GWICH'IN ATHABASKAN PLACE NAMES OF THE UPPER YUKON-PORCUPINE REGION, ALASKA: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Technical Paper Number 83

Contributed by residents of:

Arctic Village, Birch Creek, Chalkyitsik, Fort Yukon and Venetie

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CONTENTS

Page

List of Contributors iii

List of Figures iv

List of Tables iv

List of Maps iv

Introduction 1

Purpose 2

Methodology 4

Limitations 6

Place Name Classifications and Meanings 7

Names which describe fauna or faunal activities 7

Names associated with particular individuals 8

Names associated with flora 8

Names associated with material culture 9

Names associated with historical events 9

Names associated with mythological events 10

Purely descriptive names 10

Metaphorical names 10

Names borrowed from other languages 11

Unanalyzable or opaque names 11

Discussion 11

The Need for Further Research 13

References Cited 15

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LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 1. Location of study communities in the Upper Yukon-Porcupine region. 2

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Summary of community demographic characteristics and place names documentation. 5

LIST OF MAPS (IN ENVELOPE)

Map 1. Gwich'in Athabaskan Place Names for Arctic Village, Alaska.

Map 2. Gwich'in Athabaskan Place Names for Birch Creek, Alaska.

Map 3A. Gwich'in Athabaskan Place Names for Chalkyitsik, Alaska (U.S. Geological Survey 1:250,000 series maps).

Map 3B. Gwich'in Athabaskan Place Names for Chalkyitsik, Alaska (Canadian National Topographic System 1:250,000 series maps).

Map 4. Gwich'in Athabaskan Place Names for Fort Yukon, Alaska.

Map 5. Gwich'in Athabaskan Place Names for Venetie, Alaska.

INTRODUCTION

Documentation of Gwich'in Athabaskan place names for the Upper Yukon-Porcupine region of Alaska was initially undertaken by the Division of Subsistence as one component of a broader research project describing regional subsistence land use (Caulfield 1983).[1] Research activities, including the recording of place names, spanned from 1980 to 1983 and were primarily designed to describe subsistence land use patterns for the communities of Arctic Village, Birch Creek, Chalkyitsik, Fort Yukon, and Venetie (Figure 1).

This summary statement accompanies preliminary maps depicting documented place names for these five study communities and outlines: 1) the purposes for documenting the names; 2) the methodology utilized in recording, transcribing, and translating the place names; 3) qualifiers and limitations which must accompany use of the maps; 4) general categories of place name meanings using a classification system suggested by Ritter (1976); and 5) the pertinence of Native place names to addressing contemporary land and resource issues in the Upper Yukon-Porcupine region of Alaska.

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[1] The Native word Gwich'in is used in this paper instead of the anglicized spelling 'Kutchin'. Gwich'in is generally translated as 'people who live at a certain place' (Ritter 1976). It usually appears after a Native term specifying a particular band, such as Draanjik Gwich'in ('people of the Black River' referring to those who now generally live in Chalkyitsik).

