

# CULTURAL HERITAGE

PRESERVING ALASKA  
NATIVE LANGUAGES

BY KYLE HOPKINS



EVERY MORNING at 8:55, a secretary plays the Inupiaq word of the day over a loudspeaker at the White Mountain village schoolhouse.

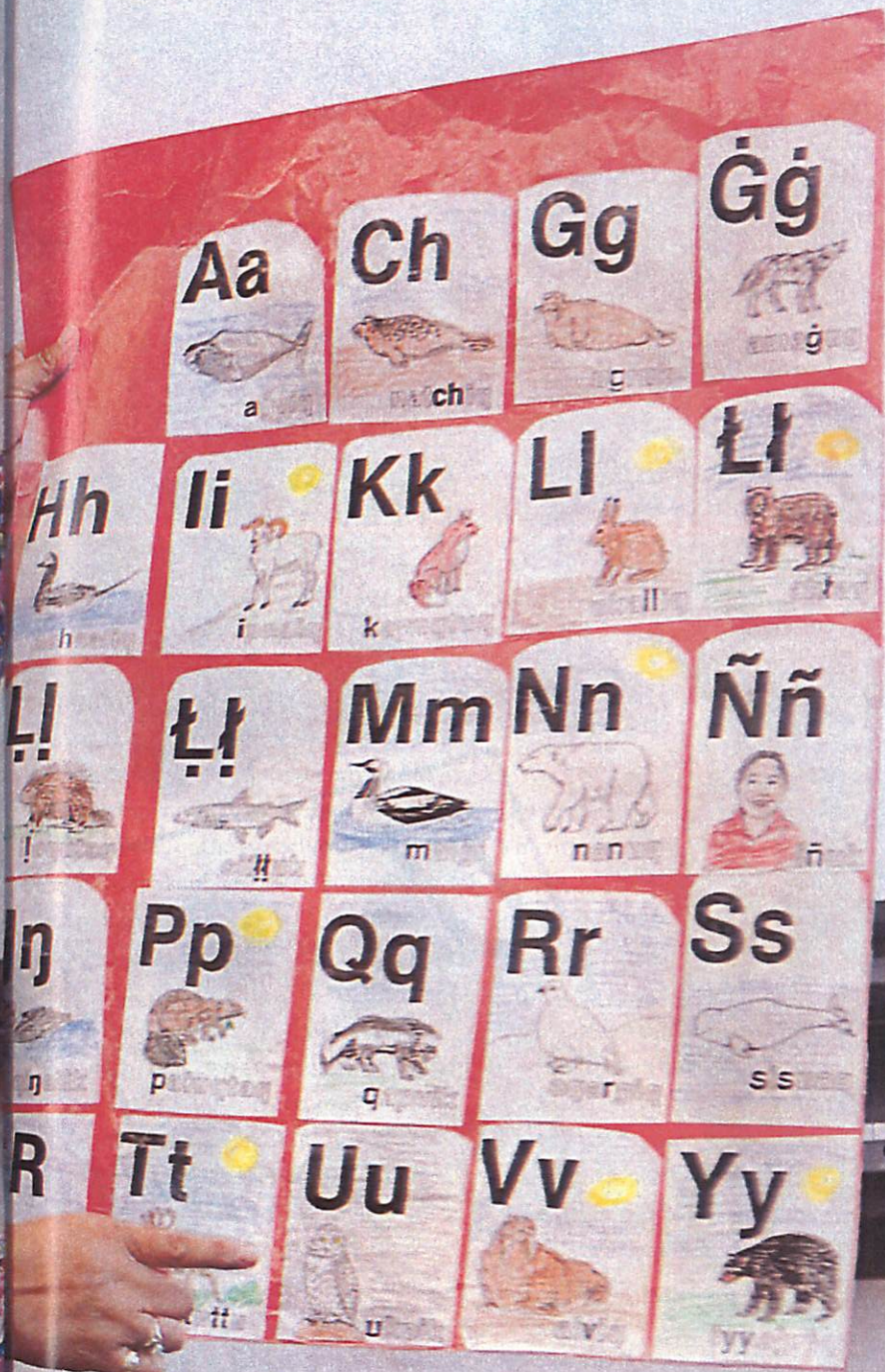
Ataataga means “my dad,” the recording says. Other examples include *kuskaq*, a cat. In White Mountain, when someone says *isrraliq*—where the regional record low is minus 54 degrees—they are telling you the weather is cold.

