

Policies for Working with Communities of Color for AOOS and CIRCAC

1. Audit of previous interactions with communities of color at our organization.

Project examples are provided for both the Alaska Ocean Observing System (AOOS) and the Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council (CIRCAC), with each example carried through the document.

Alaska Ocean Observing System (AOOS) Background:

AOOS's nineteen Board Members represent 7 state and federal resource agencies or management bodies; seven research and educational institutions or organizations; one environmental seat; three industry seats (the oil and gas seat is currently vacant); and one Tribal seat. The Board provides policy guidance, ensures sustained support by the Parties, and approves implementing documents.

AOOS is stakeholder driven and science based and their prioritization-process is user-driven. As such, AOOS relies on a variety of avenues to engage stakeholders and solicit recommendations for the process from stakeholder concerns > Information needs & products needed > Observations > Data management, integration, and analyses > final outcomes that meet societal goals. To reach the diverse users from coastal communities spread out across much of road-less Alaska (most of which are predominantly Alaska Natives), AOOS holds regionally focused meetings with key stakeholders to better understand regional needs, identify gaps in ocean observing, and prioritize information products; and also relies on the outreach efforts of dozens of partnering organizations.

AOOS Project Example: The Bering Region Ocean Data Sharing Initiative (BODSI)

The Bering Region Ocean Data Sharing Initiative is funded as an outgrowth of White House Executive Order 13840: *Ocean Policy to Advance the Economic, Security, and Environmental Interests of the United States*, and emphasizes improved access to and use of federal data. BODSI includes agency and university Bering and Chukchi seas scientists facilitated by AOOS and the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). The main goals of BODSI are to:

- Increase regional data sharing among federal, state, community and private sector partners
- Provide information so stakeholders can respond to rapid ecosystem changes in the Bering Sea
- Support agency management & community decision-making, and
- Enhance economic opportunities

As its first steps, BODSI set out to:

1. Ensure that existing data on the Bering Sea Region is findable and usable on the AOOS Data Portal.
2. Work with communities, tribes, agencies and stakeholders to identify what information and data products are needed to help with decision-making, including a series of workshops in early 2020 that included the Alaska Marine Science Symposium, Alaska Forum on the Environment, and the American Geophysical Union (AGU) Ocean Sciences conference. Of those, only the Alaska Forum on the Environment is heavily attended by indigenous people, who come from many remote communities to learn about environmental research, policies, resource management, and regulations that impact them and their communities.
3. Provide Bering Region Ocean Science Updates to share what scientists are learning about physical and biological changes in the Bering Sea region, the first of which was published in spring 2020.

Based on scientist interpretations and concerns raised at the outreach meetings above, the publication highlighted and summarized data and trends for notable environmental conditions, including sea ice, temperatures, plankton, harmful algal blooms, case-studies of unusual seabird and marine mammal mortalities, and changes in movement patterns and abundance of fish species. AOOS requested questions from readers, suggestions for changes to future reports, and information the communities would like to receive or see included in the future; included a link to an on-line survey; and provided postcards for readers to provide feedback. In addition, a Community Advisory Panel - made up of representatives from predominantly Alaska Native communities in the Bering region - was established to provide community review and feedback for these updates.

AOOS had planned to follow up those activities with community visits to several remote indigenous communities in the Bering Sea region in the summer of 2020 to garner additional feedback, but those visits were delayed due to COVID-19.

[Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council \(CIRCAC\) Background:](#)

The Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council (CIRCAC) is a citizen oversight council for oil industry operations in the Cook Inlet, AK region, established by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90). CIRCAC's thirteen Board Members represent seven coastal cities and boroughs and six special interest groups, including one Alaska Native seat. The representation on the Board was set by OPA 90 and the city and borough seats represent the largest 6 governmental bodies in the Cook Inlet area. This precludes representation of the smaller, mainly indigenous communities. Historically, CIRCAC has relied on the one Alaska Native Board of Director seat to represent all Cook Inlet Alaska Native groups in the region. In reality, native Alaskans in Cook Inlet encompass ten tribes, village councils, and native villages and often have very diverse views.

