

SEARCHING FOR EVIDENCE OF ALASKA'S MOST ANCIENT PEOPLE

Archaeology on Fort Wainwright-Managed Lands





FORT WAINWRIGHT-MANAGED LANDS

Just north of the Alaska Range, Soldiers train in vast areas of Alaskan wilderness. This land has a long and exciting human history reaching back more than 14,000 years. Evidence of the very first Alaskans lies underneath our feet, buried in sediments carried by wind and water and capped by plants of the forest and tundra.



Soldiers observing training activities from the Delta River bluff edge.



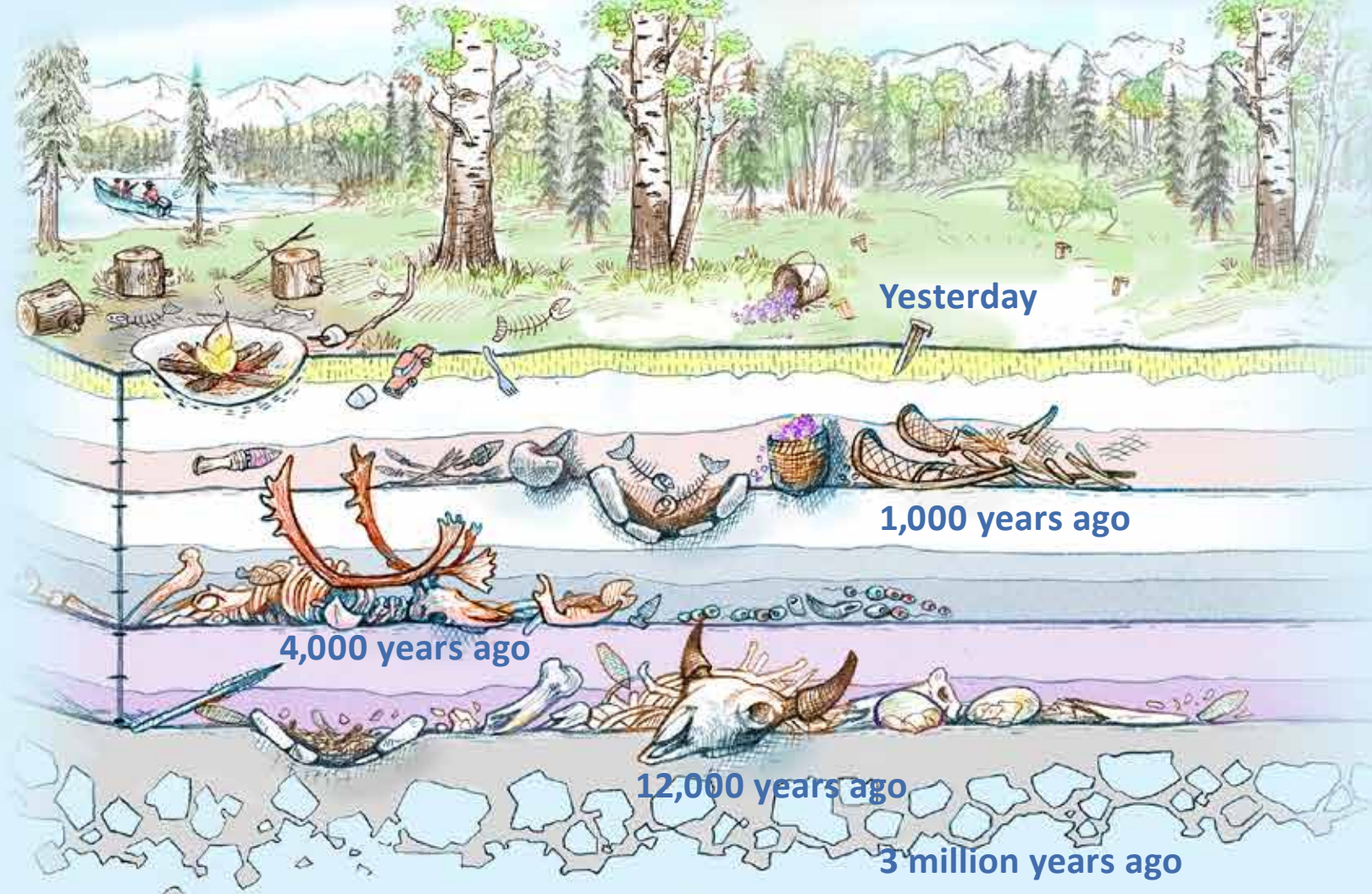
TANANA RIVER BASIN

This land is the traditional territory of the Tanana Athabascans, descendants of ancient Alaskans. Athabascan people live in cities and villages in Interior Alaska today. They continue to conduct traditional activities like hunting and fishing across the landscape.