The micro language lessons are heard by an audience of about 50 students living in this Seward Peninsula village east of Nome. The homes here are built on a steep hill, and a walk to class can feel like hiking a mountain—unless you’re lucky enough to catch a snowmachine ride. In winter, planes park on a landing strip at the top of the slope even as Iditarod sled dog teams park on the frozen Fish River below.

The people in White Mountain once spoke a unique dialect of Inupiaq, one of several that emerged in northern Alaska villages that span from Diomedes, on a small island in the Bering Strait, across Alaska north of the Brooks Range, the northernmost reaches of Canada, and Greenland.

Today, only three people are still fluent in the Fish River variant of

Teachers such as Rosaline Hadley, of Buckland, Alaska, work to help young people learn and carry on the Inupiaq language.



Inupiaq, says Roy Agloinga, a former executive at Norton Sound Health Corporation, who grew up in White Mountain. All three have moved away from the village. Even Agloinga, who rates himself at about 4 out of 10 on the fluency scale in the local dialect, now lives in Anchorage.

"I could see within 40 years the White Mountain dialect being extinct," he says.

That is the harsh, but not necessarily hopeless, story of Alaska Native languages. Already whole vocabularies—the foundation for village culture—are disappearing from daily life.

The last Alaska Native who could fluently speak Eyak died in 2008. More recently, a second language may have come closer to extinction when the last known fluent speaker of Holikachuk died on March 17 at age 86.

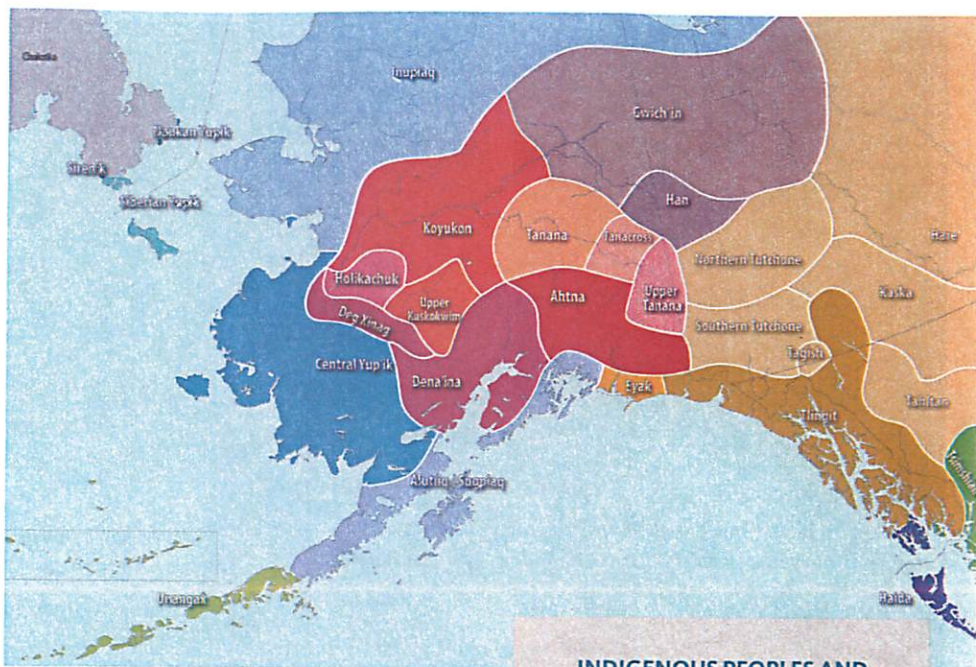
Holikachuk is an Athabascan language once spoken by people who formerly lived along the Innoko River in central Alaska. That group moved to Grayling, along the Yukon River, in the early 1960s, says Julie Raymond-Yakoubian, an anthropologist for the nonprofit Kawerak Inc., the nonprofit that manages Native services throughout the Bering Sea region.

