HISTORIC USES OF THE ALAGNAK ("BRANCH") RIVER

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Introduction

This report was prepared in anticipation of a navigability case to be filed by the State of Alaska in U.S. District Court. It was prepared with recreational use of the Alagnak River serving as the primary focus. However, all aspects of use of the waterbody and its underlying lands are addressed.

Historic and contemporary uses of the Alagnak ("Branch") River, including the Nonvianuk Branch, are described in this report. Information from published and unpublished sources, as well as from questionnaires and oral interviews, is presented in order to give a comprehensive overview of historic and contemporary uses of the Alagnak River.

History of the river's use is presented in sections dealing with native settlement prior to white contact, Russian and American activities in the region, use of the river from 1900 to statehood, and use of the river from statehood to the present.
Prehistory and Native Settlement Patterns

Archaeological evidence indicates that the Southwestern, or Yupik, Eskimos inhabited Southwestern Bristol Bay and the Alagnak River region prior to white contact. Although most archeological work in the region has been done north and south of the Alagnak drainage, Don Dumond, who has done the major archeological work in the region, places artifacts from sites in that region in the Norton Tradition. Such sites tended to occur well up the major salmon streams such as those of the Nushagak, Wood, Kvichak, Naknek, and Ugashik drainage systems. In these sites, notched pebbles generally interpreted as fish sinkers are especially common, suggesting that migrating salmon provided a staple resource. (Dumond 1977:113)

Through a 1961 excavation on the Brooks River, south of the Alagnak River, Cressman and Dumond (1962:2-3) were able to "establish the antiquity of a widespread subsistence pattern, summer interior fishing and hunting, of the order of 4,000 years ago."

There are a number of sites surrounding and one directly on the Alagnak River that suggest a dense population and widespread settlement in the Alagnak and Southwestern Bristol Bay region. Major sites discovered by Dumond include the Brooks River Bluffs, Brooks River wier, and Brooks River Falls sites. Further sites were discovered at Pavik, on the right (north) bank of the Naknek River, and the Smelt Creek site on the left (south) bank of the Naknek River. As none of the sites contain permanent structures, Dumond felt that the area suggested intermittent occupation by "small and transient groups." According to Cressman and Dumond (1962:17-18),

the attempt to discover permanent settlements for comparative purposes, then, was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, because of the number of seasonal camps discovered, the existence of such permanent settlements within the Naknek drainage or in its near vicinity is assumed.

Those sites near and surrounding the Alagnak River are included in Appendix 2 of this report. This appendix lists those sites contained in the Alaska Division of Parks Alaska Heritage Resource Survey file, a massive records system which catalogs all known pre-historic and historic resource sites in the state.
Historic Background (1818-1900)

The history of Russian and American exploration in the Bristol Bay region after 1818 is well documented. According to James VanStone (1972:5), "the first . . . contact between Yupik speaking Eskimos of southwestern Alaska and Europeans took place in 1818 when a party of Russian-American Company employees was sent from Kodiak Island to explore the territory north of Bristol Bay." The Russian presence in Bristol Bay was oriented toward the establishment of the fur trade and the Russian Orthodox Church. According to VanStone (1972:21), "the exploration of Bristol Bay . . . , together with the founding of Aleksandrovski Redoubt, later to be called Nushagak . . . , were responsible for opening the interior regions of southwestern Alaska to the fur trade." Although VanStone goes on to say that the building of Russian Orthodox churches assisted in changing settlement patterns, the fur trade had a greater effect on the Eskimos in changing their subsistence patterns. As Russian outposts were built, the Eskimos moved closer to the source of their new cash economy lifestyle. But it was not until the beginning of the commercial salmon industry that Native settlement patterns changed drastically.

Although involvement in the fur trade greatly affected the subsistence pattern, one must question whether it brought about a very great change in the settlement pattern. . . . A trapping-trading economy may have reduced the actual amount of the time which the Eskimos spent in their villages, but not enough to cause a major shift in the settlement pattern. (VanStone 1971:143)

The sale of Alaska to the United States by Russia marked the beginning of the American Period. American interests in Alaska were directed primarily toward the fur and fishery potential of the territory. In 1867 assets of the Russian-American Company were purchased by Hutchinson, Kohl and Company, which later became the Alaska Commercial Company. The company nearly monopolized the fur trade in southwestern Alaska until 1877, when fur-bearing animals became depleted. Following the fur trade's demise, commercial fishing became the major industry in the Bristol Bay region. According to VanStone (1971:22):

of far greater significance for the acculturation of all peoples . . . than either Christianity or the fur trade was the commercial salmon industry that began to develop in Bristol Bay during the 1880's. . . . The commercial fishery was responsible for bringing about major seasonal fluctuations of population which brought Eskimos from even the remotest villages to the area. . . .

