

Wildlife Management in Rural Alaska: Attitudes and Opinions

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Background:

Results presented here are part of a project called TUNDRA, which is an international project funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The goal of the project is to better understand how socio-economic conditions and governance influence land use and harvest. We chose communities that occurred in tundra vegetation and were mostly dependent on land animals with two had access to money from resource extraction (Atqasuk & Noatak) and limited access (Brevig Mission & Noorvik). Interviews were conducted in Alaska (n = 64) during early 2012. In Alaska, the interviews were conducted during January through March of 2012.

We used local hires to select the most active subsistence users with a mix of men and women and young and old (Table 1).

We asked people about their opinions of wildlife management including reasons for population declines, usefulness of management actions, effectiveness of wildlife committees, and participation and engagement in wildlife issues. Some important background about the communities that likely is important for the results is that Brevig Mission is the only community where residents harvest more moose than caribou and they have muskox, which have been re-introduced. Also, Brevig Mission has an Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) area biologist more recently employed (<15 years) than the other three communities. Currently the area biologist for Noatak and Noorvik has been working for near 30 years and the area biologist for Atqasuk nearly as long. Actions by prior area biologists can have long lasting legacy effects which may sour the relationship between management and residents for many years. Lastly, the land ownership and isolation differ among the communities with Atqasuk being the smallest, most remote, and surrounded by one major land owner (Figure 1).

Results:

Conservation and population dynamics

Noatak and Brevig Mission showed the strongest support for reducing predators in order to increase subsistence harvest, 68.8% and 66.7% respectively. Meanwhile, only 43.8% and 13.3% of Noorvik and Atqasuk agreed with this statement. All agreed that it is important to encourage the maximum use of land and animals (64.3%-86.7%). However, protecting the land was also important in that a large majority of people disagreed that mining and money earned from mining were more important than protecting the environment (Figure 2).

- “Could do both local customs and western science. But if forced to he/she would choose traditional.” Brevig Mission
- “We listen to elders.” Noorvik
- Overall, the term management was not always clear to the people interviewed and some people thought that you cannot manage the animals as illustrated by the quote below.
- “We would like these animals to increase, but it depends on mother nature. Everything is a cycle. I would say leave it to mother nature. Those kind of questions I leave alone because we can't really control mother nature. I speak about western science who manage animals from their desk. Even though we do like to see these animals.” Atqasuk

Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees for the TUNDRA project. Interviews were conducted early 2012.

Sex	Age	Government worker	Non-government	Total
Male	Youth (20-54)	2	2	4
	Elder (> 54)	2	2	4
Female	Youth (20-54)	2	2	4
	Elder (> 54)	2	2	4
Total		8	8	16

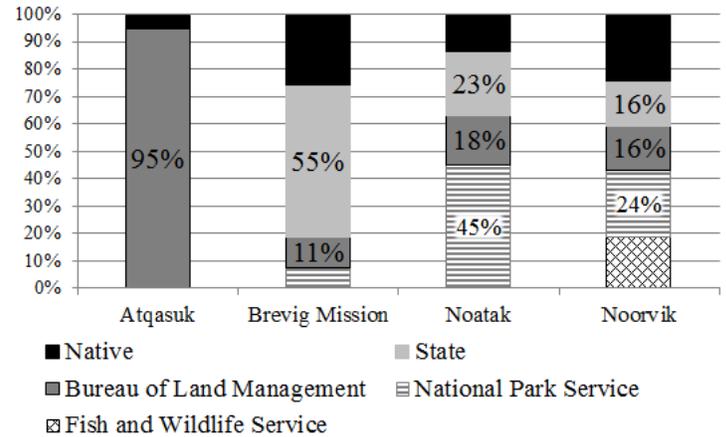


Figure 1. Land ownership, by area, within a 50 km buffer of the TUNDRA communities.