Of the 18 remaining Alaska Native languages, only two are still fluently spoken by more than 1,000 people, estimates Michael Krauss, a Fairbanks linguist who founded the Alaska Native Language Center in 1972 and named the Holikachuk language. All are in danger of extinction.

That's where efforts such as the Inupiaq Word of the Day in White Mountain, population 190, come in. Increasingly, Alaska Native culture bearers are working to counter the loss of languages. It's a battle waged in elementary school classrooms and corporate boardrooms, on grassroots Facebook pages and at computer keyboards.

The odds are poor, as some languages may be too far gone, or lack energetic champions to revitalize or preserve them. But the problem is increasingly in the limelight.

For example, the Alaska Legislature recently passed a bill, signed by Governor Sean Parnell in May, that creates a new language council. The council, proposed by Senator Donny Olson of Nome, is meant



MAP CONTRIBUTORS: Michael Krauss, Gary Holton, Jim Kerr and Colin T. West, 2011. *Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska*. Alaska Native Language Center and UAA Institute of Social and Economic Research. [www.uaf.edu/anlc/map](http://www.uaf.edu/anlc/map).

to review the ways Alaskans and governments are working to preserve traditional tongues, and recommend improvements.

Consideration of the bill stirred long-simmering emotions in a state where students were once punished for speaking the language of their parents.

"Members of the [committee] told me it was the most powerful testimony they'd heard in four or five years," Representative Alan Dick, who sponsored the bill in the House, later told the *Anchorage Daily News*. "It had its own momentum."

Here are just a few examples of how Alaskans are working to revitalize and preserve traditional languages across the state:



AYAPRUN LODDIE JONES grew up as one of 13 Yup'ik-speaking siblings in the Western Alaska village of Scammon Bay. After college, Jones settled in nearby Bethel, the largest of Alaska's remote, rural cities.

"My parents would always tell us, 'Even if you go to a Western school, don't ever forget your roots—your language and your heritage,'" says Jones, whose mother was perhaps Alaska's most famous Native dancer, the late Arnaucuaq Maryann Sundown.

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LANGUAGES OF ALASKA

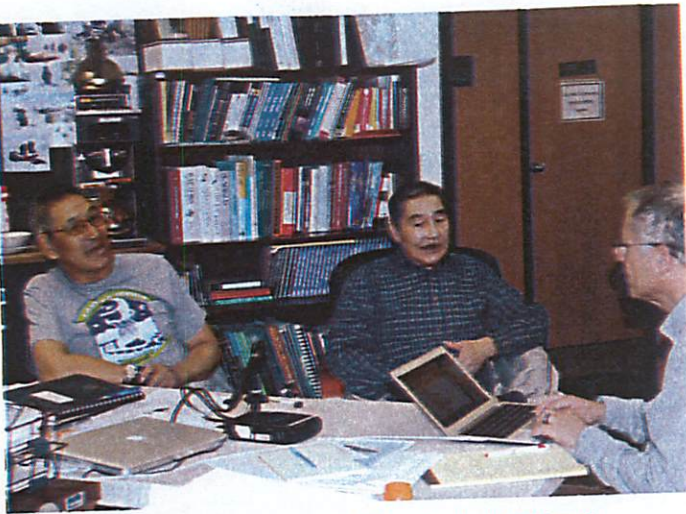
This map, created by the Alaska Native Language Center, shows the distribution of Alaska's indigenous languages, split primarily into two larger groups. The Eskimo and Aleut languages, in shades of blue, are an estimated 2,000 years old, in the area that is now Alaska, says Gary Holton, professor of linguistics at the center. Researchers believe the speakers of this Inuit-Yup'ik-Unangan family came east across the Bering Strait. The group includes Yup'ik and Iñupiaq, the Alaska Native languages most commonly spoken in the state today.

