

# Alaska Native Heritage Center

## ATHABASCANS

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### Who We Are

The Athabascans traditionally lived in Interior Alaska, an expansive region that begins south of the Brooks Mountain Range and continues down to the Kenai Peninsula. There are eleven linguistic groups of Athabascans in Alaska. Athabascan people have traditionally lived along five major river ways: the Yukon, the Tanana, the Susitna, the Kuskokwim, and the Copper river drainages. Athabascans were highly nomadic, traveling in small groups to fish, hunt and trap.

Today, Athabascans live throughout Alaska and the Lower 48, returning to their home territories to harvest traditional resources. The Athabascan people call themselves 'Dena,' or 'the people.' In traditional and contemporary practices Athabascans are taught respect for all living things. The most important part of Athabascan subsistence living is sharing. All hunters are part of a kin-based network in which they are expected to follow traditional customs for sharing in the community.

### House Types and Settlements

The Athabascans traditionally lived in small groups of 20 to 40 people that moved systematically through the resource territories. Annual summer fish camps for the entire family and winter villages served as base camps. Depending on the season and regional resources, several traditional house types were used.

### Tools and Technology

Traditional tools and technology reflect the resources of the regions. Traditional tools were made of stone, antlers, wood, and bone. Such tools were used to build houses, boats, snowshoes, clothing, and cooking utensils. Birch trees were used wherever they were found.

### Social Organization

The Athabascans have matrilineal system in which children belong to the mother's clan, rather than to the father's clan, with the exception of the Holikachuk and the Deg Hit'an. Clan elders made decisions concerning marriage, leadership, and trading customs. Often the core of the traditional group was a woman and her brother, and their two families. In such a combination the brother

and his sister's husband often became hunting partners for life. Sometimes these hunting partnerships started when a couple married.

Traditional Athabascan husbands were expected to live with the wife's family during the first year, when the new husband would work for the family and go hunting with his brothers-in-law. A central feature of traditional Athabascan life was (and still is for some) a system whereby the mother's brother takes social responsibility for training and socializing his sister's children so that the children grow up knowing their clan history and customs.

### Clothing

Traditional clothing reflects the resources. For the most part, clothing was made of caribou and moose hide. Moose and caribou hide moccasins and boots were important parts of the wardrobe. Styles of moccasins vary depending on conditions. Both men and women are adept at sewing, although women traditionally did most of skin sewing.

### Transportation

Canoes were made of birch bark, moose hide, and cottonwood. All Athabascans used sleds --with and without dogs to pull them --; snowshoes and dogs as pack animals.

### Trade

Trade was a principle activity of Athabascan men, who formed trading partnerships with men in other communities and cultures as part of an international system of diplomacy and exchange. Traditionally, partners from other tribes were also, at times, enemies, and travelling through enemy territory was dangerous.

### Regalia

Traditional regalia varies from region to region. Regalia may include men's beaded jackets, dentalium shell necklaces (traditionally worn by chiefs), men and women's beaded tunics and women's beaded dancing boots.