and caribou in winter and butcher what they kill. The junior high students gillnet salmon, trap blackfish and build drying racks and smokehouses. Snaring beavers and rabbits becomes routine for girls, while the boys use the furs to make mukluks and mitts. Every spring, students invite the village to share a meal of animals they have killed and cleaned.

"It's like having more hunters in the village," said village resident and part-time substitute teacher Erline Pat.



Rachael Evan, 15, skins a river otter trapped by classmates at Russian Mission School. Since traditional Yup'ik subsistence skills were incorporated into the curriculum three years ago, the school has seen fewer dropouts and a drop in crime. *(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)*



Nicephore Askoak, 15, skis down a Russian Mission road toward the Yukon River. He and some classmates then crossed the river

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It's also like having more scholars in the village, said principal Mike Hull. Since incorporating traditional Yup'ik subsistence skills in the school's curriculum three years ago, attendance is up, the dropout rate has plummeted and student test scores have outpaced those of many schools around Alaska.

But the subsistence studies are felt beyond the classroom, Russian Mission residents say. Parents and elders are paying closer attention to their kids' education. Youth crime has declined, according to the village public safety officer. Even basketball star Michael Jordan has taken notice, donating \$2,500 for life jackets and books through his Jordan Fundamentals Grant Program.

The school's success is not magic, Hull said. It's just what happens when kids of an unruly certain age -- roughly junior high -- get to spend a lot of time outdoors.

"We're saying that we can still get some brain function from those ages," he said. "You watch these neat transitions with kids figuring out what's cool, and out there, everything is cool."

INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED PROGRAM

Russian Mission is a village of 300 people on a protected south-facing hillside above the Yukon River. Originally a Yup'ik Eskimo settlement, the Russian American Co. opened a fur-trading post at the site in 1837. The first Russian Orthodox mission in Alaska was established there 10 years later.

Today the village is much like others in Western Alaska, with high unemployment, few jobs and a poverty rate three times that of Anchorage. Many households rely on a combination of seasonal work, subsistence hunting and fishing, and public assistance, according to the state.

On a zero-degree January day, snow-filled skiffs lined the frozen riverbank and clerks in the village store were dusting shelves. An occasional snowmachine or four-wheeler drove the village's one-lane road, which zigzags uphill from the river to a row of identical federally subsidized houses with million-dollar views of the river and tundra beyond.

Halfway up the hill is Russian Mission School, home of the Raiders and a hive of activity in an otherwise quiet village. Laughter and chatter filled the air outside as students scurried between the main building and auxiliary classrooms. Inside, a steady stream of kids and their questions flowed in and out of the principal's office.

"Hey, Mike, am I going on the caribou hunt?"

to check rabbit snares that they had set in the willows. The activity was part subsistence curriculum and part physical education.

(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)



Tatiana Changsak, 12, chips through the ice to check a beaver snare under the direction of Max Nickoli. Nickoli, who also works in the Russian Mission School library, taught students how to reposition the snare after it was pulled up empty at this beaver mound. *(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)*



Students stay after school to skin a beaver, foreground, and a river otter that other students trapped and brought back to the village. The students will be taught to sew the skins in the classroom, and the meat will be part of a dinner served to the community. *(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)*

"Hey, Mike, where's Wassily?"

"Hey, Mike, are we going to miss math?"

Hull, known throughout the village as Mike, doesn't look like the architect of a internationally renowned Yup'ik subsistence program. Gray-haired and clean-shaven, wearing bifocals and khakis, he would blend in easily in Anchorage or Omaha.

But the 58-year-old educator had a reputation for success when he arrived here in summer 2000. He even had a Yup'ik name, "Ceturalria," though he still can't pronounce it after nearly 20 years on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

"It's a sound that only a crane or a Yup'ik could make," he said with a laugh. It means "one who drifts down the river."

Raised in Carmel, Calif., Hull graduated from high school in 1963 just as the conflict in Vietnam was escalating into full-blown war. He entered a Jesuit monastery but quit seven years later.

