

# The Athabaskan Concept of Luck

The Athabaskan are the original inhabitants of interior Alaska and are made up of 11 different language groups. (*There are many more Athabaskan-speaking groups, including many in the western half of Canada and pockets down in the southwest of the United States, but this report is focused on the groups in Alaska.*) While Athabaskan areas are grouped by language, the people in those areas weren't necessarily joined by tribe or politics. They typically banded together in groups of 25-100 and lived together when resources allowed, but in times when resources would become scarce, such as mid-winter, the main group would split into smaller groups — sometimes as small as a single family — and go their separate ways for weeks or months in order to find the necessary game to feed the smaller group.

While some Alaska natives lived in areas with few resources, the Athabaskan subsistence economy was, in general, more varied and rich, with big game such as moose, caribou, and bear, smaller game such as beaver, and fish from the lakes and streams. In addition, the coastal Athabaskan had maritime resources on which to rely (fish, shellfish, waterfowl, and sea mammals). There was also gathering of bark, berries, greens, and roots by all the Athabaskan groups. Those who lived along the Yukon River and Copper River had abundant fishing which allowed larger populations and more permanent settlements.

Fall is the most intense hunting season and trapping (using long traplines) takes place during the winter. More game will be found if the hunter is lucky. The Athabaskan concept of luck in hunting boils down to this: show respect for the animals or you will have bad luck. Most Alaska native groups believed the animals gave themselves to the hunters, but only if respect was shown to the animals. This respect could be shown in different ways — for example, in the movie seen in class, *The Passage of Gifts*, the hunter was seen returning some bones and the skin of the

moose head to the woods after it was harvested. This was so the moose could come back next year and offer himself once again to the hunter. If the hunter didn't show that respect, the animals wouldn't give themselves up.

While I don't believe in the specific concept of luck as practiced by the Athabaskan people, I do believe there's relevance to the idea of "show respect for your environment to have 'good luck.'" Littering your hunting grounds, taking too many of one animal without allowing time for them to replenish, etc., can all have detrimental effects on hunting and trapping and will appear to be "bad luck," although most modern people would refer to it as bad resource management.

Watching *The Passage of Gifts* in class brought back memories from when I was 10-15 years old. Living in the Copper River Basin (home of the Ahtna Athabaskan) there were many scenes from the film that could have been taken from my childhood. My older brother ran a trapline and watching him skin lynx, coyote, etc., on a piece of cardboard in front of the stove in the living room was a common sight. While he didn't return pieces of the animals to the forest, our family was "respectful" in that we not only used the skins (some were made into mukluks, mittens, or hats, and some were sold), but we also ate the meat from the animals. (Out in Kenny Lake we weren't the only kids to take lynx sandwiches to school.)