



# Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi

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## The Dena'ina Way of Living



### **TOOLS FOR TEACHERS**

#### **Lesson Plan 1**

#### **Original People**

## Elementary (Grades 3-5) and Secondary (Grades 6-12)

### Part A: Elementary (Grades 3-5)

#### Overview

At the elementary level, teachers can choose one or more of the following strategies to help students learn about the homeland of the Dena'ina, *Dena'ina Ełnena*:

- Dena'ina Ełnena villages map
- Reading informative text about Dena'ina culture
- Learning from historic photographs

#### Goals and Desired Outcomes

##### Overarching Understanding

- We can learn about the past from a variety of sources.

##### Essential Question

- How can we learn about the culture and history of a people?

##### Topical Understanding

- The Dena'ina people are the indigenous people of Southcentral Alaska and have lived in the region for at least 1,000 years.

##### Topical Questions

- Who are the Dena'ina people?
- Where did the Dena'ina people come from?

#### Assessments

- Participation in "Pin the Name on the Map" game and photograph pair-share discussion
- Dena'ina Ełnena Quiz
- Text-based reading and question activity
- Story based on photographs

## Learning Activities

### Materials

- Map of Alaska
- Poster paper on which the teacher draws a sketch of Dena'ina Elnena
- Four sets of village strips prepared by the teacher, each a different color
- Tape
- Reading and Text-based questions: Dena'ina Elnena
- Photographs

## Background for Teachers

The Dena'ina homeland, Dena'ina Elnena, encompasses more than 41,000 square miles of Southcentral Alaska. The Dena'ina people have lived there for more than 1,000 years. While the Dena'ina have experienced many changes, especially in the past two centuries, core values and traditions have adapted and survived. As the Dena'ina say, "We're still here."

In these eight lessons, your students will have the opportunity to learn Dena'ina culture and history through essays, stories and photographs. Additional resources are available on the Anchorage Museum website (<http://www.anchoragemuseum.org/galleries/Denaina>) and Tools for Teachers DVD include short videos, slideshows, and audio clips where you can hear the Dena'ina language spoken.

## Strategies

### Strategy 1: Dena'ina Elnena Villages

1. Using a map of Alaska, show students the Dena'ina region of Alaska. If they live in Southcentral Alaska, show that they live within or close to Dena'ina territory.
2. With younger students, play a version of "Pin the Tail on the Donkey" to help students learn the locations of the eight Dena'ina villages.
  - a) On poster paper, draw a version of the Dena'ina Elnena (Dena'ina Homeland) but omit the names of the villages from your map.
  - b) Print four copies of the names of the villages, print each set of names on a different color of paper. Cut them into strips, yielding 32 strips.
  - c) Alternatively, to ensure that students remember how to spell the names, have the students write their own strips on colored paper.
  - d) Divide the class into four teams, and distribute the four sets of strips so that each student has at least one strip.
  - e) Give each student tape to attach to his or her strip.
  - f) Give students a chance to study the map with the village locations.

- g) Blindfold one student at a time and send him or her to the map to tape his/her village strip in the correct location.
- h) After all 32 strips have been placed on the map, compare the placement with the actual village locations. Determine the winning team.
- i) As a final check on student learning, review the map as a group.

### Strategy 2: Read Informational Text about Dena'ina culture

- 3. Have students read "Dena'ina Elnena," which offers an introduction to Dena'ina culture. Pre-teach vocabulary, such as:
  - a) linguist
  - b) hypotheses
  - c) migrate
  - d) area [of a geographical locality]
- 4. Place students in pairs, each with a copy of the reading and a copy of the text-based questions. Each pair is to answer the questions and mark the answers on the reading to indicate that they have been able to find the answers in the reading.
- 5. Ask students to write a summary of the main idea of each paragraph.

### Strategy 3: Learn from Photographs

- 6. Print out several copies each of the twelve photographs. In a circle (or at stations, depending on your classroom management style), show the pictures and circulate copies so students can look at them closely.
- 7. Explain that some of these photographs were taken a long time ago, before their grandparents were born, and some as recently as 2013.
- 8. Guide students as they describe in pair shares what they see in the photographs. Ask them what they think is happening in the photographs. Ask them what they think will happen next.
- 9. Ask students if they see any similar activities in both the old and new images.
- 10. Have students write stories based on the photographs. Each story should include the student as one of the characters in the story.

## Part B: Secondary (Grades 6-12)

### Overview

With students in Grades 6-12, teachers can choose one or more of the following activities to help students learn about Dena'ina Ełnena:

- Dena'ina point of view
- Getting to know the website (website treasure hunt)
- Dena'ina Ełnena villages (Internet research)
- Learning from photographs
- Reading informative text about Dena'ina origins

### Goals and Desired Outcomes

#### Overarching Understandings

- History involves interpretation through the perspective of the observer or recorder.
- We can learn about the past from a variety of resources.