The central and eastern Alaska family, shown in shades of red and orange, is an older and more diverse collection of Tlingit-Eyak-Athabascan languages. The group is sometimes called Na'Dene and has been present in Alaska for an estimated 4,000 years, based on linguistic evidence, Holton says.

Archaeological research hints at even deeper roots, with evidence that the Tanana Valley has been inhabited for perhaps 12,000 years, Horton says.

Researchers also have recently discovered a possible link between the Na'Dene languages and the Yeniseian languages spoken in central Siberia.

Some people who see the map for the first time are surprised to see that Alaska Native languages—the heart of Alaska Native cultures—reach into every corner of the state, Horton says. —K.H.



Lawrence Kaplan (right) worked with Glenn Iyahuk (left) and Andrew Kunayak (center) of Little Diomed Island, to record their knowledge of walrus and the related Iñupiaq vocabulary.

It was the early 1970s, and Jones began teaching kindergarten. With a twist.

After instructing the class in English, Jones would sometimes repeat the lesson in her Native language, one-on-one, she says. "I've always spoken my Yup'ik language to any student in an English classroom whose first language was Yup'ik."

Today, Bethel is home to the state's flagship Alaska Native language school, a K-6 elementary that Jones championed and

that bears her name: Ayaprun Elitnaurvik Yup'ik Immersion School. Launched in 1995, and expanding by one grade-level at a time, the school has about 160 to 170 students, Jones says.

"Yup'ik is not a dead language. You've got to keep on thinking about preserving it when it's still strong," she says. "You don't wait until it's dead and then try to revive it."

Faculty at the school speak to incoming kindergartners in a ratio of about 90 to 95 percent Yup'ik, 5 to 10 percent English, Jones says. Students graduate from sixth grade bilingual and confident, she says.

While some parents say the immersion school met with resistance at first, it now outperforms neighboring English-speaking schools at some grade levels on standardized tests.

"Our sixth-graders exceed any other sixth-graders in the [Lower Kuskokwim School District]," Jones says. "Their test scores are much higher."

About 10,000 people still speak Central Yup'ik, the most of any Alaska Native language, according to the Alaska Native Language Center. It's the only Alaska Native language still regularly being learned as a first language by children growing up in village homes—crucial to any effort to sustain the language over future generations.

In fact, not all the parents with kids in the school can speak Yup'ik themselves. Jones likes to tell the story of one non-Native boy who went home one day in the middle of the 2011-2012



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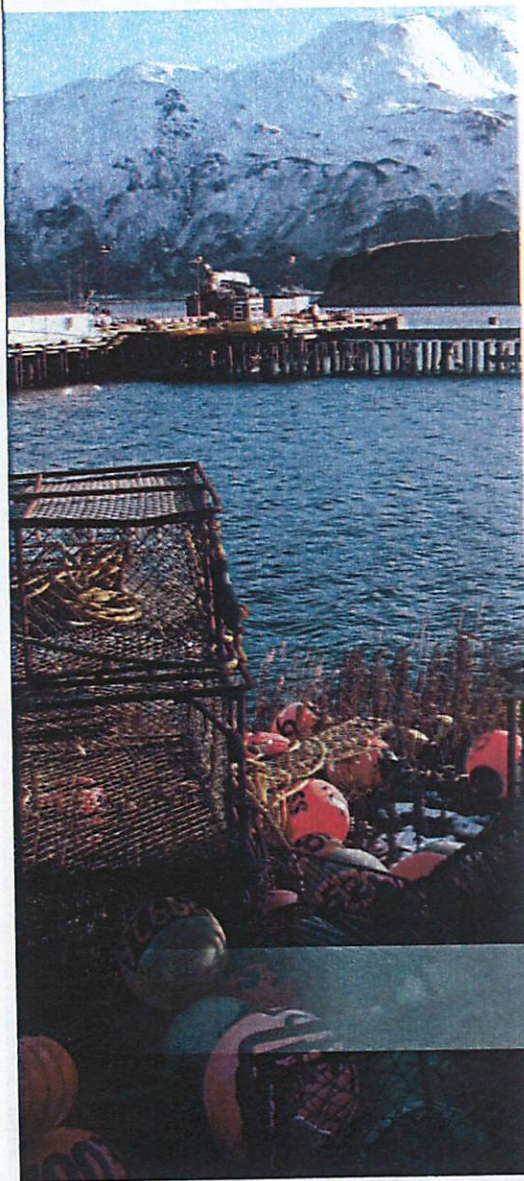
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school year and declared himself Yup'ik to his mother.

