



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON
AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard
University

HONORING NATIONS: 2010 HONOREE
Newtok Relocation Effort
Native Village of Newtok, Alaska

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http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/dca/planning/npg/Newtok_Planning_Group.htm

Scientists and politicians spend hours debating the facts of climate change, but in many places damaging changes to the local environment are already a reality. In the past decade, more and more human settlements have been threatened by catastrophic flooding, wildfires, or drought caused by variations in usual climate patterns. Climate change is already having devastating effects on Alaska; a 2003 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that flooding and erosion affect 86% of Alaska Native villages. Faced with deteriorating environmental conditions, residents of the traditional Yup'ik village of Newtok, Alaska decided to relocate and move the village to the site of the community's summer camp, nine miles away from Newtok's current location. Rather than wait for the United States or the state of Alaska to develop strategies to assist communities affected by climate change, Newtok took its future into its own hands. In doing so, they have become a model for others.

A Community in Peril

In the far western reaches of Alaska, the small Native Village of Newtok lies perched on a precarious outcrop overlooking the Ninglick River. Historically, a winter build-up of sea ice protected the village from strong coastal storms off the Bering Sea. Recently, however, the area has become increasingly warm, the ice barrier no longer forms, and the village is vulnerable to flooding and erosion. The consequences for Newtok have been devastating. Land along the river has been disappearing at an average rate of 82 feet per year. In one powerful storm, the river swallowed the village's barge landing, cutting off the community's access to vital supplies. Another storm caused part of the village's landfill to collapse, leaving residents without a safe place to dispose of waste. In addition, the warming trend has begun to melt the permafrost on which the village is built, causing buildings to tilt at odd angles as they sink into the soil.

In the mid-1990s, the Newtok Traditional Council launched a community discussion to weigh options. Sanitary conditions in the village had become worrisome and public health was suffering. An estimated one-third of the village's children had contracted illnesses that could be traced to unhygienic conditions. The residents decided that the current village was no longer viable and should be moved approximately nine miles south. The chosen site was a familiar high-ground spot within the traditional territory of Newtok families. Known as

Mertarvik, or “getting water from the spring,” it was a site families visited to get freshwater before heading out on summer hunting and fishing trips.

The plan to move their village made perfect sense to the residents of Newtok, but they faced great obstacles. For one thing, the new site was within the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge and was owned by the federal government. For another, building an entirely new village, particularly in the middle of the Alaskan tundra, would be an expensive and complex undertaking. Even though deteriorating conditions made living in Newtok almost intolerable, there was no government program designed to help communities survive under severe environmental threat.

Coming Together to Build a New Home

As a first step, the Newtok Native Corporation, a village corporation set up under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, began negotiations with the federal government. It proposed swapping the existing village site for new land. These efforts paid off in 2003, when Congress passed a law giving the Newtok Native Corporation title to the Mertarvik site.

With the land secured, Newtok representatives worked to find resources to build the new village. Their creation of the Newtok Planning Group was another important step forward. The Group — which brings together an impressive number of players, including the Newtok Traditional Council and the Newtok Native Corporation, nine state of Alaska departments and agencies, ten federal departments and agencies, and five regional organizations — has become a forum for unparalleled collaboration among agencies and organizations engaged in the relocation effort. Participants meet regularly to discuss plans for Mertarvik and how they can contribute.

Expertise and financing from the members of the Newtok Planning Group have helped villagers move toward their goal to establish a new community at Mertarvik. Using funding from the state of Alaska and the Denali Commission, the Newtok Traditional Council held a planning workshop to identify villagers’ housing, public buildings, and design preferences and incorporated these into a Community Layout Plan. The U.S. Army agreed to help with construction for five years through its Innovative Readiness Training Program, which provides military personnel with real-world training on civilian projects. In the summer of 2009, Army personnel began work on their first endeavor at Mertarvik, a barge landing facility that allows equipment and materials to be shipped to the new site. Construction of an access road that connects the barge landing to the future village followed. In the next phase of construction, the Army will build an evacuation/community center: until the move, the facility will serve as a temporary emergency shelter for Newtok residents, after the move, it will become the Mertarvik Community Center. Each of these projects was developed with guidance from Newtok residents and leaders and built with funding from numerous sources, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, the U.S. Department of Commerce, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Yup’ik knowledge and traditions inform every aspect of the new village’s design. The community’s layout reflects the way in which the old sod houses were arranged around a central common. The Community Center’s cultural elements include two huge steam baths, storage areas for hunting and fishing gear, and space for cold storage of fish and game. The arctic entryways to this building are elongated and change in grade to create a natural cold trap, following Yup’ik building techniques. Elders’ knowledge has helped orient the new buildings by taking into account sun, wind, and snowdrifts.

A Small Village in Charge of a Big Project

Faced with seemingly insurmountable problems in Newtok, each resident could have made arrangements to move elsewhere. Indeed, if Newtok citizens had not taken matters into their own hands, there was a risk that some government agency would have decided that the “best option” for them was to relocate to other tribal villages in the area or to a regional center such as Bethel. As a community, however, Newtok looked ahead. Its residents decided that they did not want to lose their close ties as a unique people. With the importance of land to the Yup’ik identity, it was critical to stay within the ancestral territory without burdening the resources of other villages. Moving the settlement to Mertarvik allows the villagers to stay connected to each other and to their physical, economic, and cultural heritage.

Newtok was able to succeed in creating a new village site through incredible determination and by expertly pooling resources from an impressive number of government programs. Despite its unassuming name, the Newtok Planning Group is a groundbreaking way for governments to cooperate. This open partnership has encouraged information sharing and problem solving among the many groups that could help the village. While potentially hundreds of government grants were available to help the community, as one Newtok official notes, “each agency works independently without knowing about projects being carried out by other agencies.” By bringing government representatives into one room, community leaders could plan more efficiently, mix grants from different sources, and fill gaps in funding. Since there are so many restrictions to working with government money, this type of integrated collaboration may be the only way to carry out an ambitious project.

Crucially, the Native Village of Newtok is the principal force behind the Newtok Planning Group and makes all of the final decisions on action. This means that the work underway at Mertarvik is not dependent on the agenda of individual government departments and its momentum can be sustained even when funding from a given program ends. The basic guiding principle is clear: the goals of the community are set first and then discussions are held with partners on how this vision will be funded, designed, and built. This community-driven approach has helped the village work successfully with complex bureaucracies, even though a majority of Newtok residents are not fluent in English.

Bringing the Lessons Home

Confronted with natural forces beyond their control, the citizens of Newtok chose to act. They found a way to bring together government agencies through the Newtok Planning Group. By managing the collaboration, Newtok has been able to piece together the funding it needs to make the seemingly improbable dream of a new village come true. As a result, Mertarvik is taking shape as a safe and livable home where residents will be able to maintain and strengthen their traditional Yup’ik ways. Yet Newtok’s challenges are not unique. More and more communities — Native and non-Native — face severe environmental problems as a result of climate change. Although it is unusual that an entire village is forced to relocate, many communities will need to respond with complex projects requiring unprecedented cooperation among governments and other organizational partners.

Lessons

1 For Indigenous nations, having authority over decisions about homelands is often the first step toward effective problem solving in the face of disaster.

2 Strategic negotiation can be an important means of advancing a nation's interests.

3 Tribally led partnerships can help municipal, state, and federal agencies find new and effective ways to cooperate.

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