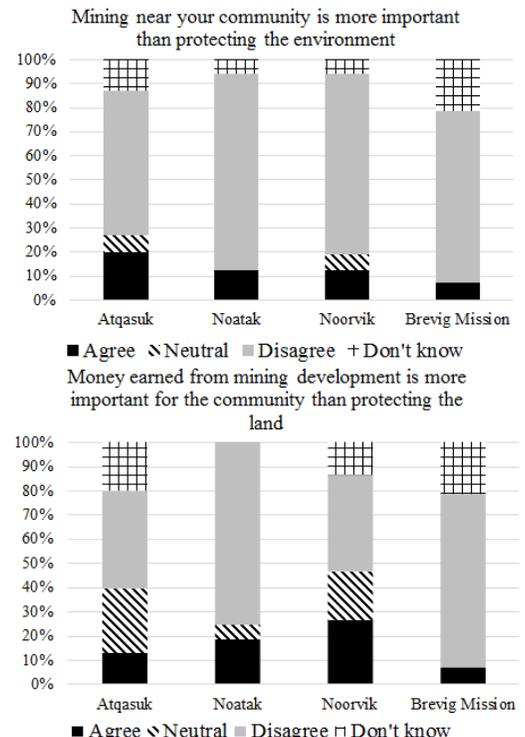


Figure 2. Interview responses to questions asked during the TUNDRA interviews in 2012.

Most people were in favor of decreasing predators and scavengers like ravens (64.9%), wolves (50.0%), bears (47.4%), and red foxes (47.4%). Caribou (51.9%) were the only species that people agreed should be increased. Most others people thought should remain as they are, but there was variation among the communities (Figure 3.) Brevig Mission has had quite a problem with bears and muskox. Bears have been breaking into cabins and muskox keep people away from their greens and trample them.

“Bears and wolves get more reindeer than caribou. Muskox like to eat plants and gather during the summer.” Brevig Mission

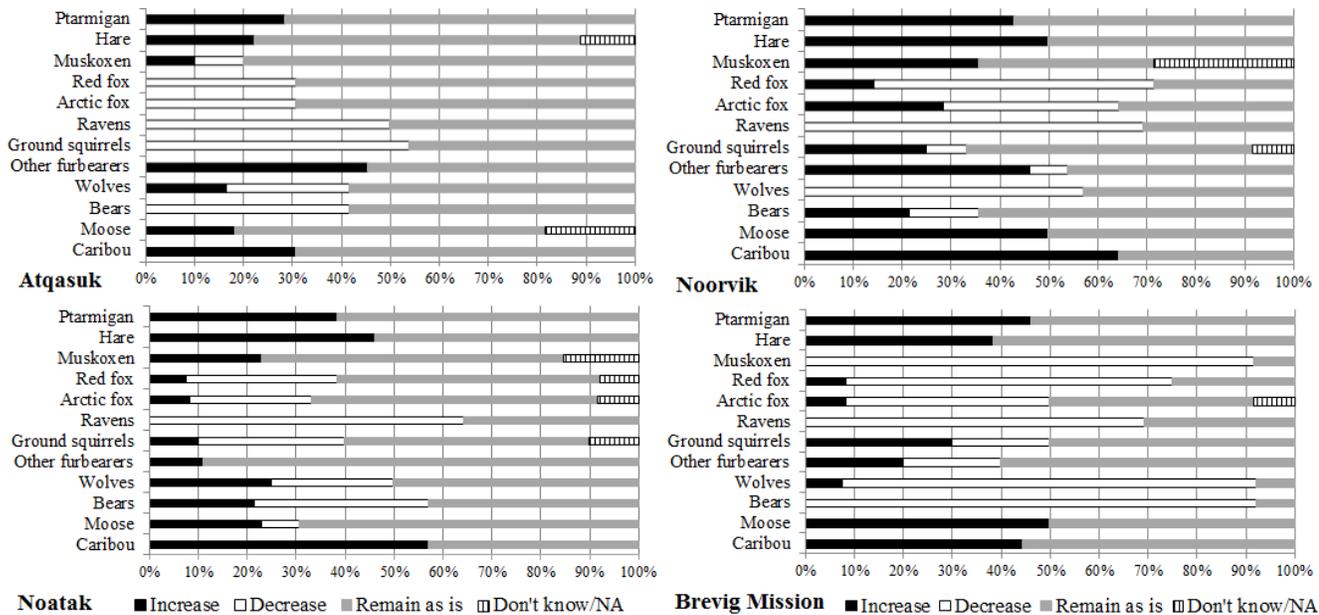


Figure 3. Responses by people regarding whether animals should be increased, decreased, or remain the same during TUNDRA interviews in 2012.