Prove it, the mother said. "So he wrote down *quyana*," Jones says, which translates as "thank you."



ON MARCH 13, the day that 25-year-old musher Dallas Seavey arrived in White Mountain at the head of the pack in this year's Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, the word of the day hanging in a schoolhouse window was *narrakaaq*. It means stomach-ache—a useful phrase for anyone who just spent the previous eight days on the trail, eating out of a sled.

But you don't need to be a visiting dog musher to learn the village school's daily lesson. You don't even need to be in White Mountain. The program has a Facebook page featuring videos that teach pronunciation of more than 100 words and phrases.

Often, the voice students hear in the recordings is Agloinga's.

"Every time I go to White Mountain, [teacher aide Luann Harrelson] will grab me and pull me aside and say we need to record more phrases," he says.



A former rural-affairs coordinator for the city of Anchorage and a former Norton Sound Health Corp. executive, Agloinga grew up in an Iñupiaq-speaking household. But his parents worried that speaking an Alaska Native language would be a disadvantage for him later in life.

"They worked really hard to make sure we were speaking English," Agloinga says.

COURTESY: JULIE RAYMOND-YAKOURIAN



Wales elder Pete Sereadlook explains how various species of nonsalmon fish, including cod, have been important to Yup'ik and Iñupiat cultures. This interview project recorded for future generations the language associated with the fish, and the tools and materials related to fishing.

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Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and boarding schools are often blamed for accelerating the demise of Alaska Native languages by punishing a generation of students for speaking their Native tongues in class. In White Mountain, missionaries had put an end to native dancing by the time Agloinga was born, he says.

"My dad said that he remembers that the last person he ever saw dancing was his mother. Probably in the 1930s, dancing alone in the bedroom where nobody could see her," Agloinga says.

Now 47, he didn't learn to speak the language fluently until he left for college and took an immersion course at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

That was before the rise of social media, which may not be the best teaching tool, but can build excitement about traditional languages among villagers and Alaska Natives who now live in cities but want to reconnect with their roots.

Facebook, in particular, is the new VHF radio of village life: a quick way to trade hunting plans or news of a family event. In

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## COMMON EXPRESSIONS

in Alaska Native languages

### Aleut

hello aang  
thank you qağaasakung

### Central Yup'ik

hello (good to see you) cama-i  
thank you quyana  
How are you? cangacit?

### Siberian Yupik

How are you? natesiin?  
thank you igamsiqanaghalek

### Iñupiaq

goodbye tautugniaqmigikpiñ  
thank you quyanaq  
Hello, how are you? qanuq itpich?

(In Iñupiaq, the vowels [a, i, u] are pronounced in the same way as the same vowels in Spanish or Italian; r is similar to English r; g' is similar to French or German r; ŋ is the ng sound; ñ is pronounced ny as in Spanish; ʃ is an ly sound; ʃ is a voiceless l. Double letters are pronounced long [held longer], and single letters are short.)

### Alutiiq

hello cama'i  
thank you quyanaa

### Haida

hello (how are you?) sán uu dág giidang?  
thank you háw'aa

### Tsimshian

thank you way dankoo

### Tlingit

hello (how are you?) wa.é ák.wé?  
thank you gunalchéesh

### Eyak

thank you 'awa'ahdah

### Ahtna Athabascan

thank you tsin'aen  
my friend slatsiin

### Deg Hit'an Athabascan

thank you dogedinh  
my friend sits'ida'on

### Gwich'in Athabascan

hello (how are you?) neenjit dóonch'yaa?  
thank you mahsi'  
my friend shijyaa

### Hän Athabascan

thank you mahsi'  
our friends nijaa

### Koyukon Athabascan

hello dzaanh nezoonh  
thank you baasee'

### Tanana Athabascan

hello (how are you?) do'eent'aa?  
thank you maasee'

### Dena'ina Athabascan

thank you chin'an

### Tanacross Athabascan

thank you tsin'ee

COURTESY: ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGE CENTER

the past few years, Native speakers have increasingly used the site to send out homemade language lessons in both Yup'ik and Iñupiaq.