OPA 90 identified a wide range of tasks for CIRCAC, one of which is to study wind and water currents and other environmental factors that affect our ability to prevent, respond to, or clean-up oil spills. In 1990, CIRCAC initiated a coastal habitat mapping program using ShoreZone methods to obtain data described below.

[CIRCAC Project Example: Coastal Habitat Mapping](#)

ShoreZone takes a close-up inventory of the shoreline geology and biological habitats. Although the imaging and mapping methods were initially developed in British Columbia, Canada, for oil spill planning and response, the Alaska ShoreZone program initiated an on-line data portal that serves up the coastal imagery and data on-line to any user with web access. Over time, the program grew to include dozens of partnering communities, agencies, and organizations and now covers almost 98% of Alaska's vast coastline.

People use ShoreZone coastal data, imagery, and maps to manage the coast for the benefit of the many animals and plants, people and industries who depend on it. The data improve our ability to understand, respond to, and plan for the dynamic coastal changes taking in place, such as increasing storm frequency and coastal erosion, projected increases in shipping traffic, and offshore oil and gas development – concerns raised by many Alaskan coastal communities, especially the smaller, remote indigenous communities along the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas.

Described in this document are the lessons learned from over 20 years of conducting this program in Alaska, with examples of very successful engagement with indigenous communities, as well as areas for improvement. Because the Alaska ShoreZone program is a partnership, different sections of coastline were mapped during different years and funded by different entities – depending on need and availability of funds, which meant that varying levels of community outreach were conducted depending on funds and sponsoring organization.

Engagement with indigenous communities included:

- Outreach during the planning stages of several ShoreZone surveys led to a request by southeast Alaska tribes that data be collected on shoreline archaeological sites such as canoe runs, clam gardens, and clam middens.
- Outreach to indigenous communities in western Alaska led to requests that the ShoreZone team provide a “Coastal Vulnerability Module” that included a shoreline stability index, a flood sensitivity index, and a thaw sensitivity index.
- Outreach to two indigenous communities on the large and very remote St. Lawrence Island took place several months prior to the planned surveys to discuss with community members the survey methods and receive input on their local concerns related to their coastal environment.
- For ShoreZone surveys on the north slope of Alaska, the funding agency hired an Alaska Native to help with public outreach and scheduling of the survey, which included community stays throughout the several day survey.
- For several Gulf of Alaska indigenous communities, the ShoreZone team offered community presentations while the survey teams were in the area to demonstrate how they would be able to access and use the data once the mapping was completed and served on-line.

2. What worked well in these interactions?

AOOS Project Example: The Bering Region Ocean Data Sharing Initiative (BODSI)

- The remote communities now have access to on-line data, visualizations, and maps on environmental indicators and ecosystem components. Some of the tribes and village associations which have hired their own scientific staff, now have easier access to data that can provide context for interpreting traditional knowledge, local observations, and other data.
- The communities will receive highlights of indicators of concern, with summaries of status and trends data. AOOS acknowledged that the Science Updates are not comprehensive; there is still much that is unknown and some data are incomplete; and that there are challenges to covering every species for each region. They also noted that, though, scientists often must focus on species important to resource managers to protect, rebuild and sustain marine ecosystems, they were also collecting and compiling information they thought would be important to communities.
- Communication among AOOS staff and leaders of several indigenous communities and tribal governments have led to the beginning of deeper conversations (described below).

- An integral component of engagement with Alaska Native organizations/communities is relationship building in the community. The global pandemic has severely hampered this with travel restrictions. We are hoping with the successful rollout of vaccinations in villages, this will help AOOS to make these trips and engage more effectively.