"I was teaching high school to kids who were going off to war," he said. "Nothing made sense."

Hull sought peace and insight in the California woods, then Hawaii. By 1973 he was living in a lean-to on the beach in the Southeast logging village of Klawock, working at a sawmill and learning Alaska survival skills.

But even that wasn't far enough off the beaten path, he said. The following year, "I picked the most isolated spot I could find" and flew in with a few supplies and plans to spend the winter. On the Melozitna River north of Ruby he built a 12-by-12-foot cabin, shot two moose and spent a year in solitude. He heard four airplanes, he said.

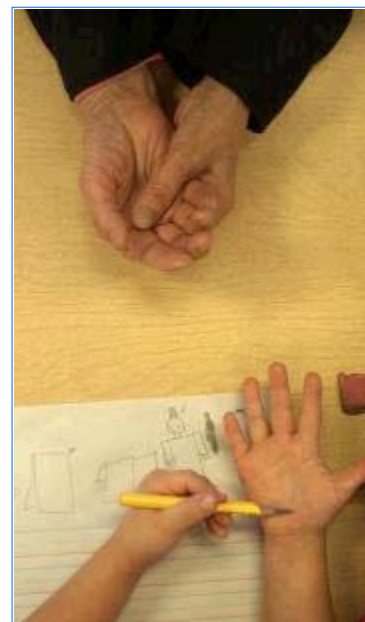
"It was like dropping 10 years off your life," Hull said. And it convinced him to incorporate outdoor education into his teaching style when he returned to the classroom a few years later in Allakaket.

Fast forward to 1996 and Alakanuk, a village near the mouth of the Yukon. Hull had been principal there 10 years earlier and had helped the community grieve, then heal, after eight young residents killed themselves in a 15-month stretch.

Shortly after his return, Alakanuk elders turned to him again, he said, saying their children were in trouble once more. In community meetings held in English and Yup'ik, residents agreed that a strong dose of Yup'ik culture -- hunting, fishing, trapping, berry picking, winter survival -- would help bring their offspring back from the edge.



Students prepare to skin a beaver in a classroom at Russian Mission. Other animals that students bring back to the village include moose, caribou, salmon, blackfish, rabbits and marten. *(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)*



Marie Askoak, 70, sits with Russian Mission kindergartener Cerena Hasek, occasionally teaching her Yup'ik words, as part of the school's Foster Grandparent Program. Village "umas" work with elementary students in reading, writing and art and teach skin sewing and beading to older students. *(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)*

"That's where we came up with this," Hull said, gesturing to his bulletin board covered with photos of students outdoors. "We're getting the kids out so they learn the subsistence skills, so they have that confidence" that helps them survive in the complex world of Western Alaska.

"When people knew I was coming up" to Russian Mission in 2000, he said, "they were eager for it."

HELPING THE CULTURE SURVIVE

Russian Mission's subsistence gurus aren't graduates of outdoor leadership schools. They have never climbed Mount McKinley, and their clothes are Carhartt, not Patagonia. Wassily Alexie is the school's head of maintenance and Max Nickoli is the half-time librarian, but Hull found them more qualified than he is to teach the traditional skills.

"I've been hunting and trapping all my life," said Alexie, 40. He learned in the traditional manner from watching his father, but he understands the need for teaching subsistence in school.

"Most parents don't have the equipment to take their children, and some don't have the knowledge to show them," Alexie said. "They want their children to learn what their grandparents taught them."

For thousands of years, Alaska Natives passed their language, customs and subsistence skills to their children and grandchildren. The tradition began breaking down when students left their villages for long periods to attend school.

"Younger parents," said school secretary Millie Askoar, "they never had the opportunity to go out and do subsistence like the older generation."

Nickoli, who learned to hunt and trap from his uncles and friends, said the subsistence classes are a boon to the entire Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

"It's important to keep our culture alive," he said.

And the skills may be even more important now than in the past 20 years, said parent Olga Changsak. With public assistance programs drying up and so few jobs in the villages, young people will have to hunt and fish to feed their families, she said.

