

GoNorth! Beringia 2011: Week 05 Chat Transcript

Background: Are you a New Yorker? A European expatriate? A refugee? An exchange student? However you define yourself, chances are at least one of the “frames” involves where you are from, or the place that you find yourself today. Culture—the clothes you wear, the language you speak, even traits like your personality and worldview—are defined at least in part by your sense of place. And this fact is part of what makes each of us a unique member of the human race.

In turn, our cultural practices have an impact on our natural surroundings. As humans build their homes, clear land for their crops, extract minerals for their iPods, and mine coal to burn for their electricity, they leave an indelible mark upon the environment. Slowly, this interrelationship evolves: Place defines culture, culture redefines place, and that redefinition requires cultural adjustment.

Today, with 6.8 billion people on the planet, this action and reaction is global in scale. Hence, the worldwide changes that are emerging in the environment, such as global climate change. Today, the scope and speed of environmental change exceeds the ability of cultures to adapt. If climate change is not checked immediately, we stand to face a wave of “cultural extinctions” as entire groups of people lose their connection to the local frames that define their culture. Some of these displaced peoples, like the Inupiaq of Shishmaref, will become literal refugees, as their regions become uninhabitable.

A teenager in Ohio leaves her computer on all night, burning another few ounces of coal. A teenager in Brazil cuts an acre of cropland out of the rainforest, reducing the rainforest carbon sink, to provide for his new family. A generation ago, such actions were both isolated and easily overlooked. But that’s no longer the case. In our shrinking world, the relationships between place, culture, and change are rapidly cohering into a single mandate for action.

In light of this new understanding of global interconnection—and the dramatic risks of widespread cultural extinction—what is the role of the individual? How are individuals and cultures accountable—or even culpable—for their impact on the global community? What steps can each of us and all humans take to insert positive change in the evolution of culture, place, and change?

Some questions to possibly open the chat with or discuss prior to the LIVE chat!

How is your culture defined by place? Has your culture changed your place?

What is our responsibility toward other cultures? If our cultural practices end up changing another place/culture, what should (or can) we do to reverse that change? Or should we not?

We live in a shrinking world in which all cultures are interconnected. How does this help or hurt our attempts to acknowledge and preserve cultural heritage and our sense of place?

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Education Basecamp: Welcome to the week 5 chat on The Human Connection. We are so glad you could join us today. Stev Weidlich is here and ready for your questions.

Education Basecamp: We are going to adjust the screen a bit so that it displays properly for everyone. If you have any trouble, please send an email to bark@polarhusky.com

AK Rules!: Hi Mr. Weidlich - we are very excited to talk with you today. We tried to understand what you do. Could you explain it to us a bit?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Sure thing. I am a cultural anthropologist. Basically, I study other cultures and try to understand how those cultures operate and why the people in that culture do what they do.

Madison, WI: Why did you decide to be a scientist? Do you work with data a lot - do you like working with people?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I decided to become a scientist because it seemed like the best way to travel, talk with people, learn new things, and be employable! :D I work with all kinds of data. In contrast to some of the other scientists that you may have chatted with as a part of this program, my data hard numbers, but really what people say, do, and think. Trying to explore that data has it's own challenges and its own special methodologies.

AK Rules!: Do you find that cultures have a lot to do with where people live?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Different cultures are always affected by the surrounding environment - great question. A large part of what shapes a culture is the surrounding environment. What types of foods are available. The amount of water available. Temperature. Distance to other communities and major travel corridors. All of these things shape a culture! They shape how people think, what they say, how their language is formed, and what materials they use in everyday life. But people who share similar environments still have cultural differences, so there can still be some variability.

Preston: When you study other cultures, how do you share what you learn? And who do you share it with?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: When I study other cultures, I share that information first with the people I study. They're the "first reviewer", so to speak. That way, they can check to see if what I see (as an outsider) makes sense or if I got something wrong. Sometimes, this makes people within that culture reflect on the actions they take and say, "Wow! I never really thought about ourselves or my community that way!" Then, it's on to publishing. There are journals that anthropologists publish in. Some write books. Others make presentations. I'm making a presentation next week in Seattle on some of my research.

New York, NY: Where have you all traveled to in the world?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I tend to stay in the United States. As an American anthropologist, I think that studying issues in my own country is really important. But many other anthropologists travel around the world to some exotic places. I tend to travel throughout the US southwest working with Native American tribes. Also, I do a lot of work in Alaska with Alaska Native communities. The most exotic/weird place I've been has been Adak Island in Alaska. Very cool place.