#### Essential Questions

- What constitutes good historical evidence?
- How could perspective, point of view, or experiences affect our understanding of history?

#### Topical Understanding

- The Dena'ina people are the original inhabitants of Southcentral Alaska.

#### Topical Questions

- Who are the Dena'ina people?
- How can I learn about the Dena'ina people?

### Assessments

- Fast-write based on reading
- Student completion of Dena'ina Website Treasure Hunt

- Travel flyer about a Dena'ina village
- Analyses of photographs
- Written description of photographs
- Completion of text-based questions on information reading
- Class discussion synthesizing information from the reading

## Learning Activities

### Materials

- Dena'ina Website Treasure Hunt
- Computer and Internet access
- The Dena'ina Way of Living educator guide
- Alaska Native Peoples and Languages map
- Art supplies for travel flyers
- Photographs
- Photograph Worksheet
- Reading and Text-based questions
  - *"Yagheli Du!"* by Clare Swan
  - "Original People" by James A. Fall
  - Excerpts from "Introduction to Dena'ina Culture and History" and "Dena'ina Archeology"

## Background for Teachers

The Dena'ina homeland, Dena'ina Ełnena, encompasses more than 41,000 square miles of Southcentral Alaska. The Dena'ina people have lived there for more than 1,000 years. While the Dena'ina have experienced many changes, especially in the past two centuries, core values and traditions have adapted and survived. As the Dena'ina say, "We're still here."

In these eight lessons, your students will have the opportunity to learn Dena'ina culture and history through essays, stories and photographs. Additional resources are available on the Anchorage Museum website (<http://www.anchoragemuseum.org/galleries/Denaina>) and Tools for Teachers DVD include short videos, slideshows, and audio clips where you can hear the Dena'ina language spoken.

## Strategies

### Strategy 1: Dena'ina Point of View

1. Read aloud Clare Swan's welcome message, "*Yagheli Du!*" Pronounce the name of the exhibition, which is in the Dena'ina language, as well as you can: it's important to try, recognizing that English speakers generally have a hard time knowing how to pronounce Dena'ina words.
2. Discuss the author's voice: What is she trying to convey? What emotions does she express? How might her perspective be different from that of a museum curator or anthropologist who is not Dena'ina?
3. Assign to students a fast-write on the topic: Clare Swan suggests that the "time is right." Right for what? Why is the time right?

### Strategy 2: Get to Know the Website

4. Have students connect to the Internet to find the answers to the Dena'ina Website Treasure Hunt. This can be a timed exercise to encourage speed, if appropriate for your students.
5. Review the answers together. Note that the answers can be found in The Dena'ina Way of Living Educator Guide on page 4.

### Strategy 3: Dena'ina Elnena Villages

6. Have students identify all the communities listed on the map. Urge students to notice one thing that all the villages have in common: They are on rivers, lakes, or, in the case of Tyonek, the ocean shore. Discuss why that may be the case.
7. Have students undertake the following assignment through Internet research. Assign to each student a letter from a to h. Each number corresponds to a Dena'ina village, as follows:
  - a) Tyonek
  - b) Nondalton
  - c) Eklutna
  - d) Lime Village
  - e) Pedro Bay
  - f) Kenai
  - g) Knik
  - h) Susitna Station

8. Note that two of the places are no longer villages, so students will have to do some digging to learn about them.
9. Students will prepare a one-page travel flyer about their village, to be posted in the classroom. Provide a rubric or checklist for the flyer that contains the following:
  - a) Identify and locate the village on a map
  - b) Tell how a person would get there from here
  - c) Provide demographic information for the village
  - d) Provide facts and information that would interest a visitor to the village
  - e) Neatness and attractiveness count!

#### Strategy 4: Learn from Historic Photographs

10. Place students in pair groups and give each group the Photograph Worksheet and one or more of the twelve photographs. Each pair studies its photograph, using the procedure on the Photograph Worksheet.
11. Have students report back their findings. If two pairs examined the same photograph, compare and contrast their conclusions.
12. Have students write descriptions of their photograph using vivid and descriptive words that involve as many senses as possible. Ask students to read their descriptions. Based on the descriptions, have other students identify the photographs they have described.