"Those are skills that will pay off in the long run," she said.

STUDENTS LEARN THE BASICS



Tatiana Changsak, 12, huddles under a tarp to shield her from the wind as she rides in a sled pulled by a snowmachine to check beaver snares with her classmates. *(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)*



Mike Hull is principal of the Russian Mission School. *(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)*



In early evening, Russian Mission students ride behind their teacher, Casey Herring, to check one more beaver snare before the 40-minute ride back to the village. *(Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)*

The school year begins with fall camp for the entire junior high, the age that many rural Alaska students lose interest in school and start to drop out, Hull said. The theory behind place-based education is that students thrive on activities. When classes call for hiking, shooting and hammering, he said, "they buy into the reasons why we're here."

Last fall, nearly two dozen students, teachers and chaperones headed out in canoes for three weeklong sessions, each at a different base camp.

The silver salmon they net go into the school freezer and are eaten all year. They build a trappers cabin or smokehouse and learn the basics of camping and survival.

Kids who have never fired a rifle learn how, as well as what to do next, Hull said.

"They've shot spruce chickens at one stop and had them for lunch," he said.

Back in class, the outdoor experiences become the subjects of stories, reports, math and science. Students post work on the school's Web site and make presentations to younger students. This year the eighth-graders are taking their show to Fairbanks, Juneau and Sitka.

"Instead of going to Disneyland, that's our spring trip," he said.

Hull is happy with his school's progress. When the subsistence program started in fall 2000, 14 of the village's three dozen teenagers had dropped out. Today, all but two are in school, he said, and attendance is up in all grades.

Russian Mission's third- and sixth-grade benchmark test scores were "above proficient" in reading and writing, and all three of last year's seniors passed the high school exit exam.

Junior high test scores also improved, he said, rising slightly when most Alaska eighth-graders typically show a decline in reading, writing and math.

But as important as the academics are, the program also teaches practical skills for Western Alaskans, Hull said.

"Our goal by eighth grade is we want them proficient in survival and subsistence," he said.

A graduate recently came by school to say he and two friends had just completed a successful caribou hunt, Hull said.

"His first time out (hunting) was two years ago with Wassily. That's what we're after. That's education, when you take what we've taught you and apply it to your own life," he said.

Parents and elders appreciate the new program, and not just because it's bringing fresh meat to town, said Simeon Askoak, the village public safety officer.



Nadia Duffy, 11, takes instruction on sewing mukluks from Natalia Changsak, 68, during Yup'ik class at Russian Mission School. (Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)



Maxine Vaska, 13, compares the size of her hand to the paw of a beaver that Charitina Nick, 14, holds. Some students from Russian Mission School stayed after class recently to skin the animal. (Photo by Marc Lester / Anchorage Daily News)

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"I saw a big change since it began," he said. Fewer kids are causing trouble at night, and the number of underage drinking citations has fallen, he said.

"I've seen (changes) even in my own boy," said Askoak, whose son is a sophomore. "He's looking forward to going to school every day now. Before that, I honestly thought he would be dropping out of school."

Educators are also impressed, said Ray Barnhardt, a professor and director of the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

"We've been encouraging that sort of thing for several years," he said, "and using Russian Mission as a model."

Village schools are often criticized as being a separate, unfamiliar world for Native students, Barnhardt said. When schools integrate culture and class work, "you bring the two worlds together," he said.

"It develops pride in the student, a sense of respect for their own families and communities and elders. At the same time, they're acquiring the skills they need to pass the state exams and meet the state standards," Barnhardt said.

Interweaving academics with real-life village concerns permeates the entire community, he said. When students get excited about school, their parents are drawn in. Elders visit and keep an eye on their grandkids' behavior. And teachers develop closer ties with the community, reducing one of the biggest problems in rural education: high teacher turnover.

Barnhardt said, "It accomplishes a whole lot of things that we have historically not done well."