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Education Basecamp: what is your favorite part about your job?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: My favorite part about my job is that, as an anthropologist, much of my "work" is just living in a community. Of course, I take notes and analyze what people say and do while I'm living there. But every action you have while living in a community - even playing cards or listening to music - is potentially part of my research. It sure doesn't LOOK like research because it can be really fun. But it is!

Education Basecamp: Fun with your job, sounds good to me :)

Madison, WI: Do you have a 'favorite culture'?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I don't really have a "favorite" culture. But there are cultures that I find incredibly interesting for personal reasons. I studied Japan in college and the Ainu, who are an indigenous people of Japan. They have a rich, interesting history and I liked studying them.

AK Rules!: What is culture to you?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Wow! Tough question! Anthropologists have been debating this for over 100 years! But to me, it's all of the symbols and behaviors shared by a group of people. That includes language, sports, rituals, religions, and other behaviors. Even things as simple as brushing your teeth is a part of your culture!

New York, NY: Where is Adak!?!?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Adak is on the far end of the Alaskan Aleutian Chain. It's closer to Russia than the US mainland and is in a different time zone than the rest of Alaska. It was a US military base during the Cold War that is now abandoned. Instead of moving everything off of the island, the government thought it would be cheaper to leave the whole base there. It's almost totally abandoned. Only about 100 people live there!

New York, NY: Cool!!!

Preston: What are some of the cultures you have worked with, and located where?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I've worked with Alaskan Aleuts and Inupiat in Alaska. In the southwest, I've worked with Mojave, Chemehuevi, Quechan, and Cahuilla groups (among others). I did my graduate work with Dene in Northern Saskatchewan.

Madison, WI: Wow! can we see that presentation online maybe? What are you presenting about?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I'll be presenting on research I did on African American miners in southern West Virginia. Totally different than my work with Native Americans or Alaska Natives, but even communities that may not be considered "exotic" have culture and different ways to see that world. It's important to understand these differences.

Preston: Have you talked with people that tell you they have seen a lot of change in the land and that their culture has to change because of it?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Great question! All the time. Especially in Alaska, where global climate change is affecting traditional hunting practices. But elsewhere too! Reduced water in the southwest has affected where important medicinal plants grow - so some people can't make medicines. Others have to go different places to hunt. I've had Native

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American elders tell me that they've seen strange behaviors from animals and have interpreted these behaviors as warnings from animals that man has poisoned the earth; the animals are getting mad.

Preston: Where have you been in Alaska working with Inupiat?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I've done work in Barrow, Alaska and in Savoonga and in Nuiqsut.

New York, NY: We think you have a really interesting job. Who pays you and what do they use your work for?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I work for a private company called AECOM. We do work for the US Government, mostly. Some state governments. The National Park Service or the Bureau of Land Management typically hires me. But other anthropologists work for universities and non-profits. There are more of us out there than you might realize!

Preston: That is amazing and a bit scary to us - are people you meet afraid of climate change?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Climate change is unfortunate, but people on the earth have been adapting to changing environments and climates for their entire histories. One aspect of studying cultures is studying how cultures change in response to changes in their environment. We're all making changes in our own culture right now in response to climate change. I just bought some efficient lightbulbs and I take public transit to work. We are all adapting. And those are changes in our culture.

AK Rules!: We see it says expedition team member on website. Are you going!?!?!?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I just found out a few days ago that I'll be going on part of the expedition! I'm very excited! I've never dogsledded before - so that's somewhat intimidating! But to be part of the research and the work GoNorth! is doing is great!

AK Rules!: COOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOL!!!! See you in Alaska!!!

New York, NY: Can you share with us some of the hunting practices that Inupiat can't do as well or at all? How are they affected?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: One of the major aspects of Inupiat life is hunting bowhead whales. But there have been changes in the ways that the whales are behaving that are making hunting them more risky. The sea ice is changing because of changing temperatures, making going out on the ice to hunt more treacherous. Also, the whales are taking slightly different migration patterns due to changes in ocean temperature. Finally, there is oil and gas development up in that area that affects the ocean and makes noise that the whales don't like - staying away from key hunting areas. It's a big problem because whale hunting is one of the main practices in the culture that ties everything together.

Madison, WI: How is the environment changing in these places you have been? Is it for example because there is no sea ice? We learned last year that the hunters in Greenland did not have ice on the sea to run their dogs on. That seems very sad to us.

GoNorth! Chat Expert: That's right! Changes in sea ice have been affecting

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communities throughout the arctic. Also, earlier summers and warmer summers have been affecting storage practices for some communities. Changes in permafrost have affected the ways plants grow, which have affected where animals go, which affects hunting, which THEN affects other aspects of culture. It's all connected!