Fort Wainwright-managed lands are located south of Fairbanks in the Tanana River Valley and the foothills of the Alaska Range. Denali, the tallest mountain in North America, is located just to the south in Denali National Park and Preserve.



Tetlin tribal members cut whitefish at fish camp.



WHAT IS ARCHAEOLOGY?

Archaeology is the scientific study of past people and the traces they left behind (artifacts). An archaeological site is a place where ancient people left evidence that they were there. Archaeologists carefully excavate sites with hand tools (trowels) in measured squares and sift all of the dirt (sediments) through screens. Using their careful measurements, archaeologists reconstruct the site in drawings and computer images and interpret what kinds of activities were taking place.

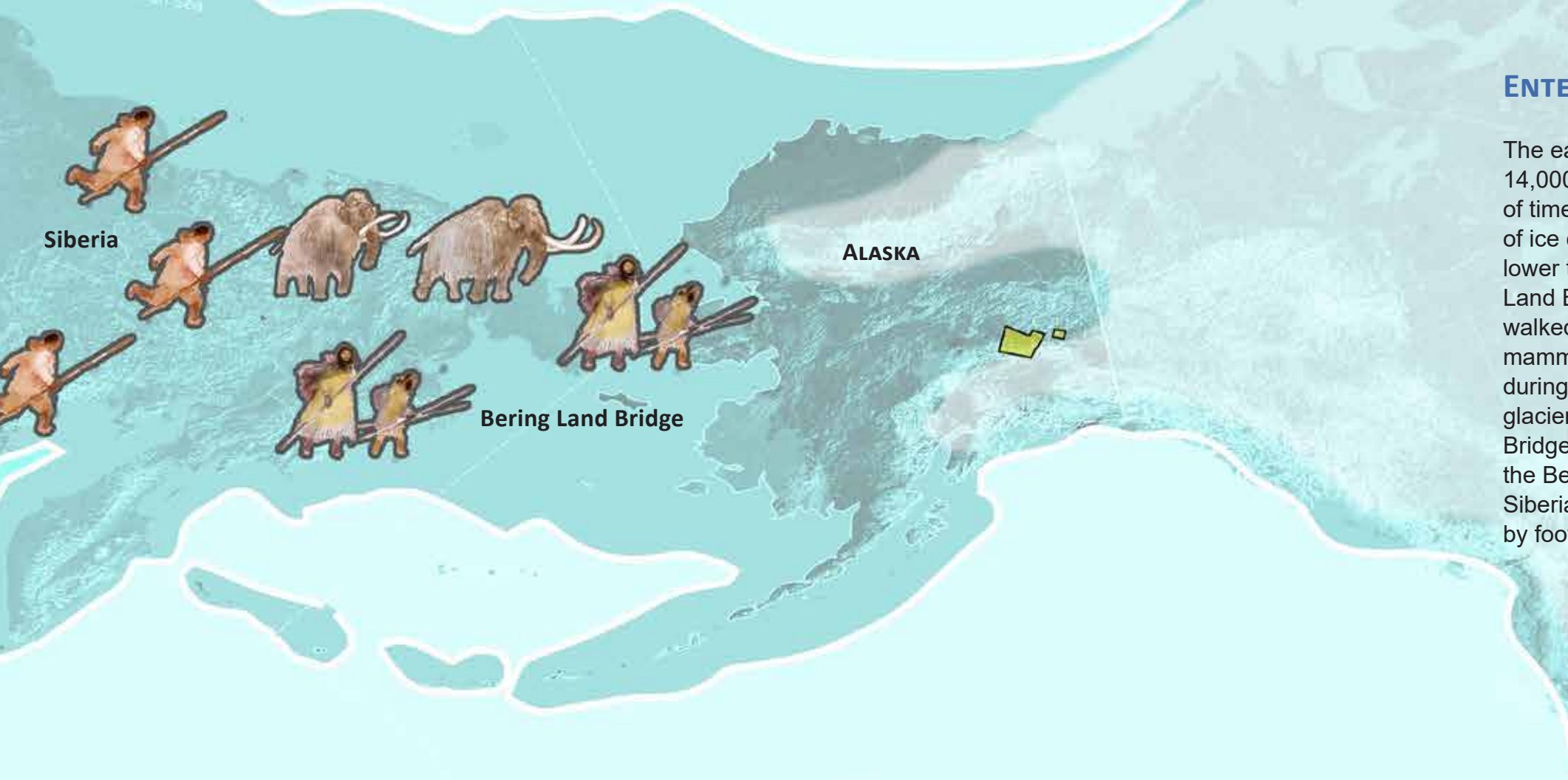
Layers of sediments at archaeology sites, called stratigraphy, preserve sequences of events that happened over time. The deepest sediments are the oldest because they were laid down first. Younger sediments are deposited on top of older ones as time passes. The youngest sediments are always at the top of the sequence.