Management

All communities agreed that wildlife management should be based on local customs and traditions (71.4%-87.5%) while a majority did not believe it should be managed more on western science (46.1%-68.8%). When asked if they thought the State and Federal governments do a good job at managing various species we had to take a step back and explain who ADF&G, the National Park Service, and the US Fish and Wildlife service were in addition to explaining what we meant by management. People were more familiar with ADF&G than Federal agencies (Figure 4). Men were much more likely to be aware of ADF&G than women, 41%

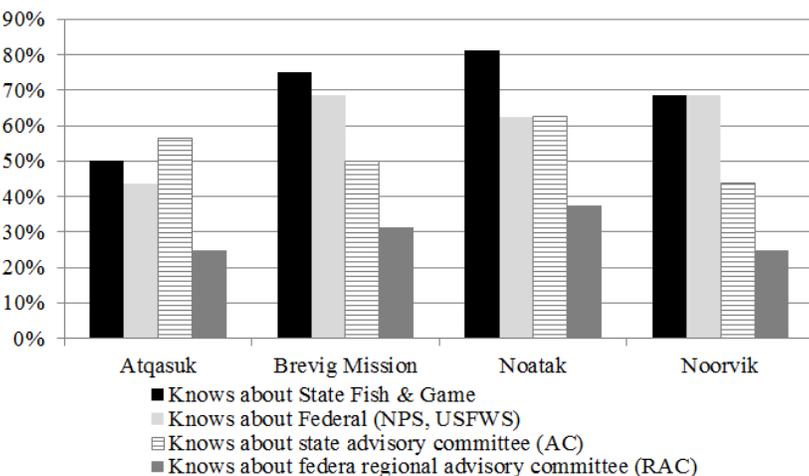
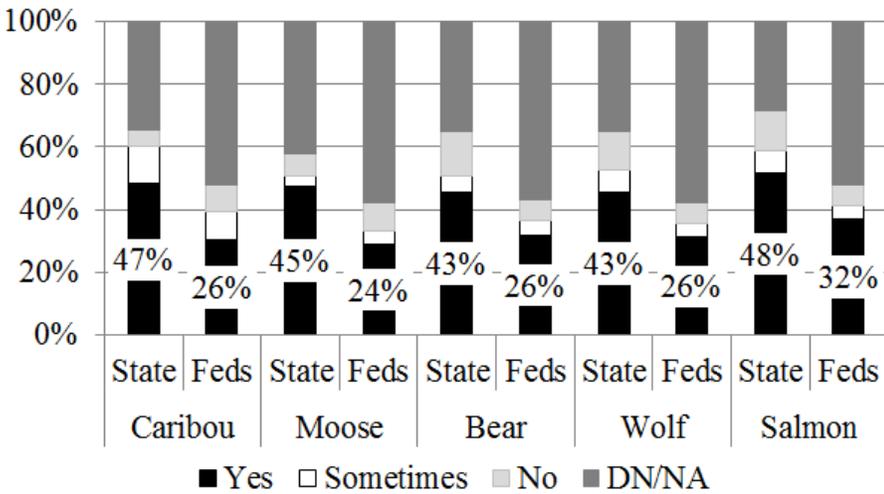


Figure 4. Awareness of wildlife management agencies and committees by interviewees during TUNDRA interviews in 2012.

