

King Island research leads to new discoveries, preservation of culture

by Bend Weekly News Sources

A team of researchers, led by Oregon State University anthropologist Deanna Kingston, has discovered a prehistoric village on a tiny island in the Bering Sea. The archaeological site, shown by carbon dating to be 800 to 900 years old, indicates that King Island, Alaska, was inhabited by a band of Inupiat walrus hunters for at least a millennium, said Kingston.

The archaeological investigation is part of a four-year study of the plants, birds, place names, dialect and culture of King Island, supported by a \$563,000 grant from the National Science Foundation. Kingston “whose team includes an archaeologist, an ornithologist, a botanist, a linguist, and 30 elder King Island volunteers” is working to preserve the traditional ecological knowledge of King Islanders, who today use their homeland only as a seasonal hunting camp.

“Like many other Alaska native communities, King Islanders possess deep and unique knowledge about the natural world upon which they have depended for centuries,” said Kingston, whose mother grew up on the island.

“They lived on the ice and the land for generations, but their culture is now threatened by a rapidly changing climate that is melting the ice and pushing walrus farther and farther offshore.”

Kingston’s work with the King Islanders is the cover story of OSU research magazine Terra’s newest issue. To view Terra, go to <http://oregonstate.edu/terra/>

The OSU anthropologist last visited Alaska in December 2006 to work on a map with Inupiaq elder Teddy Mayac and a group of others who grew up on King Island. Together, they have mapped almost all 150 place names so far.

“My team (including brother Scott Kingston and graduate research assistant Kai Henifin) made audiotapes of the elders pronouncing some of the names of all the places,” Kingston said, noting that only about 100 native speakers are living today. “We would like to keep some aspect of the language alive, so having the pronunciation recorded is very important.”

Kingston plans to release a DVD for King Island community members in late 2007 documenting the data and knowledge gathered by the team.

One of Kingston's biggest rewards was bringing elder community members back to the island to assist with the research. King Island has not been inhabited since 1966.

“Other than the hunters who still go back regularly, many of the elders had not been there in many years,” she said. “People noticed birds on the island that were never there before, which could be a result of climate change.”

The key, says Kingston, is to document as much of the knowledge of the King Islanders as possible before it is lost.

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