Can you use the clues left behind at these different sediment layers to tell stories about what may have happened here yesterday and many years before?



Excavations at the Banjo Lake site, Fort Wainwright.





ENTERING BERINGIA

The earliest Alaskans came from eastern Siberia over 14,000 years ago at the end of the last ice age, a period of time when the earth was much colder and large sheets of ice covered northern North America. Sea levels were lower then and a large tract of land, called the Bering Land Bridge, stretched from Siberia to Alaska. People walked across the Bering Land Bridge, hunting herds of mammoth, bison, caribou and other animals that lived during that time. Later, as temperatures grew warmer and glaciers melted, ocean levels rose and the Bering Land Bridge became submerged under what is now known as the Bering Sea. By around 13,000 years ago, Alaska and Siberia were separated by water and travel back and forth by foot became impossible.



THE EARLIEST ALASKANS

The earliest Alaskans hunted large mammals like mammoth and bison using spears tipped with a distinctive style of point. These points combined the flexibility and durability of antler or bone with the razor sharp cutting edge of stone blades called microblades. Extinct and modern species of bison have shared Alaska with humans since the end of the last ice age. Archaeologists know that early Alaskans hunted bison for food, fur, and tool making materials based on the large number of bones that have been found at sites.



Early Alaskans used razor sharp pieces of stone called microblades to edge their spears and other tools.



Excavations at the McDonald Creek site, Fort Wainwright.



Animal bones left by ancient hunters at the McDonald Creek site.

14,000 YEARS BEFORE TODAY

Excavations at the McDonald Creek site in the Tanana Flats have unearthed the remains of 14,000-year-old stone tools and the bones of mammoth, elk, and bison. This is one of the oldest sites in North America! Archaeologists are currently excavating part of the site that contains garbage from an ice age kitchen. Animal bones, charcoal, and stone fragments were left in place after ancient Alaskans cut up these animals for food. Many parts of the site remain to be explored, and archaeologists are hopeful that the homes of the people who lived at the site have been preserved.

Hidden in the puzzle are the types of animal bones excavated at the McDonald Creek site. Can you find them?

- | | | |
|--------|---------|-----------------|
| grouse | mammoth | Canada goose |
| bison | lemming | ground squirrel |
| hare | caribou | taiga vole |
| elk | | |

i	m	c	d	e	s	u	o	r	g	n	h	c	l
c	i	a	e	i	e	v	e	r	u	m	s	b	e
e	q	n	m	a	g	i	d	o	e	e	i	o	m
a	b	a	z	m	c	n	b	l	l	s	f	n	m
g	f	d	r	a	o	i	d	t	o	o	l	e	i
e	s	a	l	r	r	t	k	n	v	o	c	s	n
j	b	g	r	a	o	a	h	h	a	m	h	t	g
x	r	o	c	g	b	w	q	s	g	f	a	j	o
g	r	o	u	n	d	s	q	u	i	r	r	e	l
u	g	s	p	l	t	a	l	t	a	k	e	i	y
l	h	e	e	x	c	a	v	a	t	e	l	o	k
t	c	a	f	i	t	r	a	l	p	d	m	e	w



6,000 YEARS BEFORE TODAY

A few thousand years after the end of the ice age, large forests began to grow in central Alaska, and the environment started to look like it does today. A new group of people arrived in the Alaskan Interior. Archaeologists refer to the culture that lived in the area between 6,000 and 3,000 years ago as the Northern Archaic Tradition. These people were likely the ancestors of modern Athabascans. The Banjo Lake site, near the town of Delta Junction, is one example of the many Northern Archaic sites identified on military training lands.



Banjo Lake, view from the archaeological site.