- “These organizations don't really have any influence on me” Atqasuk

versus 27% regardless of whether they hunt or not. Both Noatak (81%) and Brevig Mission (75%) were more familiar with ADF&G. The reasons for the higher awareness differ slightly in that Noatak has a control use area nearby and residents participate on the Western Arctic Caribou working group. Meanwhile, in Brevig Mission residents hunt moose which often require them to interact with ADF&G to obtain hunting tickets. Also there were comments about ADF&G flying over to watch people fish. Only half the interviewees in Atqasuk knew of ADF&G. Familiarity was even less for the committees, which people are supposed to use to get their voices heard and engage with wildlife management.

- “Because they are always telling us when we can and can't get stuff. They really watch fishing - always have to get permits now. When moose season cut-off - may not have money to buy food at the store.” Brevig Mission
- “Should get more bears. Bears break into cabins and into fish tracks. The state does a better job because they watch hunters and the state workers are out. Can be seen.” Brevig Mission
- “State lets us know when to get caribou and how many. I get information from the radio. Hunting regulation book picked up from the post office.” Noorvik
- “Working group is good. They collect information from others. They also give us info at the statewide level” Noorvik



- “Every time they have updated information they share and also give comment period times. They do more so than feds.” Noatak

Overall, the interviewees thought ADF&G did a better job at managing fish and wildlife with more people reporting they did not know for the federal management of species (Figure 5). When asked why the agencies managed well or not the responses varied but several related to communication, some to animal health, and predators. Half of the comments in Brevig Mission mentioned bears (n=6)

Figure 5. Responses from interviewees when asked about if they thought State and Federal agencies were managing various species well during interviews in 2012.

- “Never get to hear anything. Either the State or Federal Government.” Atqasuk

- “Fish and Game same as Feds. Too many wolves. Good job with waterfowl, they don't stop us from hunting.; Some of the salmon species are becoming extinct. No more kinds, not like 10-15 years ago. There used to be a lot of kings 4-5 a day now lucky to get 1-2 a day.; Seals are not good because some have sores and no more fur. Walrus the organs are different. Walrus organs got green on them or something. Walrus are skinner.” Brevig Mission
- “Bears have liberal regulations. The State and Feds have to do what they have to do - dealing with animals, people, hunters, photographs. They are using western science and doing a job that is mandated to them. Feds - more active in working with tribes. Feds trying to do more co-management. Both have very stringent enforcement.” Brevig Mission
- “Feds don't live up here so they don't have knowledge of how we live up here. Do what they have to do whether it's for or against hunting.” Noatak
- “Park service is not as visible as Fish and Game. Does good job at maintaining park. Jim Dau does a good job at Fish and Game. If we call Jim he would tell us where the caribou are and tell us about the migration. The Park Service is there to protect us and for safety. When we call Fish and Game about bears there is not a quick response. Fish and Game use to send slugs to people. No one is making an effort to kill wolves.” Noatak
- “Not really sure of the difference between State and Feds. Conflict with transporters. ... Maybe the State and Feds should listen to us about the bears and wolves. We tell them there are too many bears and wolves. Caribou is the life blood of the community that is what we survive on.” Noatak
- “Feds Don't listen to State. Feds go against State, they want to run our subsistence.” Noorvik

Among the comments provided about ADF&G there was an even mix between positive (25%), neutral (18%), and negative (21%). Brevig Mission was the only community with more negative comments (50%) than positive comments (14%). When people in Noatak and Noorvik commented it was typically positive, 29% and 40%, respectively. Managing wildlife and the people who depend on it is complex and often expensive. We asked people whether they thought the tribal council should manage wildlife and if so would they do better than the State and Federal agencies. Nearly half (49%) thought the tribal government should and 43% said the tribal government will do better than the ADF&G and 39% thought they would do better than the Federal agencies. The characteristic of the person did not influence their response. However, the comments reflected that if the tribal government did manage, it would not be easy.