CIRCAC Project Example: Alaska ShoreZone Coastal Habitat Mapping

- Several southeast Alaska tribes received imagery and mapped coastal archaeological data; data that is not normally a part of ShoreZone protocols. With early discussions during the planning stages, the communities were able to train the survey geologist and biologist to identify key features. As well, they had the time to communicate their concerns about sensitive information being integrated with the rest of the ShoreZone data that is available to the public on-line, so alternate ways of accessing the data were provided.
- Coastal communities in western Alaska received information on coastal vulnerability, which was previously not a standard deliverable of the ShoreZone program. The data are useful for planning and for relaying quantitative data to agencies and policy-makers who often don't incorporate traditional knowledge and observations into their analyses. For the coastline near the Inupiat community of Kotebue, the requested additional ShoreZone data showed that more than 45% of the coast has high flooding sensitivity (>50m storm surge inundation) and about 40% of the coast has high thaw settlement sensitivity (>25% thaw lake in backshore).
- During the community meetings in Savoonga and in Gambell on Saint Lawrence Island, one community leader said that they appreciated the effort because they often felt "transparent" to many agencies and researchers who do work in their area. They've even had helicopters fly the 160 miles across the ocean to the island, set the helicopter down on their land, deploy instruments, and leave - without stopping at the villages or providing information on what they were doing. The ShoreZone project gained the full support of the leadership in both communities after determining that the proposed timing of the helicopter operations was ideal for minimizing impacts on subsistence activities after Walrus-season (ends late-June) and before Seal-season (starts mid-August).
- By visiting villages during several Gulf of Alaska ShoreZone surveys, the survey teams gained experience describing their technical survey and mapping methods to non-experts and gained an appreciation for how important local knowledge can be. Even something as simple as letting village children climb around in the helicopter was a great way to interact with the community and offered opportunities to connect with village leaders while the children played.

3. What did not work well, how can this be better addressed in future plans, and are there ways to improve the outcome of projects already undertaken?

AOOS: The Bering Region Ocean Data Sharing Initiative (BODSI)

- In the summer of 2020, a letter went out from groups representing tribes, villages, communities, and elders in the Bering Sea and Bering Strait regions¹ to the Alexandria, VA, leaders of the National Science Foundation's Navigating the New Arctic (NNA) Initiative. Launched in 2016, NNA supports research at the intersection of the built, social, and natural environments to improve understanding of Arctic change and its local and global effects. The letter outlined failures by NNA to engage indigenous points of view and traditional knowledge from the start and offered recommendations for equitably incorporating a co-production of knowledge approach. Shortly after, a letter was sent to AOOS, NOAA Fisheries, the North Pacific Research Board, and the U.S. Arctic Research Committee by the same authors to share their collective concerns with the current processes that are utilized to determine research priorities for the Bering Sea region. They relayed that they had "grave concerns that your research and planning efforts continue to happen with little to no consultation or collaboration with Bering Sea Tribes, communities, and knowledge holders" and that "We cannot overstate the need for true, equitable collaboration among Indigenous Peoples, Tribes, communities, state and federal government agencies, academia, and non-governmental organizations. As the first and enduring stewards of our ecosystem, including our traditional lands, waters, and ice and 'resources' (i.e., plants and animals), we have grave concerns that your research and planning efforts continue to happen with little to no consultation or collaboration with Bering Sea Tribes, communities, and knowledge holders."
- Comments specific to BODSI were that the Science Update Publication did not include some of the major concerns of indigenous people in the Bering Sea region and that earlier establishment of a relationship could have directed the BODSI team to focus on issues of concern to people actually living in the region and subsisting on Bering Sea resources.
- AOOS immediately followed up with representatives of all of the co-signing organizations (of the letter) and established a new Community Advisory Panel (CAP) for the Bering Science series of publications, represented by members of tribes, village council presidents, elders, communities, and the Alaska Tribal Health Consortium² and is seeking additional representation from the Bering Sea region. The main role of the CAP will be to advise on and review content before publication. The first meeting of the CAP was held on December 14th to start planning for the next publication, planned for March 2021.

¹Kawerak Incorporated (Kawerak) is the Alaska Native non-profit Tribal consortium for the 20 federally recognized Tribes of the Bering Strait region. The Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) is the regional non-profit Tribal consortium for 56 Alaska Native villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. The Bering Sea Elders Group (BSEG) is an association of Elder Representatives appointed by 38 Tribes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bering Strait regions. The Aleut Community of St. Paul Island is the federally designated name used to identify the community of Unangan, also known as Aleuts, residing on St. Paul Island.