To date, the commercial salmon industry in Bristol Bay remains that region's primary industry. Its significance has changed little over the past one hundred years.
Historic Background (1900-1981)

The commercial salmon fishery and its importance to the Bristol Bay region was rapidly expanding at the turn of the century; however, the author was unable to find specific references to the Alagnak River's use during that time. It is not until the mid 1950's that references are made to the Alagnak River as an important part of the Bristol Bay salmon fishery, and then only as a tributary of the Kvichak River. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (1954:68), "the Kvichak River tributaries are the most important salmon spawning streams entering Bristol Bay":

Practically all of the lake, stream, and river systems are inhabited with large numbers of resident trout and grayling. These waters also support large numbers of anadromous fish composed principally of sockeye and King Salmon and are the spawning grounds essential in maintaining the important fisheries of this region. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1954:119).

In the early 1970's, numerous studies were undertaken regarding management potentials of the Alagnak River. Between June 25 and July 4, 1971, Royce Perkins, a biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Habitat Division, located in Anchorage, participated in a float trip of the Alagnak River-Nonvianuk branch. His accounts of the fish and fishing on the river, as well as man-use and management recommendations, follow:

While we were at Nonvianuk Lake two chartered float planes brought a total of nine fishermen in. Both guides were from Anchorage. These people nearly all took their limits of five rainbow each in a very short time. A few lake trout were killed and taken also, but rainbow were definitely the prized species. Egg clusters and flashing spinning lures were the most successful.

Those using files caught a few fish, however, on grey ghost and coachman patterns. A "muddler minnow" brought no strikes.

After leaving the lake, fishing slowed down dramatically down-river but was still fairly good. We caught several rainbow and greyling plus one lake trout before reaching the confluence of Alagnak branch. Spinning lures were once again more effective than flies. One rainbow was taken on a "muddler minnow", however, from this point down, the river became increasingly flooded and turbid, reducing fishing success greatly. About half-way down river we encountered a large population of greyling feeding on what appeared to be salmon fry. We couldn't entice any of them to take a lure however, so we are not certain of their prey.

In the most likely-looking locations over many miles we tried a few casts with no success. Had the water been lower, we feel certain fishing would have been good in many of these places.
On July 1, we did manage to catch two rainbow and one greyling at the mouth of a creek. . . . These fish were approximately 17" long. They were taken on a white rubber grub-like lure and a "crocodile" lure.

Approximately 15 miles up-river from the mouth we came upon the first king salmon. This was on July 2. We took one for food and caught and released a few more. These fish, ranging from four-pound "jacks" up to 40 pounds were excellent fighters. They readily hit our flashing spinning lures. From this point down we saw several king salmon roll above the surface but no more fishing was tried.

Man-Use

At the outlet of Nonvianuk Lake there are several buildings, some of which belong to Wein Consolidated Airlines. These are used by sport-fishermen. There are a couple of older log buildings which appear to have been a permanent home at one time. They are open and a note inside tells one he is welcome to stay overnight.

Down-river about three miles a cabin was started several years ago out of small logs. It apparently was never finished.

The next building we saw is at confluence of Alagnak and Nonvianuk branches. This small cabin appears to belong to a trapper and is in good repair.

Further down, on June 29 (see map for location) we came to the finest cabin seen anywhere in the Bristol Bay wilds. It stands on the north bank. This cabin, also probably a trapper's, is of log with hewn floor and inside walls and has a beautiful moose-hide bed. Unlike buildings below on the river which are more accessible, this one was unlocked and unvandalized.

The following day, and for the remainder of the trip, we passed an increasing number of cabins and homes. Most of these are probably used as subsistence fishing and trapping camps. Alaska Department of Fish and Game has a cabin and salmon-counting tower well down-river.

There are three native "settlements" on the Alagnak River. One of them, on the south bank appears to be permanently occupied by several families and many dogs. However, this perhaps is only in use seasonally. A second, smaller, cluster of houses lies on the north bank and probably is used as a fish camp, although at one time it was likely used year-round. The third group of buildings is at the mouth on the north bank. This is the site of the village of Branch River, Abandoned several years ago. Four or five large frame houses now stand deteriorating.
As for sport-fishing, apparently only the upper-most portions of the river get much traffic. According to guides we met, the exquisite piece of river just as it drops from Nonvianuk Lake is one of the most popular spots in the area for rainbow fishermen and gets very heavy use through the summer.