#### Strategy 5: Read Informational Text About Dena'ina Origins

13. Choose the reading that is appropriate for your class.
14. The middle school reading is fairly straightforward, although there is vocabulary you might want to introduce. For example:
  - a) encompass
  - b) dialect
  - c) linguist
  - d) river drainage
  - e) concrete evidence
  - f) house depressions (These are dips in the ground that are roughly the size and shape of the houses that original stood there; the outer edges of the depressions are higher because the remains of wooden wall supports have not completely rotted away.)
  - g) cache pits (These are smaller holes that were used as cold storage pits for food outside of a house.)



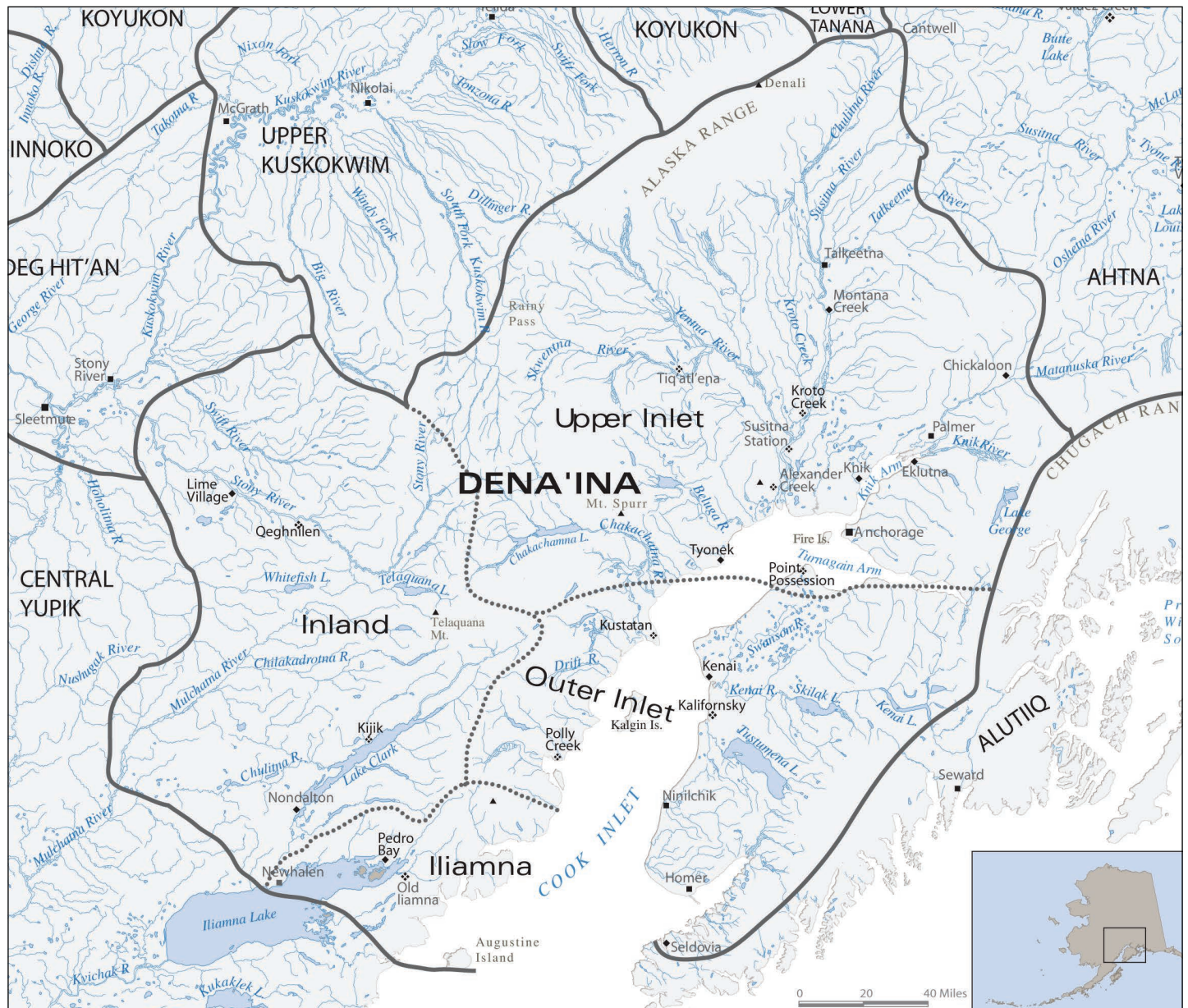
- h) time immemorial (This is the time that has no specific beginning date – since “the beginning of time.”)
  - i) “the time when animals could talk” (In Dena’ina culture, this is the long-ago time that is undated. During this time, the boundaries between the animal and human worlds was not firmly established. The animals instructed humans in how to treat them so people would be successful hunters. Success in hunting depends on skill but also on keeping a respectful relationship with the animals, such as not wasting meat or speaking ill of the animals, based on the instructions the animals gave.)
15. The high school/college text is more complex in sentence structure, vocabulary load, and document structure. Review the document’s structure with students before they begin to read. Specifically, note that these are excerpts of essays by two anthropologists that are printed in their entirety in the catalog that accompanies the Dena’ina exhibition. The parenthetical references imbedded within or at the end of some of the paragraphs are the anthropological way of footnoting, indicating the source for the information. If students want to go directly to the sources, they will need to refer to the catalog for the full references.
16. Have students complete the text-based questions appropriate to the readings.
17. Check for understanding, and then discuss the following:
- a) What do you do when two types of evidence do not agree with each other completely?
  - b) How do you know which pieces of evidence to believe?
  - c) Having read the essays, what is your opinion about the origins of the Dena’ina people? Support your conclusion by reference to the reading.