² Specifically, the panel is comprised of members representing the Qawalangin Tribe of Unalaska, Bering Sea Elders Group, Association of Village Council Presidents, Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, and the Alaska Tribal Health Consortium.

CIRCAC Project Example: Alaska ShoreZone Coastal Habitat Mapping

- Outreach efforts to Indigenous communities have not been consistent from survey to survey, based in part on funding limitations and sponsoring organization priorities. However, all Alaska ShoreZone partnering organizations have agreed to follow strict ShoreZone protocols for coastal imaging and habitat mapping and should be able to agree on a set of protocols for early engagement of coastal communities in their survey areas.
- Although training in the access and use of on-line ShoreZone imagery and data projects is often requested by agencies and oil spill decision-makers, there has been little effort to develop training programs for indigenous communities that targets how ShoreZone tools can support their information and planning needs. Instead of waiting to be asked for help, there should be more active offers by Alaska ShoreZone partners to provide community-specific training; and these offers should include community visits instead of the usual invitations to community residents to attend training sessions in a more central location as is common now.
- The lack of guidance to engage communities early in the process of developing surveys has led to some complications and misunderstandings between survey crews and local communities. For example, though there was an outreach visit to Saint Lawrence Island months before the surveys, much of the budgeting and helicopter contracting was conducted prior to the visit. Thus, when a later request came in from one of the villages that the team either provide space on the helicopter during the surveys or scout routes with a local guide pre-survey, the budget and helicopter did not allow it. However, the survey team spent time in the community and worked out some options that worked that didn't require pre-flying the full route prior to the survey. Earlier engagement and more conversations would have likely brought this request to the team earlier in the planning process.
- In the northern Alaska communities along the Beaufort Sea Coast, there were also several misunderstandings between the survey team and community members, even though a resident of one community had been hired as a liaison between the survey team and all of the communities. The ShoreZone team relied too heavily on that one person instead of making efforts within each community. As a result, the helicopter did disrupt a group of subsistence hunters during the survey, angering the community. In addition, one community was not prepared for the survey team as the team had thought.
- In the future, direct and early communication with each community will provide longer time to build relationships and ensure adequate time is allowed to formulate concerns and solutions. Budgeting for a liaison in each community in the area would also benefit both the community and the survey team.

4. Are there specific resources or guidelines that are needed to improve the process for planning ahead and working with communities of color?

Alaska Ocean Observing System (AOOS):

AOOS is actively reviewing the diversity and inclusion within their organization and in how they interact with stakeholders. A Diversity and Inclusion Working Group was approved by the AOOS board in September 2020 in response to the national discussions regarding inclusion and systemic racism, recent letters from western Alaska Indigenous organizations, and changes to our work due to the coronavirus.

The charge of the group is to analyze AOOS' policies to make sure as an organization we are inclusive of the diverse communities in our state in both the ways we engage and provide resources. The working group includes 5 AOOS board members, including the Tribal board member, and 2 non-board members who are both Alaska Natives with extensive experience in outreach, engagement, and Native policy development.

Three meetings have been held since November 2020 where the group reviewed board membership, stakeholder engagement, and other policies and procedures, including those for subawards, and developed recommendations for future AOOS board consideration.

The following recommendations are under review to go before the AOOS board in May:

- Expanding AOOS Board representation of indigencous organizations from one seat to four seats, each representing a different coastal eco-region (Beaufort/Chukchi, Bering, Eastern Gulf, Western Gulf)
- Amending the AOOS Memorandum of Agreement to specifically including Alaska Native interests when identifying priority observing needs, and acknowledging the need to keep bandwidth capabilities in mind when developing data products or services
- Amending the AOOS Standard Operation Procedures to specifically state board members can join meetings virtually, to state that compensation can be provided to board members for their time and knowledge sharing as appropriate, and that communication pathways and forums of partner organizations should use the most relevant channels of communication.