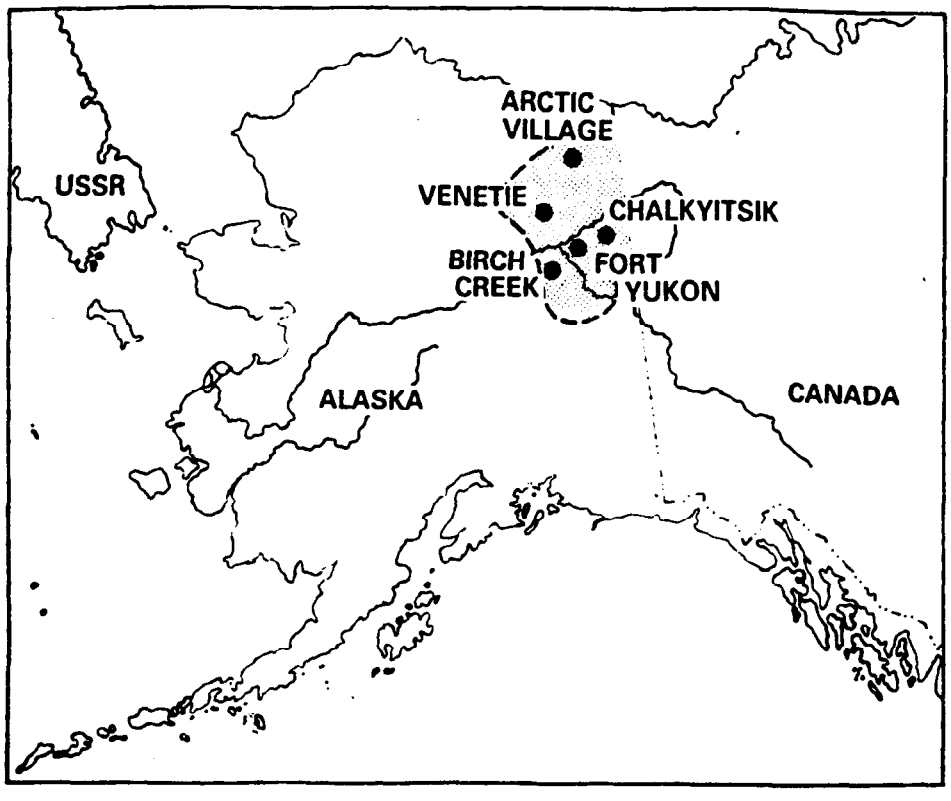


Figure 1. Location of study communities in the Upper Yukon-Porcupine Region.

PURPOSE

Implicit in the research design for documenting land use was the premise that in order to be adequately understood, contemporary use patterns must be viewed in the context of historic and prehistoric patterns. While published sources provide some documentation of historic and contemporary land use patterns, researchers have increasingly begun to realize the value and significance of the distinctive oral traditions of Native peoples as a source of knowledge (for further discussion see Cruikshank 1981).

Data derived from Native-named places -- or toponyms -- have proven to be valuable in understanding historic and contemporary land use; floral and faunal resources; prehistoric, historic and contemporary resource use patterns; folklore and local history; and material culture (Jetté 1910; Stager 1974; Ritter 1976; Arima 1976; Andrews 1977; Bane 1977; Kalifornsky 1977; Kari 1978; Nelson, Mautner and Bane 1978; Sidney 1980; Tom 1981; Brody 1982; Kari and Kari 1982; Kari 1982; Leer 1982; Bacon 1982; and Kari 1983). Of particular interest in this research was the value of Gwich'in Athabaskan place name data in understanding and addressing contemporary issues pertaining to the management of lands and fish and wildlife resources. Analysis of the place names provided by residents of Arctic Village, Birch Creek, Chalkyitsik, Fort Yukon, and Venetie reveals a detailed and complex array of data about contemporary and historic land and resource uses, distribution and seasonal availability of local resources, annual cycle of harvest activities, resource harvest methods, environmental conditions, traditional Native band distributions, and important aspects of a distinct world-view which shapes local perceptions and land and resource use patterns today.

This preliminary report makes the results of this initial place name mapping effort available to local communities, resource experts, educational institutions, researchers, and others concerned with land and resource issues in the Upper Yukon-Porcupine region of Alaska. The report is preliminary in nature because documentation, translation, and refinement of the place name maps is an ongoing process; additional names undoubtedly are known by local resource experts in the study communities. Refinements and additions to the maps after a review period of approximately one year will allow the completion of a final report.

METHODOLOGY

Native place names depicted on Maps 1 through 5 were documented in the communities of Arctic Village, Birch Creek, Chalkyitsik, Fort Yukon, and Venetie between November 1980 and July 1983 (Table 1). Work in Arctic Village occurred principally in November 1980, when 6 residents who are considered to be experts about land resources provided a total of 226 place names. In Birch Creek, 4 resource experts provided 52 names during visits to the community in February 1982. In Chalkyitsik, 9 resource experts contributed 235 names in October 1981, while in Fort Yukon 148 names were documented between August 1981 and July 1983 by 7 resource experts. A total of 208 place names were documented by 6 resource experts from Venetie in March 1981. Often one or two resource experts in each community provided the bulk of the names; these primary contributors were appropriately noted on page iii.