## Know Your Geography

### Dena'ina Elnena

#### Directions

There are eight locations on this map. Circle the name of the Dena'ina village.



The Dena'ina homeland consists of four dialect areas and comprises about 41,000 square miles in Southcentral Alaska. Map courtesy of the National Park Service

**Village Names for Strips**

Eklutna
Kenai
Knik
Lime Village
Nondalton
Pedro Bay
Susitna Station
Tyonek

## Elementary Reading

### Dena'ina Ełnena

Linguists, people who study languages, can tell a lot about the history of a group by the language the people speak. For instance, the Dena'ina language is part of a big language family that is called "Dene" or "Athabaskan." A language family is a group of languages that has some of the same vocabulary and sounds but that are so different from each other that people cannot understand another language in the same family. Being in the same language family means that long ago all the people spoke the same language and were part of the same group. English and German are in the same language family.

Linguists can also make good guesses, or hypotheses, about how the people came to their homeland, for instance by listening to the names they give to places. They think that the original speakers of the Dena'ina language lived west of the Alaska Range and might have migrated to Cook Inlet and the Kenai Peninsula through Rainy Pass, where the Iditarod Trail goes today.

The Dena'ina homeland, Dena'ina Ełnena, is more than 41,000 square miles in area. That is about the size of the state of Kentucky! When strangers from Europe first came to Dena'ina Ełnena, there were more Dena'ina than any other Athabaskan group. There were 4,000 to 5,000 Dena'ina in the late 1700s.

The Dena'ina are different from all the other Alaska Athabascans in more than their language. They are the only ones who lived on salt water. This means that, unlike other Athabascans, they could hunt sea mammals and collect shellfish. They could also hunt and fish for salmon, caribou, bears, and other animals inland, away from the shore.

### Text-Based Questions on the Reading

**Directions:** You will be in pairs. Each pair should find the answers to these questions in the reading. Write the answers on this paper, and use a marker or crayon to mark the place where you found the answer on the reading.

1. What is a language family?
2. Besides the Dene or Athabaskan language family, what two languages does the text say are part of the same language family?
3. Why is it important that the Dena'ina language is in the Dene or Athabaskan language family?
4. Where do the linguists think that the original Dena'ina people came from?
5. What is special about living along salt water shores?
6. When were there 4,000 to 5,000 Dena'ina?

## Photographs for Discussion

### Background for the teacher

Each of the following pages has a photograph with a brief caption, but the full captions are listed here for your reference during the class discussion.

Note: These images are approved for use only in this specific educational activity. Please contact sources for permission to use any of these images for another purpose.

#### Historic Photograph 1

Men cooking beaver feet and salmon tails near Iliamna, 1930s. Helena Seversen Moses Collection, Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, NPS H460.

#### Historic Photograph 2

Woman in front of house with snowshoes, c. 1908, along Newhalen portage. Photograph by prospector Arthur S. Tulloch. Photograph courtesy of the Alaska State Library, Arthur Stanley Tulloch Photograph Collection, P148-29.

#### Historic Photograph 3

*Nichił*. This photograph from the late nineteenth century shows one of the earliest and best examples of a multifamily house called a *nichił* in Dena'ina. Here we see a Dena'ina family at K'echan Dałkizt, "Humpy Point," about three miles south of Kasilof. H. M. Wetherbee Family Papers, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Archives, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, UAF-1959-866-26.

#### Historic Photograph 4

Chief Stephan of Knik. Chief Stephan is shown wearing a ground squirrel parka, headdress, and dentalium shell (*k'enq'ena*) bandolier in this late nineteenth-century photograph. The dentalium shells and headdress are symbols of Chief Stephan's status as a *qeshqa*, a leader. Louis Weeks Collection, Anchorage Museum, B2003.019.149.