- “Tribal gov. is too fractional. Tribal government is whimsical and in constant flux. Allow for people to have their say every now and then. Can get off on tangents.” Atqasuk

- “Yes/No - Yes, more people would be able to do subsistence hunting. No population might totally drop.” Brevig Mission
- “But they would have to develop regulations.” Brevig Mission
- “Tribal government would do better. People who live here know what is going on with the animals. We observe and watch. More power to keeping the guides from coming in. Guides would have to be dropped off in the village.” Noatak
- “Traditional ways are good but scientifically the state should. They are documenting everything anyway.” Noatak
- “It’s too small of a government. But we have elders we listen to. “Clean up after yourself. Don’t get more than you need.” Try to quit hunting around March. Start to lose fat and get warble flies. Springtime tells us not to get more than need. Hunt in Native Allotments - try to clean up after ourselves.” Noorvik

Trust

When people reach out and would like to know about animal numbers and locations they trust relatives, people in the community, and biologist twice as much as troopers (Table 2). Also working groups had moderate support for information, but newspapers and the internet were the least trusted source of information. Co-management groups were not trusted likely because most people did not know about them. When asked about trust of various wildlife management agencies and committees the highest trust was for ADF&G wildlife biologists (54.4%). Overall Noorvik had the highest trust (58.3%) and Atqasuk the lowest (27.4%), but Atqasuk also had the highest “don’t know” responses (59.6%) and Noorvik the lowest (27.1%). One explanation is that that in general rural Alaskans are isolated and day-to-day life is influenced by local events with minimal known intrusion by outside agencies. If people do not believe that these agencies are influencing them then it may be their default to trust them. Unless given a reason to not trust, people in rural Alaska trust. This is advantageous for wildlife managers because rather than having to earn trust they can work to maintain trust. Even though several interviewees in Brevig Mission were not happy with wildlife management, nearly 50% of interviewees still trust management. The conflict between user groups near the control use area in Noatak could be a reason for the lower trust in Noatak than Noorvik even though they have the same area biologist.

Table 2. Percent of people who said they trusted these sources for information about wildlife numbers and locations.

Source	Yes (%)
Other people in household	84.4
Hunters from the community	82.8
Hunters from outside the community	45.3
Elders who still hunt	85.9
Elders who hunted but no longer hunt	76.6
Newspapers/internet	20.3
Trust biologist for animal numbers	48.4
Trust troopers for animal numbers	23.4
Trust working group for numbers	50.0
Co-management groups	32.8

Adaptation

If caribou or moose populations decline to the point where it is difficult for residents to obtain their preferred species, the most popular response was to use another resource (25%), followed by increase effort (18%) and purchasing food from the store (16%).

- “Travel further to get caribou” Atqasuk
- “Use other resources like walrus, seals and fish.” Brevig Mission
- “Try to put away more fish.” Noatak

Harvest of subsistence foods becomes even more important when the price of food in the stores increase because 62.1% of interviewees said they would need to do more subsistence activities to offset the increased cost of store food. When asked about whether changes could be made to help with subsistence harvest, people said the following things:

- “More local representation. One person represents 2-3 villages. Need 1 person for each village. Each village is so different.” Noatak
- “Should be more serious about sports hunting regulations.” Atqasuk
- “Moose season, when they first open, they let us hunt the females. Another 30 days would give us more time. People that work anyway.” Brevig Mission
- “Like to see Noatak and Kivalina to select their own subsistence committee and give their input on mining. It is the other way around. They select the people and give away power.” Noatak
- “No, because they support subsistence in our villages.” Noorvik
- “Sharing more information about rules, regs, and also animal numbers and health. NW Arctic borough - mapping project - Zach should to RAC and AC meetings and explain the project.” Noorvik
- “IRA needs to get more involved with subsistence with the city. In the last few years IRA has not be involved in it.” Noorvik

Thank you for talking the time to read this and to the tribal councils, interviewees, University of Alaska Fairbanks, and University of Tromsø, Norway. If you have any questions or comments please feel free to contact me at either my email (jischmidt0@gmail.com) or cell (907-750-3750).