

NIMA looks to education, tourism for next generation

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Photos: Tim Pearson / Martin Leonard III
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On a pristine island in the Bering Sea, inhabited mainly by reindeer and musk oxen, the Cup'ig Eskimo residents of Mekoryuk are hedging part of their economic future on an innovative college biology program.

It began this summer with a 10-day concentrated college-level biology course for 10 students from the Yukon Delta. Over the next few years, the Nunivak Island Mekoryuk Alaska (NIMA) Corp. hopes the summer program and related jobs will lead to steady employment on the island, which lies within the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. <http://yukondelta.fws.gov/>

The camp is operated through Nunivak Island Cultural Education and Adventures LLC, a subsidiary of NIMA. It is located some 35 miles west of Mekoryuk, at Nash Harbor, on the north side of the island. <http://www.nimacorporation.com/NICEALLC.htm>

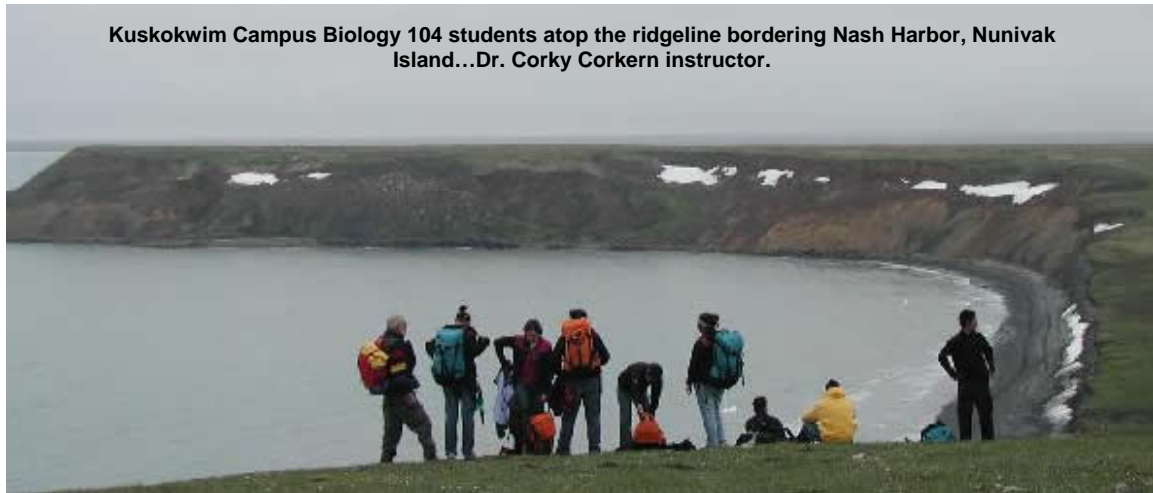
"The main purpose of the camp was to create economic opportunities for shareholders on Nunivak Island," said Terry Don, who managed the camp. "We are looking to expand our operations next year. We hope to double or triple that number (of students)."

Don is also vice chairman of the NIMA board of directors.



The program included lectures, plus day hiking, backpacking and sea kayaking to augment classroom instruction. The academic staff included Native elders in residence,

who supplemented scientific knowledge with local and indigenous knowledge of Nunivak Island.



Kuskokwim Campus Biology 104 students atop the ridgeline bordering Nash Harbor, Nunivak Island...Dr. Corky Corkern instructor.

The outdoor classroom, the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, is known for its abundance of seabirds, shorebirds, whistling swans, emperor, white-fronted and Canadian geese, black brant and other migratory birds, plus salmon, musk oxen and marine mammals.

The core curriculum of the course is a blend of Western academic and traditional subsistence sciences. Field projects are designed around real-time needs for data for the community and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as for long-term scientific efforts at the wildlife refuge. http://fc.bethel.uaf.edu/~summer_science/



NIMA Corporation and Nash Harbor support crew.

"NIMA did a great job pulling the camp resources together," said Martin Leonard III, an associate professor at the Kuskokwim campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Bethel. Leonard is also the executive director of the outdoor center, which offers alternative education and village-based economic development.

"They are doing work force development at the village level, everything from computer training to hospitality, guide training, first aid and training for transportation specialists," Leonard said.

The university has received funding through the National Science Foundation for a five-year program to develop science, technology, engineering and mathematics initiatives in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Leonard said. "We are providing education resources to develop students here so they can get four-year degrees in engineering and science."

Leonard also said he hoped the summer biology courses would be a springboard not only for the participants to attend college, but to also get them substantial jobs in the area in engineering, mining and management of the wildlife refuge area.

"We are hoping they will get a good start on their four-year degrees," he said. "In the past, there has not been a lot of good science and math instruction in rural Alaska."

Don envisions the program attracting a wide range of students.

"Part of the academic emphasis is attracting students in the Delta for exposure for a post-secondary course, but I don't think we will restrict the applicants to the Yukon Delta area," Don said. "Our goal is to provide the service and have it available to anyone. We'll be accepting applications from whoever is interested."

Don said it was a report from the Denali Commission citing the serious economic problems of Nunivak Island that prompted him to explore creative economics.

"Our approach to education (through the subsidiary) emphasizes both the traditional Native way of knowing as well as the Western scientific approach," said Wayne Don, Terry's brother and program manager for NIMA's board. "Nunivak Island provides the ideal wilderness, historic and cultural setting for students to develop expertise in both disciplines."



Elder in Residence, Edward Shavings Sr.

Wayne Don is also an assistant professor of military science at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Participants in the education program also included the Alaskan Outdoor Center, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, Nuniwarmiut Piciryarata Tamaryalkuti (the nonprofit cultural heritage organization for the village of Mekoryuk), the city of Mekoryuk and the Mekoryuk School, among others.

"NIMA has really stepped up to the plate," Leonard said. "They know they have a resource out here on the island, and we're happy to be part of it. We have five years to get it better and better. We think the resource is that valuable."

Tourism ventures explored

In a related development, NIMA also jumped into the tourism business by offering guided tours three times this summer to cruise ship travelers with Cruise West, which stopped at Nash Harbor.



KuC Instructor Martin Leonard III and Students visit historic sites on location at Nash Harbor.



Ed Shavings Overseeing Nash Harbor's First Cruise-ship Visitors.

Together, the Don brothers approached Cruise West, which had been operating tours in the area for several years.

Cruise ship visitors offered NIMA an opportunity to train a handful of its young residents in tourism hospitality. Following courses in hospitality training and a wilderness first aid responder course, NIMA sent the young people off to guide several dozen visitors on an area tour, plus a little sea kayaking.



"We had people from Australia, England, all over the planet," he said. "We took them on tours of the old village and campsite, hiking and kayaking. The guides actually did very well. They had a blast, interacting with the folks that came ashore. (Cruise West) agreed to come back next year."

Terry Don said the NIMA board would hold a planning session with Cruise West on ways to customize the tour to the travelers' desires next year. "We want to see what their customer base wants and to fine tune our product," he said. "We're hoping to offer them experiences they can't have anywhere else."



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Other Web resources:

- NIMA Corporation <http://www.nimacorporation.com>
- Nunivak Cultural Programs <http://www.nunivak.org>
- Alaskan Outdoor Center <http://www.alaskanoutdoorcenter.org>
- Alaska Journal of Commerce http://www.alaskajournal.com/stories/083004/foc_20040830010.shtml