#### Historic Photograph 5

Anton Balluta climbing into a kayak to go hunting, Chulitna River, 1928. Ida Carlson Collection, photograph courtesy of Marilyn Balluta and the National Park Service, NPS H93.



### Historic Photograph 6

Cutting fish, 1921. Two women cut fish at Simeon Wassillie's fish camp on the east side of the Newhalen River, August 7, 1921. Photograph by Robert Vreeland. Robert Vreeland Collection. Photograph courtesy Robert Vreeland Jr. and the National Park Service, NPS H-214.

### Photograph 1

Everyone helps out at the Evanoff family fish camp, Nondalton, 2013. Photograph by Chris Arend © Anchorage Museum.

### Photograph 2

Jordan Finney hangs fish to dry, Evanoff family fish camp, Nondalton, 2013. Photograph by Chris Arend © Anchorage Museum.

### Photograph 3

Wayne Dick, Sarah Dick and Helen Dick in the boat heading upriver from Lime Village on the Stony River, 2009. Photograph by Chris Arend © Anchorage Museum.

### Photograph 4

Nathan Dick, inside the frame, assists his parents Sarah Dick and Wayne Dick as they lash slats onto a frame for a fish trap at the family home site on the Stony River, 2009. Photograph by Chris Arend © Anchorage Museum.

### Photograph 5

Melissa Carltikoff and Sherie Balluta picking blueberries, Lime Village, 1980s. Photograph © Priscilla Russell.

### Photograph 6

Karen Evanoff and Mary Hobson at fish camp. Family fish camps are occasions for visiting, sharing memories, and catching up on the news, as well as catching fish, Nondalton, 2011. Photograph by Dave Nicholls © Anchorage Museum.

## Historic Photograph 1



Helena Seversen Moses Collection, photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, NPS H460.



## Historic Photograph 2



Photograph by prospector Arthur S. Tulloch. Photograph courtesy of the Alaska State Library, Arthur Stanley Tulloch Photograph Collection, P148-29.



### Historic Photograph 3



H. M. Wetherbee Family Papers, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Archives, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, UAF-1959-866-26.



Historic Photograph 4



Louis Weeks Collection, Anchorage Museum, B2003.019.149



### Historic Photograph 5



Ida Carlson Collection, photograph courtesy of Marilyn Balluta and the National Park Service, NPS H93.

## Historic Photograph 6



Photograph by Robert Vreeland. Robert Vreeland Collection. Photograph courtesy Robert Vreeland Jr. and the National Park Service, NPS H-214.



Photograph 1



Nondalton, 2013. Photograph by Chris Arend © Anchorage Museum.



Photograph 2



Photograph by Chris Arend © Anchorage Museum

Photograph 3



Photograph by Chris Arend © Anchorage Museum



Photograph 4



Photograph by Chris Arend © Anchorage Museum



Photograph 5



Photograph © Priscilla Russell



Photograph 6



Photograph by Dave Nicholls © Anchorage Museum

## **"Yagheli Du! Welcome, Distinguished Elders and Friends"**

**by Clare Swan, Dena'ina elder and chair of the  
Dena'ina Exhibition Advisory Committee**

From *Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi: The Dena'ina way of Living*.

Edited by Suzi Jones, James A. Fall and Aaron Leggett (2013), p. vii. © Anchorage Museum.

Life takes time. Things take time. I know this in my head, but I don't always believe it in my heart. A dear friend and elder used the phrase, "when I come back to myself" whenever she spoke of returning home from boarding school. The exhibition and book, *Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi: The Dena'ina Way of Living*, make me feel a bit like that.

Like many of you, I grew up when tribal life, our culture, our way of life, was slipping away. I was at home, but where did my place go? Over time, we had become invisible as a people and sadly isolated from each other. I went away for many years, but somehow I knew it was time to come home, and the struggle to forge new paths has been worth it.

Dena'ina live in the seasons, and we know that time is our friend. We understand that, like the tides, we must move when the time is right. The Dena'ina exhibition and this book that accompanies it show us that our time is here. *Tsitatna*, our ancestors, the creators of these artifacts, have provided the resources. Dena'ina elder Peter Kalifornsky's song, "Potlatch of the Lonely Man," rejoices: "Our relatives have come back to us . . . Our friends with cheer have come back to us."

As we wonder at these objects of our past, our ancestors touch us. We hear their words again, feel their strength, their artistry and spirit. This is more than just remembering, it is the way of knowing. We come back to ourselves.

*Chiginik!*

## **Dena'ina Website Treasure Hunt**

### **Instructions**

Search this website to find the answers to these questions.