Management Recommendations

The Alagnak River system is large and offers great potential for diversified use. The Nonvianuk branch is an excellent piece of water for canoe of kyak. It is swift and exciting but not dangerous--at least at the time of our trip. Perhaps a lower water level would expose dangerous rocks. This branch is wild and heavily timbered and offers fine rainbow fishing. Power boats should be excluded. Aircraft should not land nor fly below 3000 feet over this extraordinary stretch of river during ice-free months. Landings can be made on Nonvianuk Lake. Power boats and aircraft should be allowed on the main Alagnak River with the exception of the upper 15-20 miles. This portion should be protected along with the Nonvianuk Branch. Perhaps this protection can best be met by inclusion into the National Wilderness Waterway system.

On the lower Alagnak, where the heavier spruce-type vegetation gives way to several types, further investigations should be made to determine moose population status.

Further waterfowl and fur animal and trapping information must be known before specific recommendations can be made.

Due to the apparently very heavy traffic of sport fishermen at the outlet of Nonvianuk Lake, I would suggest the placement of a man here during summer. In the two days we were there I gave four citations for violations.

This temporary person, as well as doing enforcement and public relations work, would have an opportunity to collect scale samples and data from a great number of large rainbow trout. (Perkins 1971:6-7,9-12)

In August of 1971, Peter Shepherd, another employee of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, floated the Nonvianuk branch of the Alagnak River. His account follows:

After two or three days required to get ourselves and gear and notes straightened out, we were flown to Nonvianuk Lake by Charlie Allen. This was June 25. We spotted one brown bear and a moose or two along Alagnak River on the way in.
We set up camp at the outlet near Wien's cabins and spent a couple of days on survey. Willows (again mainly S. pulchra) in the area have had only 5% of annual growth removed by moose. Rainbow fishing was excellent -- fish mostly 18" to 22".

This spot is apparently a high-use area as regards to fishing. Three planes landed while we were there carrying a total of 13 fishermen (4 of whom were without licenses and/or fishing w/multiple hook and were cited). Nearly all of these people took their limit of 5 rainbow.

Seems to me it might be a good spot for a permanent temporary for the summer doing combination creel census/scale sampling and enforcement work.

We began floating the Nonvianuk River on the 28th of June. This is a swift, clear, pleasurably floatable stretch of water. The Nonvianuk River and all but the lower portion of the Alagnak (Branch) River appear to be important moose calving areas. Myriad small islands of S. pulchra, S. alexensis sedges and grasses afford prime habitat. We saw several cows with calves, plus a few bulls.

Along nearly all of the Nonvianuk and upper Alagnak rivers there are deep bear trails strewn with skeletons of salmon. We ran into salmon (Kings) well down river on July 1 approximately 10 miles below the Department counting towers.

Several cabins, both log and frame stand along the Alagnak. Apparently the upper ones are mainly trappers' shelters and those down river are for fishing sites as well.

Waterfowl were not found in great abundance except for red-breasted mergangers. Two pairs and a group of seven non-breeding swans and a few pair of harlquin and pintail and one high flock each of cranes and geese (white-fronts?) would nearly complete the list.

Approximately the lower half of the Alagnak was flooded probably 6 to 8 feet. This I'm sure had a great deal to do with the dearth of waterfowl. The flooded conditions also made information on fur-bearers difficult to get.

We reached the Kvichak River July 2. The next day we picked up the 4 h.p. Johnson we had stashed in the bushes and tooled all the way to Naktnek, then up river to King Salmon.

In July, 1973, the U.S. Bureau of Outdoor Recreation began studies of the Alagnak River for its possible designation as a wild and scenic river. Additions of such rivers to the wild and scenic river system was mandated under section 17(d)(2) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, of 1971. David Dapkus, a planner with the bureau, and five other individuals representing various state and federal agencies floated
the Alagnak River as part of the wild and scenic river studies referred to above. The trip log follows:

Alagnak River field inspection - July 1973

We conducted an interagency field inspection of the Alagnak River July 23-28, 1973. The Alagnak flows generally west across the (west side) Alaska Peninsula about 30 miles north of King Salmon. Participants were:

David Dapkus - BOR, Anchorage
Gene Ludlow - BLM Anch. District
Gil Blinn - NPS, Katmai National Monument
Rich Randall - ADF&G King Salmon
David Bohn - NPS Consultant
Abigail Dapkus
Don Nielsen - Bristol Bay Native Assoc., was scheduled to accompany us, but cancelled.

Twelve foot Avon Redshank (2 man) rafts were used for the river inspection.