Jones, the Bethel language-immersion-school teacher, says she tries to write her posts in Yup'ik when possible. The Alaska Native Language Center's Krauss says he's heard rumors that it's now considered cool for young people on St. Lawrence Island to write on each other's walls in Siberian Yup'ik.

Mary Sage of Barrow began a more broad Iñupiaq Word of the Day project on Facebook in the spring of 2010, featuring iPhone videos of phrases spoken primarily in the Barrow dialect. One clip asked visitors what they like to eat on their *qaqqulaaq*, or pilot bread. Another taught girls how to tell friends they'd met a cute guy. Nearly 3,000 people signed up as fans.


"I realized how many of our Iñupiat




The North Slope Borough School District uses its VIVA software program to teach the Iñupiaq language to its students.

people wanted to learn, as well as others who like to learn languages," Sage says of the effort, which she plans to renew this summer. "At first I recorded my children, then I started to record other people, including longtime Iñupiaq teacher Etta Fournier. I let the person pick the word or phrase they would like to teach, and it's fun to see the responses."

The Alaska Native Language Center at UAF has joined with Google and other organizations involved in preserving languages in the new Endangered Languages Project. The recently unveiled website ([www.endangeredlanguages.com](http://www.endangeredlanguages.com)) is aimed at collecting digital recordings of people speaking disappearing tongues. The idea is to create a kind of online library of the



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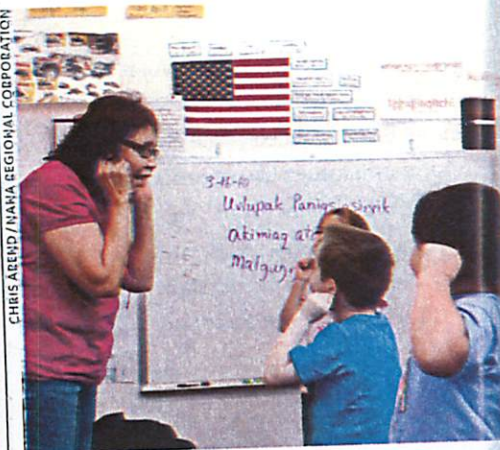
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most threatened languages from around the globe.

"It's a great way to bring attention to the plight of Native languages," Rosita Worl, the Sealaska Heritage Institute president, told Juneau public radio when the project was announced in June. "Our language may never be spoken the way it once was, but the voices of our ancestors are not going to disappear."

Worl is Tlingit. Only 300 people spoke her traditional Southeast Alaska language



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Poliy Agnik Schaeffer teaches Iñupiaq to students at Nikaitchuat Iñlisagviat, a language immersion school in Kotzebue, Alaska.

in 2000, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO lists Southeast Alaska Native languages as "critically endangered," meaning the youngest speakers are grandparents. And even those elders use the language partially and infrequently, Worl reported in testimony to state lawmakers earlier this year.



ALREADY, the endangered-languages site includes historical samples of Alaska Native speakers, provided by the Fairbanks university's Alaska Native Language Archive. Visitors can listen to a 46-year-old recording of Tanaina singers performing a medley of songs in the village of Nondalton. In other clips originally recorded in 1977 in Eagle, the late Louise Paul speaks for hours—sometimes in the endangered Han language of central Alaska, sometimes translating traditional stories into English.

In one such tale, a boy is abandoned on an island only to hear strange voices. The boy follows the noise and comes across a village, Paul said, beginning the story. "But the people looked different. When he comes to the village, they got no mouths. ..."