1. What does Dena'ina Ełnena mean?
2. Where is Dena'ina Ełnena?
3. What does Dena'ina mean?
4. How long have the Dena'ina lived in Southcentral Alaska?
5. How many Dena'ina are there?
6. Is Anchorage in Dena'ina Ełnena?
7. How was the area that is now the city of Anchorage used by the Dena'ina?
8. Which Alaska regional corporations do the Dena'ina belong to?
9. What makes the Dena'ina different from other Alaska Athabascans?
10. Who are the Tanaina?

## Photograph Worksheet

Directions: To analyze your photograph, follow these procedures.

1. Divide the photograph into foreground (what's up close) and background (what in the distance). Study each quarter separately and describe exactly what you see in each of them:
  - a) Foreground
  - b) Background
2. Write a description of what you see in the photograph.
3. Write what you think is happening, based on what you see and on what you have learned about the Dena'ina people and culture. **YOU MUST EXPLAIN WHAT YOUR INFERENCES ARE BASED ON.**
4. Write questions that the photograph raises in your mind. For instance, what does the photograph not show that you would like to know more about?

## Middle School Reading

### Original People

Adaptation of "Introduction to Dena'ina Culture and History" by James A. Fall. Original essay in *Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi: The Dena'ina way of Living*. Edited by Suzi Jones, James A. Fall and Aaron Leggett (2013), pp. 1-45. © Anchorage Museum.

Dena'ina Ełnena, the Dena'ina homeland, encompasses about 41,000 square miles of Southcentral Alaska. At the time of European contact, the Dena'ina were probably the most numerous of all Athabascan peoples in Alaska, with a population of 4,000 to 5,000. The Dena'ina language, which belongs to the Dene language family, includes four regional dialects.

The Dena'ina are the only Northern Athabascan people whose traditional territory borders on salt water. Thus, most Dena'ina have had access to the natural resources of marine waters and tidelands, as well as rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains of the interior.

#### Dena'ina Origins: Linguistics

Dena'ina linguists have wrestled with the problem of Dena'ina prehistory and have offered their own theories. At this time the linguistic evidence points to a three-wave movement into Southcentral Alaska. Linguists have suggested that the prehistoric Dena'ina lived in the area west of the Alaska Range in the Upper Stony River drainage and perhaps the South Fork of the Upper Kuskokwim River, and the first migration occurred either through Rainy Pass or Ptarmigan Pass, where people established several villages in the Upper Cook Inlet. Later movements populated west Cook Inlet and then, crossing Cook Inlet, the Kenai Peninsula.

This evidence is based on several things: First, the four dialects are different enough to suggest that the people came to Cook Inlet at different times and were separated from each other for a while. Second, the vocabulary shows that the Dena'ina were originally mountain people. Third, the name given to the Upper Stony River/Mulchatna River plateau, Htsaynenq', means "First Land." This suggests that this area is the original homeland of the Dena'ina.

#### Dena'ina Origins: Archeology

Among archeologists, there is still a lot of debate as to what is the oldest known Dena'ina site. Archeologists have found many artifacts from non-Dena'ina people who lived in Southcentral Alaska for centuries before the Dena'ina came. In addition, the Dena'ina were very good at learning from the people who came before them. They adapted the technology from their neighbors, so it is sometimes hard to tell whether a site was inhabited by the Dena'ina or by ancestors of the Sugpiaq people who were there first. Finally, Dena'ina were very efficient: they used almost everything and left very few remains behind. The most concrete evidence of Dena'ina occupation that archeologists have uncovered comes from the dating of house depressions and cache pits.



More archeological work has been done on the Kenai Peninsula than anywhere else, although recently archeologists have been excavating sites at Knik and the Susitna Valley and inland along Rainy Pass. These finds show that the Dena'ina have lived in Southcentral Alaska for between 1,000 and 1,500 years.

### Dena'ina Origins: Oral Traditions

The most knowledgeable Dena'ina elders have never claimed that the people have been in Cook Inlet since time immemorial. However, the Dena'ina believe that they have been in Southcentral Alaska since "the time when animals could talk." The oldest type of stories that take place "when animals could talk" describe the Dena'ina migrating into the Cook Inlet region from an area that was colder.

In one story from the western part of Dena'ina Ełnena, starving Dena'ina from the Kuskokwim foothills moved southeast to the mountains, where a spiritually powerful person that took the form of an old man in one of the stories and of a kingfisher or a northern shrike in another, opened a mountain using a magical stick. This let the people enter what is now Dena'ina territory. At first, they met threatening monsters, which they overcame with the help of the mountain spirit and his magic songs. The Dena'ina then saw many game animals and became prosperous from that time on. The mountain is Telaquana Mountain, or Nduk'eyux Dghil'u, "Animal Goes in Mountain", east of Lime Village at the headwaters of the Stony River.