The types of place name data gathered included: 1) the Gwich'in Athabaskan name for specific geographic features, resource harvest, or cultural sites; 2) the translation of that Native name if known by the resource expert; 3) the equivalent English name if such a name exists either in local knowledge or on the U.S. Geological Survey base map; and 4) descriptive data illuminating the meaning behind the name. All place name interviews occurred in the study communities after initial approval had been provided by the village council. Primary resource experts and a local resident capable of transcribing the names were identified in each community by the local council. Participants in the interview usually included several resource experts, the local resident literate in Gwich'in Athabaskan who was hired as a translator, and the recorder who

TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS
AND PLACE NAME DOCUMENTATION

Community	1980 Population[a]	Number of Contributors	Number of Recorded Names[b]	Dates of Documentation
Arctic Village	111	6	226	Nov. 1980
Birch Creek	50	4	52	Feb. 1982
Chalkyitsik	100	9	235	Oct. 1981
Fort Yukon	661	7	148	Aug. 1981-July 1983
Venetie	132	6	208	Mar. 1981

[a] Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1980.
[b] Some overlap of documented names exists between communities.

marked the appropriate locations with a numerical symbol on 1:250,000-scale maps. Maps at a scale of 1:63,360 were occasionally used but were not available for some areas.

Because the more comprehensive subsistence land use research project of which the place names element was a part had a specific community focus, place names were gathered on a community rather than on a region-wide basis. As a result, the distribution and clustering of names near a community portrays the extent of geographic knowledge of local experts. However, it also means that some overlap exists between the names recorded by residents of different communities.

In at least one case for Fort Yukon, names were contributed to the community map by a respondent who originally came from another community. However, because that person was reported to be especially knowledgeable about place names in a particular area near Fort Yukon, and because

Fort Yukon is now his primary residence, names which he contributed were included on that community's map.

Tape recordings were made of all interviews and were subsequently used (with the exception of some names for Fort Yukon) by Mrs. Katherine Peter, who translated and retranscribed many names. In Fort Yukon, Clarence Alexander and Richard Mueller translated and transcribed about one-half the names. All translations were written using the Gwich'in orthography developed by Richard Mueller of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Fort Yukon. Mr. Mueller also made valuable suggestions about the format and presentation of the place name maps. Variations occasionally appeared in translations for Arctic Village, where differences in local dialect are apparent.

Copies of all tapes have been deposited in the Alaska Native Language Center (ANLC) library at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Jane McGary of ANLC assisted with typing the place name lists which appear on the maps, and Dr. James Kari contributed suggestions and ideas about the overall project. Debbie Miller generously contributed an initial list of some 25 place names she had gathered from resource experts in Arctic Village. The preliminary maps themselves were drafted principally by Mary Moran of Alaska Biological Research (ABR) in Fairbanks and Joseph Tetro of the Division of Subsistence.

LIMITATIONS

As noted above, the place name maps are preliminary and may be subject to additions or corrections. Because they were collected on a community basis, some overlap occurs in names identified by resource experts in each community. While the bulk of named places known to local experts

probably appears on the maps, the lists of place names should not be considered exhaustive since many potential resource experts were not interviewed. While some named places have been identified in the Yukon Territory of Canada by Alaskan experts, no effort has as yet been made to correlate these names with those collected in Canada (Stager 1974; Ritter 1976). Also, use of maps at a scale of 1:250,000 may have caused resource experts to overlook smaller, more discrete features on the landscape which may have been more easily identified on 1:63,360 scale maps. On-site field visits may also have allowed more detailed place name documentation in some areas.

PLACE NAME CLASSIFICATIONS AND MEANINGS

Ritter (1976) has suggested ten semantic classification headings for Athabaskan place names collected in the Yukon Territory and has provided examples of each. These headings are used below to provide the reader with a brief overview of the depth and complexity of the body of knowledge reflected in these names. While certain names could potentially fall in more than one category, those cited are categorized below according to their primary significance as identified by the contributors.