It's hard not to wonder what happens next. But it's also hard for this brand of traditional oral storytelling to survive in the face of Netflix and Blu-ray players.

Krauss blames the introduction of television to once-isolated Alaska Native villages for hastening the erosion of languages. But what if Native speakers contribute to the programming? Then electronic media can also be a powerful preservation tool, Krauss says.

The efforts of the Lower Kuskokwim School District Film Academy hint at the possibilities. This past spring, high school students from the Bethel area created a series of short videos that can now be found on YouTube. In one video, *Kuli's Lost*, a boy played by 19-year-old Brandon Kilongak of Toksook Bay finds himself separated from friends in downtown Anchorage. The camera follows Kilongak, in a backward baseball cap and hoodie, as he slowly walks along the Fifth Avenue sidewalk. Absorbed in text messages, the village teenager finally looks up. The camera spins, lost in a blur of unfamiliar faces and tourist shops.

Kilongak sits at the curb, rubbing his face. Where did his friends go? he asks in Yup'ik. A city girl in a ponytail sits down nearby, making lunch plans on a cellphone. When Kilongak asks for help finding his way, they can't understand each other.

"Ugh! You're speaking wrong!" he complains in Yup'ik.



YUP'IK CAN ENDURE as long as children continue to learn it in schools and homes. In the next 100 years, however, many if not most Alaska Native languages will likely disappear from all but academic use. That calls for a different tactic. Even so-called extinct languages—some linguists prefer the term "sleeping tongues"—can be resurrected if they are properly documented.

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Hebrew was once a dead language, Krauss notes. In Alaska, Eyak found an unlikely champion in an aspiring French linguist who worked with Krauss to learn the language, building momentum for an ongoing effort to teach Eyak at Alaska workshops and online.

The Eyak Preservation Council plans to hold a first-ever culture camp for Eyak people from across the country, asking descendants to return to the Cordova area in mid-August.

What about Iñupiaq, the language of

White Mountain and other regional dialects? Iñupiaq was once the primary language of the northern and northwestern regions of Alaska, and it has dwindled to as few as 1,500 fluent speakers, Krauss estimated in 2011.

The solution for some of Alaska's heavy-weight regional organizations has been decidedly high tech. In Kotzebue, NANA Regional Corp., through the nonprofit Aqqaluk Trust, completed regional Iñupiaq dialect-teaching programs in partnership with Virginia-based Rosetta Stone, a lead-

ing language-software developer. In Barrow, the North Slope Borough government turned to former UAF Iñupiaq professor Edna MacLean, who taught the language to White Mountain's Agloinga, to work on a Rosetta Stone software project focusing on the North Slope dialect.

MacLean also recently completed a pre-publication version of an Iñupiaq-English dictionary available for download at the UAF website, [www.uaf.edu/anlc](http://www.uaf.edu/anlc). Her work on that project was used in the development of a free iPhone app called Iñupiat Word Finder, which acts as a pocket translator tool and can be used to share favorite words on Twitter and Facebook.

Perhaps the most high-profile effort is the Rosetta Stone software, which works by showing pictures, giving examples of proper speech, and rating users on their pronunciation. A version of the software customized for NANA-region coastal villages, including Kotzebue, was completed in 2007. Another, geared toward the dialect spoken in inland villages along the Kobuk River, such as Selawik, was finished three years later.

More recently, the North Slope Borough School District has been working on a free online teaching aid to help students understand spoken Iñupiaq, says Chrisann Justice, Iñupiaq-language materials developer for the district. Visitors to the school system website simply progress through a series of pictures, choosing the photo that matches the word or phrase they hear spoken on their computer.

Students complete increasingly challenging levels, not unlike a video game. This "Visual Iñupiaq Vocabulary Assessment" program is meant to complement work with an Iñupiaq language teacher and is being used by kindergarten through college students, Justice says.

Those who have completed the program are eager to show off what they've learned.

"Most kids now," she says, "do know more Iñupiaq than their parents."

And that's a positive sign for the survival of Alaska's Native languages. ▲

Kyle Hopkins is a freelance writer living in Anchorage.

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