International standards on a local scale: Building the Ahtna digital linguistic and ethnographic archive

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Today’s goals

- To describe the development of *C’ek’aedi Hwnax*, Alaska’s first digital language archive to be
  - Indigenously-administered and
  - OLAC-compliant

- What’s ahead:
  - Who we are
  - The need for a local archive
  - Building the archive
  - Future plans
  - Conclusions
Who we are
The Ahtna community

- 8 modern villages in Copper and Upper Susitna River valleys of southcentral Alaska
- One of 11 Athabascan-speaking groups in Alaska
- ~30 elderly speakers, all bilingual with English
- Strong interest in cultural and linguistic preservation
The Ahtna Heritage Foundation

- Non-profit corporation serving 8 Ahtna villages
- Mission statement:
  “to strengthen our people by preserving and promoting the Ahtna culture and supporting education”
- Natural fit for administering an archive
Size of the corpus

- Ahtna Heritage Fndtn holdings
- Alaska Native Language Archive collection (U. AK)
- 14(h)1: Interviews about historic/cemetery sites, AK Native Claims Settlement Act
- OTH-Backscatter: Interviews for potential Air Force research facility
- Copper River Native Assoc.
- Chickaloon Village collection
- Bureau of Indian Affairs
- Ahtna individuals
The need for a local archive
Need:
Increased local access to materials

- 2009: 11 village meetings voicing
  - awareness of existence of recordings
  - uncertainty over who owns them, how to gain access
  - desire for access to records of our own history
Need:
To protect fragile recordings

- Digitization of tapes agreed to be of top priority
- Awareness of
  - vulnerability of media
  - irreplaceability of contents
Need: To involve the Elders

- Traditional transmission of knowledge
- Protocols on who has access to knowledge
  - e.g. songs for certain villages, certain people
- Questions of how to treat these protocols
  - We will need to build new policies: intersection of old and new
- Others’ policies on this have not yet been seen
Building the C’ek’aedi Hwnax Archive
Funding

- Spring 2009:
  - Applied to Institute of Museum and Library Services Native American Library Services Enhancement Grant

- Fall 2009:
  - Awarded US$149,839 over two years
  - Plus US$39,063 in cost sharing from AHF, UAF, Berez consultant time

- Work began early 2010
Facility + Equipment

- Ahtna Cultural Center, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park
- Professional-quality digitization suite
  - A-D converter
  - Dual cassette deck
  - VHS and video converter
  - Monitors, control center, rack with power
  - 2TB RAID storage
  - Fire-proof cabinet for tape storage
- Based on equipment at Kaipuleohone Archive (UHM)
Involvement of Elders

- Elders’ Tea
- “Seal of approval”
  - Others more likely to deposit their collections too
- Enriching descriptive metadata during visits
- Chose name for the facility and the archive
Involvement of Elders

“C’ek’aedi Hwnax” [c’ɛk’æti nax]
c’e- k’ae -di hwnax
INDEF.POSS- in; cavity -NOM house
‘things-the-deceased-leave-behind house’ =
‘Legacy House’
Training

- Outside consultant (from University of Hawai‘i) to train staff in
  - building database
  - digitization procedures
  - tape curation
  - metadata collection
Policies

• Acquisition policies
• General access policies
  – Ahtna people
  – Non-Ahtna people
  – Researchers
• Still in development:
  – More specific clan & family ownership issues
Current collection

• To date: 17,000+ minutes digitized, including:
  – AHF Collection
  – 14(h)1
  – OTH-Backscatter
  – ANLA Collection
  – Several small private collections
  – Copper River Native Association

• Coming in future:
  – Chickaloon Village, BIA, other private collections
MOA with ANLA, Fairbanks

- Sharing of entire Ahtna collection
- “Gray storage” backup in perpetuity
- Decisions about access to Ahtna collection turned over to C’ek’aedi Hwnax
OLAC

- December 2010: joined Open Language Archive Community
- Participating in a global network of language archives
- Metadata
  - adheres to international standards
  - is discoverable online
- 1st member of OLAC to be run by an Indigenous American organization
Increased access

• Public workstation in the Cultural Center in summer 2011
  – Browse catalog, listen to recordings
• Plans to build networked workstations in 8 Ahtna villages by 2013
  – Allow widespread access across Ahtna territory
  – Integrating a ‘public comments’ feature to enrich descriptive metadata
• Build on contents of recordings to further revitalization of Ahtna language
Network of archives in AK

ASRC, Doyon, Ahtna, Sealaska, Bering Straits, Bristol Bay, 13th Region, ANLA, NANA, Calista, CIRI, Chugach, Koniag, AVCP, TCC, Aleut Corp.
Conclusions
Conclusions

• Native language archiving in Alaska has traditionally been a task of universities
  – Better access to know-how
  – Better access to technology
  – Better access to funding

• Now:
  – Know-how is more accessible
  – Technology is cheaper
  – Funding is more widespread
Conclusions

Archives that are administered locally can better mobilize language materials for use in the home community... while still benefiting from a partnership with the academic sphere for data back-up, technical training, and networking.
Conclusions

- It is possible to create a language archive that
  - increases ownership of and access to language
  - is housed and run locally
  - addresses local concerns
  - meets international standards
  - builds partnerships
  - is sustainable

- And to do it in about a year
Conclusions

- If you are interested in talking to us about how your community might build a similar archive, please contact us:
  - Karen Linnell: ahtnaheritage.klinnell@gmail.com
  - Andrea Berez: andrea.berez@gmail.com
Xona. Tsin’aen sigu!

Tsin’aen to the Institute for Museum and Library Services and the Ahtna Heritage Foundation.