The working group also made the following general recommendations

- AOOS should approach engagement with attention towards content and geography. Not all of what AOOS does is relevant to all interest groups.
- AOOS should be aware of transactional relationships vs. actual relationships. Building genuine relationships means showing up sometimes without an agenda.
- AOOS should avoid working with communities to identify needs and then do nothing about it. This can erode trust.
- AOOS and its partners should increase the use of social media, local radio and local newspapers for outreach to rural communities when in-person interaction isn't possible (and even when it is!)
- AOOS should pursue staff training on community interaction and inclusion.
- There should be a focus on making the AOOS data portal more accessible.

The working group provided a list of entities that AOOS should better engage with and also discussed ideas to support workforce development - particularly learning about existing internship programs and how to collaborate with them. Lastly, the working group endorsed starting meetings with land acknowledgements and provided some tips.

Challenges: The board noted that inclusion and diversity are important issues that will require more discussion, especially to ensure the inclusion of Indigenous viewpoints and input. They also recognize that AOOS is a statewide organization, and it will be important to ensure that the viewpoints of the different Alaska Native regional groups and Tribes are put into the statewide context. In-person community outreach to each potentially affected community is difficult with the small staff of AOOS.

However, the board members can play a role in some outreach activities and subawardees could be required to include specific levels of outreach to indigenous communities in their research geographic areas.

AOOS staff members have also participated in several Alaska Native engagement classes through the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) to assist with engagement.

[Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council \(CIRCAC\) and Alaska ShoreZone Program:](#)

[CIRCAC](#)

As a body, CIRCAC's board, committees, and staff should develop organizational goals and objective in their strategic plan that ensures improved communication and engagement with regional indigenous communities in all aspects of our work.

CIRCAC's science program includes oceanographic surveys, habitat assessments and mapping, nearshore food-web studies, contaminant monitoring, and many other research projects. We partner with a wide range of state and federal agencies and other organizations such as AOOS. It is critical that we form stronger relationships with our Alaska Native communities that are productive, mutually beneficial, and meaningful. A first step could be more formally engaging with the Seldovia Native Tribe's Environmental Department. Their Science Director currently holds the Alaska Native seat on CIRCAC's board, yet there has been little overlap between the two organizations' science programs.

Improved engagement with the individual indigenous communities in Cook Inlet instead of relying on the one Alaska Native board seat on CIRCAC's Board of Directors. This should include during early stages of developing new projects.

CIRCAC can offer training for communities on a wide range of subjects, especially those related to oil spill planning and response. Budgets and outreach efforts should emphasize opportunities to work with indigenous communities. Travel and housing support could be provided to participants from remote coastal communities to attend various workshops and training opportunities in the region.

In the event of a large oil spill in the Cook Inlet region, CIRCAC would likely play a large role in the Regional Stakeholder Committee. CIRCAC should explore opportunities to work with Native communities to help them develop the capacity to meaningfully participate in the Incident Command System through these committees as they are a structured way to involve and engage as stakeholder who will likely be affected in a spill response. Tribal leaders should play a primary role representing their communities and relaying concerns regarding, for example, important subsistence areas and species. Pre-spill training will empower them to help make decisions, prioritize their concerns, and effectively communicate them to the state and federal on-scene coordinators through the regional stakeholder committees.

Challenges: During its 30 year existence, CIRCAC has been conducting business

[Alaska ShoreZone Partnership](#)

The Alaska ShoreZone partnership consists of many agencies and organizations and each has their own internal policies. There is no formal Memorandum of Agreement or Understanding among the organizations and this document cannot speak for the individual partners who fund the individual

surveys. However, ShoreZone partnering agencies and organizations should agree to incorporate specific outreach protocols into the Alaska ShoreZone 5-year plan and into each planned survey. Discussions with communities familiar with the ShoreZone program from past surveys should be involved in these discussions to help guide the development of community outreach protocols.

Training could be developed for accessing and using ShoreZone imagery and data in a way that is more meaningful to indigenous cultures. By including and paying for the assistance of community educators or science staff, a series of presentations and training modules could be developed that involves hands-on opportunities to familiarize folks with the ShoreZone data portals. It will be important to make the data and imagery significant to their needs, which will require early communication in developing the training programs.