The Upper Inlet Dena'ina have had a long history and connection with the Ahtna to the east, and both these Athabascan groups have similar stories about people moving back and forth from the Copper River to Cook Inlet. Some of their clan origin stories also support this explanation.

Many other stories tell about the early days on Cook Inlet when there was warfare between the Dena'ina and the Sugpiaq people who the Dena'ina displaced.

### Text-Based Questions on the Reading

1. What does "Dena'ina Ełnena" mean?
2. What is unique about the Dena'ina, among other Athabascans?
3. What is the linguistic evidence based on?
4. What is the archeological evidence based on?
5. What does the linguistic evidence show?
6. What does the archeological evidence show?
7. What does oral tradition say about the origins of the Dena'ina?

## Senior High School to College Reading

### Excerpts from **“Introduction to Dena'ina Culture and History”** by James A. Fall

Original essay in *Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi: The Dena'ina way of Living*.

Edited by Suzi Jones, James A. Fall and Aaron Leggett (2013), pp. 1-45. © Anchorage Museum.

Dena'ina Elnena, the Dena'ina homeland, encompasses about 41,000 square miles of Southcentral Alaska. As the only Northern Athabaskan people whose traditional territory bordered on salt water, most Dena'ina had access to the natural resources of marine waters and tidelands, as well as rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains. Their diverse subarctic environment provided seasonal abundance, followed by periods of scarcity. The Dena'ina were probably the most numerous of all Alaska Athabaskan peoples, with an aboriginal population of perhaps four thousand to five thousand (Townsend 1981:637).

The Dena'ina are one people traditionally speaking a single language, which can be divided into four mutually intelligible dialects.

#### Origins

Although the Dena'ina were firmly established along the shores of Cook Inlet when Euro-American explorers arrived in the late eighteenth century, the origins of the Dena'ina and the approximate date of their arrival in the Cook Inlet area have long been of scholarly interest. The Dena'ina are the only Northern Athabascans whose territory borders salt water; all other Northern Athabascans live inland along rivers and in mountainous terrain. Ethnographic and linguistic evidence thus points to an interior origin for the Dena'ina. For example, writing in the 1830s, Ferdinand Wrangell suggested that

It is probable that the Kenay [Dena'ina] came to the place they now occupy from across the mountains. These migrant mountain people ultimately became coastal and semisettled; they formerly used birch bark canoes on lakes and rivers, and these have remained with them even now, but they also use baidarkas and baidaras covered with laftak (the tanned hides of sea mammals), probably adopted from the Kadyaks or Chugach. They cannot compete with the latter in skill and courage of navigation. Their favorite occupation remains the hunting of animals in the forests beyond the mountains. (1970 [1839]:12)

Likewise, applying linguistic and ethnographic evidence, James Kari concluded that The ancient Dena'ina were a mountain people. The area west of the Alaska Range in the



Inland dialect area is probably the oldest Dena'ina homeland. Some bands of Dena'ina may have been participating in coastal activities on Cook Inlet for as long as 1,500 years. In the middle and upper Cook Inlet, the Dena'ina developed well-established routes for sharing in the labor and the products of both upland and coastal areas. By maintaining control of the key passes and transportation corridors in the Alaska Range and an aggressive posture, Dena'ina bands gradually annexed areas east and south—Lake Clark and Iliamna Lake and Cook Inlet basin—some of the finest resource areas in Alaska. (1988:336)

Kari suggested that the Dena'ina reached Cook Inlet in two migrations. The first, through either Rainy Pass or Ptarmigan Pass, brought the upper Inlet people into the Susitna River country, from where they occupied the coastal area around Tyonek as well as Knik Arm and its tributaries. In a second, later movement, the Dena'ina reached the middle inlet from Iliamna Lake, establishing the Outer Inlet dialect on the Kenai Peninsula (1996b; see also Boraas 2007). Because of the large differences between the upper Inlet dialect and the other three dialects, the upper Inlet regional bands likely had been separated from the others for a substantial period of time. Additional evidence of the considerable length of Dena'ina occupation of the upper inlet is the diffusion of linguistic and cultural traits, including those of several matrilineal clans, to the per Inlet people from the Ahtna Athabascans of the Copper River drainage to the northeast (Kari 1977).

