

Introduced Plants in Bethel, AK

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Introduction

Dr. Rita Pitika Blumenstein, the first officially recognized traditional doctor in Alaska said, "I am a dandelion. People try to kill me to get rid of me, but I pop up here and there. The dandelion is a non-native species to Alaska. It is an apt analogy for the diaspora of Alaska Natives catalyzed by colonization and the adaptability of plants and people to in our mutual quest to not only survive, but to thrive."



Oral history is a traditional means of preserving Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), but today generational transition of TEK has been made more difficult by the diaspora that often has removed generations from each other. My hope is that through documentation, knowledge of Elders is available for future generations where oral traditions have been disrupted.



Plant examples shared with Elders.



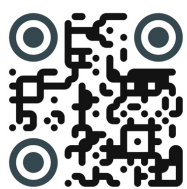
Methodology

Oral histories were conducted between July 23-31, 2024, on the UAF Kuskokwim campus and in private homes in Bethel, Alaska. Images of non-native plants were used as discussion prompts. The plants were selected from those included for the area in the Alaska Exotic Plants Information Clearinghouse (AKEPIC, <https://akepic.accs.axds.co>). I met these Elders through my advisor, Lisa Strecker, and ethnobotanist, Dr. Sarah Murray. The interviews were 30- 80 minutes long; they were transcribed and edited for qualitative text analysis. All interviews are available to the public through Project Jukebox Ethnobotany (link below).

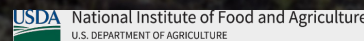
Key Takeaways

- What I want to talk about may not be what the Elders decide I need to know
- Elders are aware that climate change is affecting their experiences of plants in their environment
- Plants introduced early seem more likely to have uses identified; later introduced plants frequently weren't recognized
- Elders identified introduced plants as those from outside of the immediate Bethel area rather than just those from outside of the Yukon Kuskokwim region or from outside of Alaska
- Use of folk taxonomies to group different species of similar use as one plant type (mousefood, moosefood, dandelion, and sorrel)
- Origin stories for two recently introduced plants (common dandelion and coastal beach grass)
- Most Elders interviewed talked about the recent occurrence of trees in Bethel with concern; they identified them as a product of roadbuilding and development that creates breaks in the tundra for tree seeds to grow roots

"Well, there's a value and purpose for every plant. I get offended when people talk about weeds. There's a value there." Gloria Simeon



Transcriptions and audio recordings of the oral histories were deposited with the UAF Rasmussen Library archives and are accessible for public use through Project Jukebox in the Ethnobotany Collection. <https://gqr.sh/h6gA>



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Thank you

I am grateful to the Yup'ik Elders without whom this project would not have been possible.

Gloria Simeon

Gloria grew up in Bethel, learning Yup'ik traditions from her grandmother and husband's eldest sister. Later in life, she studied with Dr. Rita Blumenstein and received an Ethnobotany certificate from UAF. Gloria belongs to the Kaayani Sisters' Council, a group of Alaska Native women who promote respectful wild plant harvesting.

"And when people started digging up the tundra to get to the soil, the sand to build housing, foundations to build roads. That's when those seeds had something to grab onto. So wherever there was really super disturbed soil was where the trees were able to start taking root and possibly these invasive plants."

Theresa Moses

Theresa Moses grew up traditionally in Nunapitchuk and Toksook Bay. She still uses plants from the tundra according to traditional practices, and weaves introduced coastal beach grass into baskets, mats, and decorations.

"Long time ago, my cousin was fishing here from Chefornak. And he left his net at my fish camp. A few years later, there was coastal plants that grew where that net used to be...and they grow every year at my fish camp now."

Ruth Evon

Ruth Evon grew up in Chefornak and Kasigluk where she learned Yup'ik culture and language. At age 15, she went to boarding school in Wrangell, Alaska. She worked as a dorm parent at Akulmiut Cottage and Bethel Regional High School, as well as in the library and special education classes. She and her husband raised their children and grandchildren in Nunapitchuk and then Bethel. Ruth became an Associate Teacher and Yup'ik language teacher.

"My sister... went to a camp in Anchorage, and she saw these beautiful flowers that are [dandelions]. So she picked them, she took them home, and by the time they were going to the fish camp, they had wilted. So she threw them on the land of our fish camp, and they started growing from there."

Esther Green

Esther Nuqaa'ag Green learned traditional skills from her mother and grandfather. Despite having to leave school after the 6th grade, Esther went on to achieve an associate's degree and work as a Yup'ik language teacher. She became the first educator to win UAF's Meritous Service Award. Esther and co-host, Dr. Diane McEachern, talk about healthy living on their KYUK radio show, *Ikayutet*.

"I don't know that, but the plants that you guys know that grow around here, they were growing everywhere. Well, they're getting scarcer every year there. Some years there's plenty. Some years they don't grow. Maybe because of the climate change."

Amy O'Brien

Amy was born in Bethel and raised in Nunam Iqua. Her mother was a health aide in the village and taught Amy traditional plant uses, including which plants to stay away from because they were poisonous. Amy works as the Program Services Coordinator for the Orutsarmiut Native Council in Bethel.

"When I went back to my village, I never saw it [coastal beach grass] growing at all. And then I noticed that, since it started warming up, it grows rampant! There's just a big sea of them growing now."

Agrafina Baugh

Agrafina Baugh is Yup'ik and Athabaskan. She grew up in Stoney River, living traditionally off the land before moving to Bethel. She worked as a Case Manager/Care Coordinator for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC). Agrafina continues her traditional practices, including the use of plants for food and medicine.

"And so now there is a lot of the beach grass that's along the road, and also at other places where they seem to be taking over that area. So it's like new to this area. But a lot of the women, they take it and dry it and use it for making jewelry or making grass mats or wall hangings."