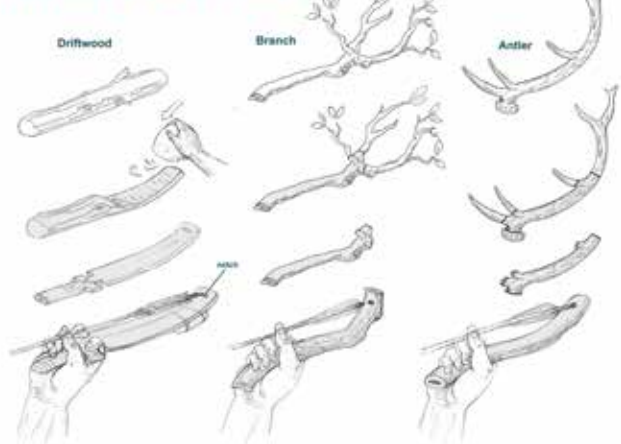
A NEW INVENTION

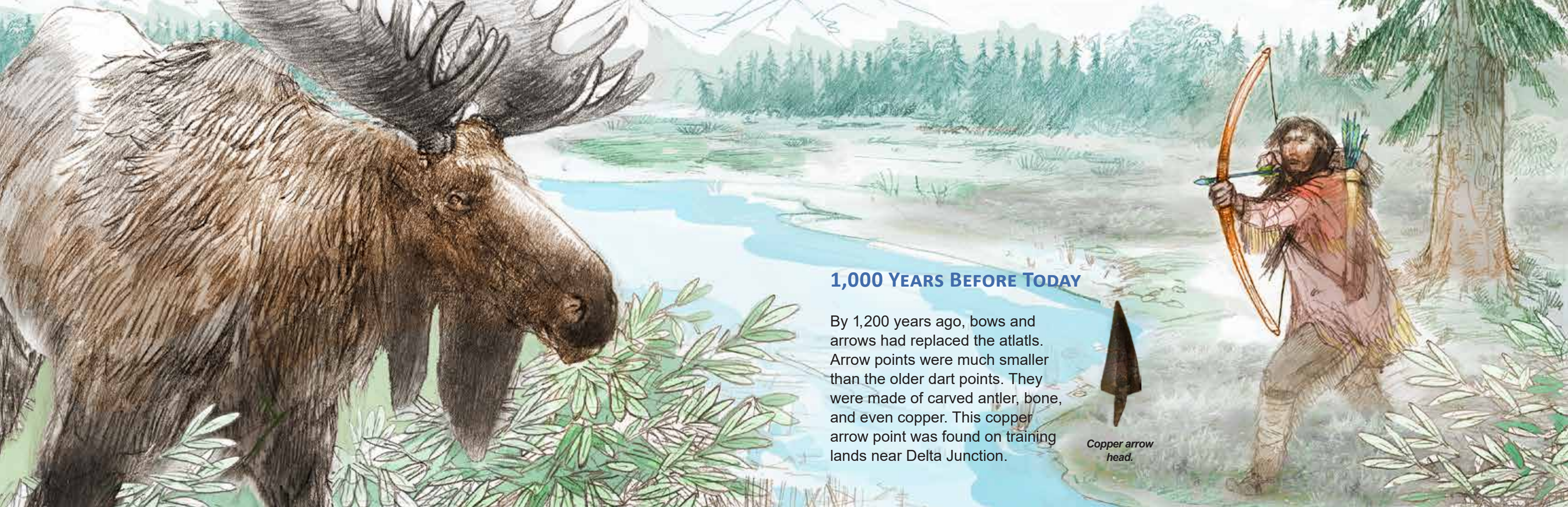
The Northern Archaic Tradition people hunted caribou and bison with a new type of weapon called a spear thrower, or atlatl (pronounced at-lat-l). Atlatls allowed people to throw long, narrow spears called darts with more velocity, or power, than by simply throwing them by hand. Many atlatl darts were tipped with distinctive stone points that were unlike anything previously seen in the Alaskan archaeological record. What are some ways you could make your own atlatl? Do you think you could throw a dart well enough to hunt large and dangerous animals?



Stone dart point.