New York, NY: That is amazing, you get to travel with the Polar Huskies! Are you nervous?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I will get to travel with the polar huskies! I am slightly nervous! I'm not sure what traveling by dogsled is going to be like. My friend says, "Cold." HAHA! But that's not a big help. I had a husky dog a while ago as a pet, and I loved her. So I'm excited to meet the sled dogs.

Preston: We are really excited we are talking with you and you are going on the expedition. Will you be talking to the locals about change and culture maybe? :)

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Great question! That's the reason I'm going! You hit the nail on the head! I'm interested in how locals have seen the climate change and how they are adapting to change. Since the arctic is seeing so many changes, I'm hoping that some of their adaptation strategies can provide lessons for the rest of the world as we experience climate change. That's the major strength of anthropology as a science - comparing lessons learned from one culture to those of another.

Preston: We just learned about the cellars in the ground!!!! Have you ever been in one?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I have! They're very useful and have been a traditional storage technique for centuries! Archaeologists even find old ones that have since been filled in.

New York, NY: We wonder what whale taste like, have you tried it?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I've never had whale meat. I hear it's fatty... which could be tasty. Or it could be totally gross!! I hope to find out. As an anthropologist, you have to eat whatever is present in the community. There are rarely McDonalds in the communities you work in! :D I've had moose nose (also fatty) and beaver tail (chewy and kinda gross).

Education Basecamp: Polar Huskies LOVE beaver tail we should add!

AK Rules!: Do you cultures are good at learning from each other?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Cultures are very good at learning from one another. The official term is "transculturation". Other cultures adopt aspects from neighboring cultures all the time. And have for centuries. I'm sure you and your teachers can think of things in our own culture that we've adopted from neighboring cultures. Symbols or foods or words in the English language. All cultures adopt aspects that they like or find useful.

AK Rules!: Do you ever compare cultures?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Anthropologists do compare cultures, but not to find a "winner" or to determine which culture is doing something "better" or more "right" than another culture. It's more to explore why cultures are doing what their doing in the face of the same stimulus. Why does one culture wear a certain color to a funeral than this other culture may? Why do they eat this food instead of that food that is popular in another

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culture? Exploring these differences is where you can figure out the most about people and what makes them tick!

Education Basecamp: We have about 10 minutes left. Just enough time for Stev to answer a few more questions.

Preston: Was it not very very dark inside those cellars? Have you seen melting permafrost?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: There was a light on in the cellar - so it wasn't very dark! But it would be if the light had gone off. I haven't seen melting permafrost yet - but people I know and trust talk about it frequently. I hope to document some when I travel with the polar huskies!

New York, NY: Is there a term for cultures having to adapt to environmental change?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I can't think of a fancy term off the top of my head right now. "Climate change adaptation" is typically what it's referred to.

Madison, WI: We think it is important to learn about other cultures to get along too

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I do too! One of the main purposes of anthropology is to create a cross-cultural understanding. It's much more difficult to get mad at someone if you understand them and you understand why they act the way they do. If more people took the time to understand other people's (or cultures) issues, there may be less conflict in the world.

Madison, WI: What is your least favorite part of your work?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: There is a significant amount of travel, so it's hard to be away from my family sometimes. And there's usually no money to bring them with. But my family is very supportive and we talk on the phone when I'm gone and stay in contact. Aside from that, there are very few drawbacks! It's a dream job, to me!

New York, NY: We think it is a dream job - you get to travel with Disko & Co.!

AK Rules!: Do you speak Inupiaq or any language other than English?

GoNorth! Chat Expert: I speak Japanese pretty well (or at least used to!) I also took Arabic in college. I had to learn Dene while I was in graduate school. It's related to Navajo and is a very difficult language to learn - it has very different sounds than in English.

Preston: Will you share it with the rest of us then?? We hope so

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Of course! My information will be all part of the learning experience here on the site!

Education Basecamp: We are really impressed here at Education Basecamp - that is amazingly different languages!

Madison, WI: It seems anthropology would be a good way to avoid wars :)

GoNorth! Chat Expert: It would be, that's for sure. Modern anthropology actually

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started as a way to understand other countries to prevent wars and conflict.

Education Basecamp: While Stev wraps it up, we would like to thank you for joining us today. We hope you not only enjoyed yourself, but learned a few things too.

Education Basecamp: Your questions today were terrific -- Making Mille really excited here at Education Basecamp!

GoNorth! Chat Expert: Thanks so much for having me! It was great to hear all of your questions. Stay tuned for some results of our trip!

New York, NY: Thaaaaaank you!!!!!!!!!!

New York, NY: Good luck!

Preston: We will be watching you and are so happy we talked to you today!

Madison, WI: We learned so much. Thank you

Thank You!

Be sure to join us again next week on for our last chat on the topic of The Human Connection! See the chat schedule for details.