TIME TO CHECK THE TRAPS

Subsistence school continues all winter. Elementary students learn to make emergency fire starters, using paraffin and cotton balls, and how to dig snow caves for survival. Older kids set traps under the Yukon River ice for lush fish and dangle hooks for pike.

A cold snap this January kept students indoors for a week, but when it warmed to zero, Nickoli and teacher Casey Herring hauled six seventh- and eighth-graders by snowmachine to check their beaver snares in a bog 15 miles to the south.

Earlier, Nickoli showed them where to set their traps around the snowy hump of a beaver lodge, how to tap the ice with a long steel ice pick and listen for hollow spots, he said. The ice is thinnest where the beavers swim away from their den and leave a trail of bubbles.

With their teachers looking on, the kids took turns using the pick to free the first snare from the ice. Anyone complaining about the cold was assigned to chip ice for a few minutes.

When the first snare came loose, eighth-grader Kenny Vaska gently lifted it, hoping to feel the heft of a dead beaver. "No, nothing," he said.

Following Nickoli's instructions, Vaska lowered the 8-inch steel noose back into the water until it was perfectly placed, using a thick branch to hold it in position until the hole froze over.

The second set was also empty. But when students lifted the snare from their third hole, a pair of curved, orange incisors and a black nose rose out of the slush. "It's a big one!" they cried as they pulled the hefty beaver out and dragged it through the snow to dry it.

Their excitement faded quickly in the stiff north wind. Three more lodges had to be checked, with two to four snares at each. They caught one otter but no more beavers, making it a typical day, Nickoli said.

The sun was already down when the quiet teenage crew huddled in the snowmachine sled for the 40-minute drive home.

SCHOOL IS AN ANCHOR

Empty snares and missed shots are common experiences for the students at Russian Mission School, though sometimes they hit the jackpot. The weekend after the beaver expedition, five high school students and five chaperones came upon several hundred caribou during a hunt near Whitefish Lake, in the Kuskokwim River drainage.

"The kids got all excited," Hull said. But when they followed the herd over a hill, they came upon 3,000 to 5,000 animals, he said. Each student brought home at least two.

The high school boys weren't so lucky when they skied across the frozen Yukon River to check rabbit snares in a willow thicket on the far bank.

Rabbit tracks in the snow suggested they had chosen a good spot, but their snares were empty.

Instructor Nickoli suggested they improve their "rabbit fence," a barrier of willow sticks 75 feet long and 2 feet high. Every 10 feet or so they had left an opening wide enough for a rabbit with a wire noose hung in the middle.

As the boys broke willow saplings to fill gaps in the fence, Lyle Whitley could hardly believe his luck. He had just transferred to Russian Mission from the Bristol Bay village of Manokotak, where there are no subsistence classes. "Nothing, not anything like it," he said.

For the other people, rabbit snaring is old hat. For four years, they've killed, gutted and skinned various Yukon River animals, and they approached their class work with less attention than their instructor would like. They seemed more interested in jousting with the broken branches than fixing the fence.

Still, the subsistence studies are an anchor for at least some students to stay in Russian Mission, students who otherwise might drop out or leave for a boarding school far away.

Sophomore Nicephore Askoak, whose nickname, "Thugz," is handwritten on the rim of his cap, is among those with an uncertain path. He doesn't track his grades, he said, and is only vaguely concerned about the high school exit exam. It was Askoak's father, Simeon, who feared his son might have dropped out without the subsistence curriculum.

"I want to get school over with," the younger Askoak declared as he snapped branches. "I'm kinda getting tired of this village."

Askoak hopes to graduate, then join either the Marines or the Air Force. But his application to Mt. Edgecumbe, the college-preparatory state boarding school in Sitka, was denied. Then he lost his application to the boarding school in Galena, he said.

"I was thinking of getting a new one" for Galena, he said. "Maybe next fall."

But as he and his fellow students prepared to ski back across the frozen river to class, Askoak seemed to reconsider. If he were in Galena, he would miss moose hunting with the Russian Mission high school class, Askoak said.

"And I really love moose hunting."

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