Three Ways of Making an Atlatl



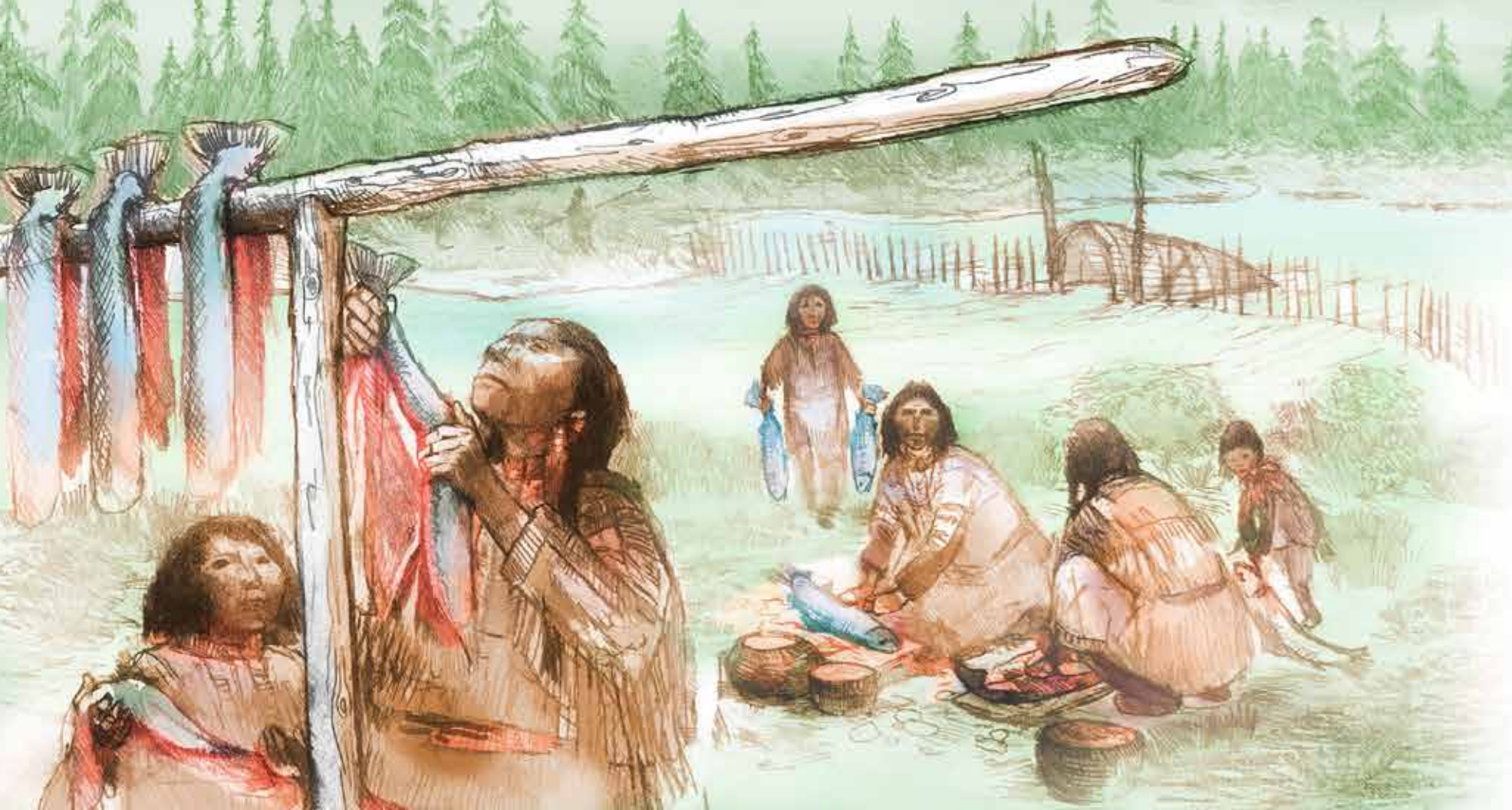


1,000 YEARS BEFORE TODAY

By 1,200 years ago, bows and arrows had replaced the atlatls. Arrow points were much smaller than the older dart points. They were made of carved antler, bone, and even copper. This copper arrow point was found on training lands near Delta Junction.



Copper arrow head.



THE ATHABASCANS

These later people were the early Athabascans. Like their ancestors before them, these people lived in winter villages along creeks and lake shores, but were very mobile during other months hunting caribou, moose, and fishing. Ancient trails ran along the Delta River up into the mountains and on to the Copper River to the south. The Richardson Highway now follows the same route.



Tetlin tribal members caught whitefish in wooden fish weirs. Fish were then cut up and dried to preserve them for many months.



Gordon's Roadhouse in 1911 (Margaret Lentz photograph collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives).



The remains of a collapsed hunting or trapping cabin, Fort Wainwright.

EUROPEAN SETTLERS

Archaeology of the 20th century includes early gold mining sites, roadhouses, and even the remains of plane crashes from the 1940s. Just before Fort Wainwright became a military installation, the land was occupied by homesteaders, trappers, and miners. Can you help this trapper find the lynx he caught?



Cultural Resources Management at Fort Wainwright

The Cultural Resources Management Program supports the Army's mission by inventorying and managing cultural resources in a manner that complies with federal law, minimizes impacts on the mission, supports sustainability of resources and infrastructure, and provides sound stewardship of properties eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

The Cultural Resources Management Office is located within the Environmental Division, Building 3023. Copies of publications and additional information on the history of Fort Wainwright are available upon request. Business hours are Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

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*On the covers:
Excavations at the
Delta River Overlook
site, Fort Wainwright.*