Names which describe fauna or faunal activities

This broad and extensively-used category includes names referring to a variety of fish and wildlife species, their habitat, distribution, behavior, and harvest activities associated with them. Examples include Ch'injik gwagaih ("dried saltlick for sheep"), which identifies a place habitually used by Dall sheep in the Brooks Range near Arctic Village, and Gaa'al tąįj njik ("where-game-usually-passes-along-a-trail creek") which

reveals information about localized caribou migration patterns in the Coleen River drainage. Nehdlįį nee'inlii ("red salmon spawn") describes a particular warm spring on Kevinjik Creek in the Black River drainage above Chalkyitsik where coho salmon spawn. Khaalii k'ǫǫ ("fish-run-in-springtime creek") refers to a small creek near Venetie where whitefish are seasonally abundant, while Ɣuk dahotr'į' ("arctic char [lake]") identifies a lake reportedly containing a land-located population of arctic char on the south side of the Brooks Range north of Arctic Village.

Names associated with particular individuals

Examples in this category provide insights to local history as well as land and resource use. Creeks, mountains, cultural sites, or other features sometimes bear the name of a person who lived there or who had strong associations with a place. For example, Ch'idzee ddhaa ("ear mountain") is reported to be named after an Iñupiat Eskimo man known as Ch'idzee to Arctic Village people. Similarly, Shahnyaati' vatth'ank'it ("Shahnyaati's grave") near Circle identifies the gravesite of a famous Indian chief. The location of this site, when coupled with other data about this chief's travel elsewhere in the region, contributes to an understanding of traditional band territories which continue to shape land and resource use patterns today.

Names associated with flora

Examples of names which refer to trees, berries, or other plant materials or vegetation types include Jak ddhaa ("blueberries mountain"), known for its abundant blueberries near Chalkyitsik, and Kiithaataa ("[there's-plenty-of]-birch-bark portage") near Chalkyitsik describing an overland portage trail across a major "oxbow" bend on the Black River.

Dachanlee ("timberline") refers to an alpine tundra ridge near Arctic Village where the lack of timber provides excellent visibility for hunting caribou.

Names associated with material culture

These names provide information about resource harvest tools and methods both past and present, including references to caribou and moose fences, caches, cabins, scraping or cutting tools, or ochre used for coloring snowshoes, sleds, or toboggans. Dinjik tthal ("moose fence") refers to the historic location of a moose snaring fence on a small hill east of Salmon Village on the Black River, which reportedly had been used until the turn of the century. Teetsaih t'it ("ochre bluff") refers to a large bluff along the Black River upstream from Chalkyitsik where red ochre used for coloring locally made items is found. Geenatthal ehnjik ("caribou fence creek") identifies the location of a creek and a caribou fence north of Arctic Village. Previous work by Warbelow et al. (1975) commented on the significance of identifying the locations of these fences to understanding historic caribou migratory patterns.

Names associated with historical events

Information pertaining to local historical events and cultural sites is reflected in names such as Ch'eekwaii zheh ("Eskimo house"), which refers to the location of a camp on Eskimo Creek on the Sheenjek River. This camp, which was documented by Andrews (1977:254), was used by the North Slope Iñupiat in the early 20th century. Ka̱ii choh njik ("horse or 'big dog' creek") identifies the location of a cabin on the Sheenjek River built by a non-Native trapper and prospector who kept horses there

early in the 20th century. Dachan dootin ("grave [coffin] in tree") refers to a historic burial site along Henderson Slough on the Porcupine River.

Names associated with mythological events

The cultural landscape of the Upper Yukon-Porcupine region includes places associated with legends and ancient accounts of mythological characters. This folklore, while unknown to many non-Natives, continues to shape the world-view of many of the region's residents. Vak'at daraa-dii ("something we sit on") is the Native name for Helmet Mountain near the Sheenjek River and refers to a legend in which Vasaagihdzak, a super-natural being in Gwich'in mythology, sat on the mountain giving it a distinctive shape. Ohdik (meaning not clear), a large lake near Chal-kyitsik, is said to have been created by the footprints of a legendary giant. Kyaachii ("the voice comes out") is the name of a sacred rock located along the Salmon Fork of the Black River.

Purely descriptive names

Place names in this category may be simply descriptive of local geo-graphical or vegetative features, such as Han geeraatąii ("trail that passes a river") or Kihtr'uu choh ("big bare-topped mountain"). However, such names often provide information essential to successful procurement of local resources. This would include names such as Vineeteiidii van ("it-floods-over-lake"), describing a lake known to have overflow condi-tions in winter.