The Dena'ina themselves acknowledge an origin outside the Cook Inlet country. Their oral traditions tell of battles with the Alutiit (Ułchena), perhaps for control of the Cook Inlet basin. One Dena'ina tradition of their arrival in Cook Inlet is provided by Alberta Stephan of Eklutna:

Many years before the influx of the Russian fur traders and Russian settlements in Cook Inlet, there were wars with other Natives that had settled along the coastal regions of Alaska. The Athabascan Natives lived in the central mountain regions. They had winter homes where there was drinking water, meat and fur-bearing animals. Every spring there was a migration to their summer fish camps. Each family had their own fish camp along the coast of Knik Arm and Cook Inlet.

You will note that the Athabascan place names are a description of the area. We don't know how long after the last war with the other Natives that the Athabascans started settling along Knik Arm and Cook Inlet. (1994:85; see also Stephan 1996a:147) Also of note is that the Dena'ina name for the upper Stony River/Mulchatna River plateau, Htsaynenq', may be translated as "First Land," thus suggesting this area as the original homeland of all Dena'ina groups (Kari 1996a).

**Excerpts from**  
**“Dena’ina Archaeology”**  
**by Douglas Reger**

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The human history of the Cook Inlet basin began when glacial ice melted after the last major ice age. The earliest cultural remains are estimated to be at least 10,000 years old, dating from the end of the last ice age. Since then, numerous cultures have occupied the Cook Inlet area (Reger 1998; Workman 1998). After the first entry of people into the area, many of the succeeding cultures around Cook Inlet traced their closest connections to the Eskimo and Alutiiq people of the North Pacific rim. Approximately 4,500 years ago people of the late Ocean Bay culture, best known from Kodiak Island, lived in the Kachemak Bay area, and traces of their activities have been found in the upper Cook Inlet area. The following Kachemak culture was equally widespread, and the Kachemak occupation extended inland along major river drainages. The Kachemak people intensively harvested salmon along the inland rivers, and their culture survived from 3,000 years ago to about 1,200 years ago. They were the last group in the area prior to the arrival of the Dena’ina people. The culture history around Iliamna Lake and likely also Lake Clark was much the same except that a southwestern Alaska Eskimo culture, the Norton culture, occupied the area until about 1,300 years ago. Very few details of life and culture prior to the coming of Euro-American explorers are known for most of the Inland Dena’ina area.

At the time of the arrival of European explorers, Dena’ina Athabascan speakers were the dominant population on the shores of Cook Inlet. A new style of house, accompanied by a sharp decrease in artifacts and debris in the houses, signaled the change from earlier groups. Much of the archaeological information about the prehistoric Dena’ina comes from excavations on the Kenai Peninsula because more intensive investigation has occurred there than in other Dena’ina locations. Excavations at two prehistoric sites in Kachemak Bay have uncovered bone artifacts that help define traditional Dena’ina tool use (Workman 1996). More recent excavations in the upper Cook Inlet area have generally focused on historic period sites. One site at an inland lake, Hewitt Lake, exhibited a pattern of Dena’ina cultural artifacts overlying earlier Kachemak levels, but the complex layering in the soil made separation difficult (Dixon 1996). Collections from the various sites when examined as a whole, however, provide some insight into the prehistoric Dena’ina people. Prehistoric Dena’ina artifacts from sites well within the boundaries of their historic territory have been dated to the time just prior to the arrival of European explorers. Extending those findings back in time is the

method of interpretation known as the “direct historic approach.” The technique gives confidence that the artifacts are indeed Dena’ina, with the expectation that similar remains can be confidently traced further back in time and outward to the territorial margins. By this means, early dated collections can be compared with still earlier or distant site remains and an age estimated for Dena’ina movements through time and across the landscape.

### Dating

Thirty-seven radiocarbon dates from sixteen sites along the Kenai River show that the first significant occupation of the area by Dena’ina speakers occurred between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1200. The Dena’ina are the primary Native people along the Kenai River to this day. The dates obtained for Dena’ina sites in other parts of their territory generally reflect habitation in the several centuries prior to the appearance of the European explorers.

Archaeological investigation of Dena’ina sites has provided hard evidence that Dena’ina occupied the shores of Cook Inlet for at least the last five hundred years, and perhaps two hundred fifty years before that. Excavations show that the Dena’ina quickly adapted to the marine environment and expanded their knowledge about the subsistence resources. In that way, archaeology has supported historic period descriptions of the Dena’ina lifeway, emphasizing the great adaptability of the people to new opportunities.

### Text-Based Questions on the Reading

1. What does “Dena’ina Ełnena” mean?
2. What is unique about the Dena’ina, among other Athabascans?
3. What is the linguistic evidence based on?
4. What is the archeological evidence based on?
5. What does the linguistic evidence show?
6. What does the archeological evidence show?
7. What does oral tradition say about the origins of the Dena’ina?
8. What limitations or problems have archeologists had in trying to learn about the prehistory of the Dena’ina?



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