

Hello, my name is Bill Simeone

I am an anthropologist who has lived and worked in Copper Basin and east central Alaska for almost 50 years.

At this point you have a pretty good idea of the importance of hunting and meat in Ahtna culture. My testimony is to reiterate in dry, academic terms the importance of the Community Hunt and its relation to Ahtna culture.

The community hunt was originally intended to reflect Ahtna culture. The Ahtna have lived in this land for thousands of years and have perfected a culture that enables them to live in a harsh land. Everything about Ahtna culture is centered on the people's relationship with the animals they rely on for sustenance. In the Ahtna tradition animals and humans exist in a reciprocal relationship.

Humans take animals to survive and animals give themselves to humans so that the animals can be reborn in a never ending cycle of birth and death.

Without the animals there would be no Ahtna culture and without the Ahtna there would be no animals.

In the Ahtna tradition animals are understood to be powerful, sentient beings that purposefully give themselves to the hunter. A hunter must take every precaution when hunting. He must follow a strict set of rules that are meant to please the animal. When a hunter encounters a moose he must kill that moose. To not kill the moose is disrespectful. If a hunter does not take that moose he will lose his luck, the animals will become aloof, and the hunter's family will suffer. Likewise, to waste an animal, to waste meat is tantamount to a sin that will result in dire consequences for the hunter.

Ahtna elder Frank Stickwan summed it up this way: "All meat [has] bad luck with it. If they handle meat right and don't throw it away the animal knows. They are luck with meat."

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Ahtna culture is based on a set of traditions or obligations. Here are some examples of the kinds of obligations that are an integral part of Ahtna culture and meant to maintain important community relationships. Wild meat plays an important role in maintaining these relationships.

First, the young are taught as an obligation to provide meat for their elders. Without meat the young cannot meet their obligations.

Second, the Old are obliged to pass on their knowledge of hunting to the young. But if the young cannot hunt the elder's knowledge goes for nothing.

Third, son-in-law are obligated to provide meat to their father-in-law. It is a sign of respect that cannot be ignored.

In Ahtna culture meat is not just meat. Each piece of the moose has a value: the ribs, the head, the stomach, the liver, and heart are highly valued as delicacies that must be shared with the elders.

A third set of obligations is based on the idea of partners or brothers-in-laws who hunt together and provide for each other. A man who kills a moose must give specific parts of the moose to his brother-in-law. In this way the man provides for his sister and her children.

A fourth set of obligations involves providing meat for those who have lost a loved one. Ahtna have the tradition of the potlatch in which the deceased person's in-laws are obligated to provide the deceased's relatives while they grieve. Moose meat is essential to meeting these obligations.

Ahtna are a community that has lived in the Copper Basin for generations. Hunting is a vital part of their culture. If they are unable to hunt and take what the land provides they will not be able to participate in Ahtna culture, they will no longer be Ahtna. The Board created the community hunt to provide the Ahtna with an opportunity to provide for their families and to hunt in order to meet their obligations to the community. I hope the Board can see its way to fix the community hunt so that it can continue as it was originally intended.

Thank you for your time.