Metaphorical names

These names include those which imply the comparison of a named feature with something else, such as Ch'idrii ("its heart"), referring to a mountain on the Middle Fork of the Chandalar River which is said to

look like the heart of a moose. Similarly, Neechiigǫǫ ("twisted rock across") is the name for Brushman Mountain on the Sheenjek River. The name refers to uplifted sedementary rock formations which appear as if they have been "wrung out", as a moose or caribou skin would be in the tanning process.

Names borrowed from other languages

Only a few of the names documented were borrowed from other languages, but some interesting examples exist among those that were. One such example is Kobuk vavan ("Kobuk's lake"), the name given to Kobuk Lake on the Chandalar River above Venetie and said to be the name of an Iñupiat Eskimo man who lived near there. Another interesting example is Sii Sii tąii, which is the name given to a trail built between Venetie and "Gold Camp" on the East Fork of the Chandalar River. Apparently work on the trail was funded by the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) in the 1930s, and the name was borrowed from the government program.

Unanalyzable or opaque names

Some names were simply not translatable or the meaning underlying the name was not known even by local experts. Additional translations of the tape recorded interviews may provide further clues to this category of names, as would more complete interviews to gather annotations for names.

DISCUSSION

Place name data for the Upper Yukon-Porcupine region are a valuable source of information about land, wild resources and their use, environmental conditions, local history and folklore, and material culture. The

abundance of names referring to a variety of geographic features reflects the depth and breadth of knowledge which persists about land in contemporary Gwich'in Athabaskan communities. Such data provide evidence of traditional Athabaskan band distributions and land use patterns. The density or "clustering" of names in certain areas provides an index of the intensity of uses which may occur in those areas.

Of special interest is how these data may be used to address contemporary land and resource issues in the region. Much of the land used by residents of these communities for traditional pursuits falls within federal conservation units, such as the Arctic and Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuges. General management planning efforts on these refuges, which may shape management of future uses of these lands, are underway now or soon will be. Expanded exploration and potential development of oil and gas resources both on Alaska's North Slope and in the Upper Yukon region itself may be imminent, and lands owned by village or regional Native corporations, or by tribal governments, may be subject to similar activities.

Traditional knowledge derived from place name data may assist in identifying important environmental resources or habitats, such as caribou migratory routes, fish spawning areas, mineral licks used by Dall sheep, or discrete and unusual populations of a particular species. Furthermore, understanding traditional land use patterns of local residents can assist in the development of locally relevant, sensitive, and acceptable wildlife management plans and regulations.

Finally, an appreciation by resource managers and others of the significance of land and wild resources for local residents, as reflected in the place names, enhances the process of building a consensus regarding

conservation of lands and wild resources. Nelson (1983) cogently presents this perspective in writing of the relationship between the neighboring Koyukon Athabaskan people and the land:

> To most outsiders, the vast expanses of forest, tundra, and mountains in the Koyukon homeland constitute a wilderness in the absolute sense of the word. For the Western mind, it is wilderness because it is essentially unaltered and lacks visible signs of human activity, and it must therefore be unutilized. But in fact the Koyukon homeland is not a wilderness, nor has it been for millennia.
>
> This apparently untrodden forest and tundra country is thoroughly known by a people whose entire lives and cultural ancestry are inextricably associated with it. The lakes, hills, river bends, sloughs, and creeks are named and imbued with personal or cultural meanings. Indeed, to the Koyukon these lands are no more a wilderness than are farmlands to a farmer or streets to a city dweller. At best we can call them a wildland. (246)

THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Additional refinements of the place name data now in hand will enhance our knowledge of their meaning and significance. Furthermore, place name data now on tapes could be stored in computer files and additional annotations made. Review of the maps with resource experts not previously contacted in each community could add new names and provide further information about their significance. Data from experts in both Alaskan and Canadian communities could be compiled in order to develop a region-wide map. The use of other methodologies, especially data gathering through on-site visits, could elicit additional names. Moreover, detailed analysis could be undertaken to examine the relationship of resource-related names with contemporary resource conditions. Analysis of correlations between named places and actual land use patterns also may be

useful. Finally, biologists, land managers, and other researchers working in the region could put this important but untapped body of knowledge to work by seeking out resource experts in appropriate communities in order to expand current knowledge about natural systems within the region.

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