July 23

We left Anchorage in the morning, loaded with gear and boats and flew to Kukaklek Lake via BLM standard goose (twin engine). We picked up part of the crew in King Salmon. Made camp on the southwest shore of Kukaklek Lake about 1/2 mile from where the Alagnak begins at the lake's outlet. Red salmon, running up the river to the lake, appeared to be schooling up near the outlet. We caught and released many reds, but did not keep any because they were in poor condition. The entire day was sunny and warm as were all except the next to the last day on the river.

July 24

The lake and first five river miles lie in rolling tundra covered country. Then the river enters a valley that becomes increasingly narrow until it becomes a vertical rock walled canyon impassible by foot. The entire valley and canyon area is densely covered with a white spruce forest. In this "heart" of the canyon lies a Class III rapid, followed at about 100 yards by a good Class II rapid. From the lake to these rapids, the river flows about 3 mph through an extremely rocky and shallow single channel course. This 15 mile reach of the river is Class I with Class II in places. We camped below the Class III rapids.

We saw one large grizzly bear, one bull moose with a large rack, two swans, an eagle, hawks, ptarmigan, Arctic terns, and seagull. The river was filled with red salmon and also
had numerous kings, neither were biting much at this point. Lake trout, rainbows, and grayling were plentiful. We ate fish for supper.

July 25

Ran some more Class II rapids as the canyon slowly began to widen until its confluence with the Nonvianuk River where we were out in rolling tundra country one more. The river remained rocky, 3 mph, mostly Class I water but mixed with Class II to the Nonvianuk. Fishing remained good with several grayling and lake trout caught at the river's confluence. We saw moose, ducks, Arctic terns, and seagulls. Made camp a few miles downstream of the two river's confluence.

After the Nonvianuk, the Alagnak became braided, less rocky, with thick willow brush lining much of the riverbanks. The river is easily runnable for its remaining length (all Class-I).

July 26-27

The river continued to be braided, running about three mph, and was often lined with willow brush. Red salmon and king salmon also remained plentiful as were grayling. We observed a grizzly bear, several moose, hawks, seagulls, and Arctic terns. We passed several Native allotment sites, some with older cabins.

Camped (July 27) at a large Native fish camp about 10 miles above the mouth of the river. A Native family was there and kindly offered a cabin for us to use.

July 28

We were picked up by BLM goose on the river. It was a difficult place to load the plane due to a lack of gravelbars for the plane to park. Flew to King Salmon to refuel and dropped off part of the crew, then returned to Anchorage. (Dapkus 1973:1-2).

Gilbert Blinn, who participated in the float trip, commented on the trip in a letter to David Dapkus. The letter included Blinn's recommendations for the river's future management. According to Blinn (1973):

Motor boat use should be prohibited in the Alagnak River between the lower end of the quiet water below Kakaklek Lake (about 3 miles downstream from the lake) and the confluence with the Nonvianuk River. Snowmachine use, if consistent with Wild and Scenic Rivers Management, should be restricted to the river itself. . . . These uses will permit subsistence use of the area, provide for recreational fishing, and preserve the most scenic part of the river for canoe and raft use on a wilderness basis.
Blinn also felt that the Alagnak "should be managed primarily for fisheries resources, and subsistence and recreational uses" (Blinn 1973). Blinn's unpublished report on the Alagnak addresses these concerns: "While only that portion of the Alagnak and Nonvianuk River immediately adjacent to the lakes are fished regularly, the entire lengths of these streams hold high potential" (Blinn 1973). In the same report, the issue of floatability is addressed: "Both rivers are clearwater, free-flowing streams flowing through a natural pristine setting. They are highly boatable for small craft, including canoes and rubber rafts" (1973). According to Blinn, present recreational use consists mainly of sport fishing, particularly for trophy rainbow trout and grayling. Sport hunters hunt the area for brown/grizzly bear and moose. Both rivers have been recently floated by small watercraft.

In September of 1973, Mary Kaye Hession, a member of Knik Kanoers & Kayakers, floated the northern branch of the Alagnak River. Her account of that trip follows:

Alagnak River, north of Katmai—we ran it early September 1973 during unusual Indian summer weather. Much sun, little rain and a tail-wind. Water level appears extremely regular—fed by huge lake and near-constant rain. About 80 miles all together; we spent four days, but in usual weather (headwinds) it would take longer. Weather is the only drawback to this trip.

We put in at the outlet of Kakaklek Lake. There is another fork out of Nonvianuk Lake, but it's not whitewater. Our branch, called the Alagnak on maps, is just called the "Branch" by the locals. We had flown Wien to King Salmon, then took the Wien shuttle flight to the Brooks Camp, Grosvenor Camp and Kulik Lodge on Nonvianuk Lake. From Kulik we chartered a fast, powerful Pilatus-Porter to take all five of us, with gear, to the put-in. We had two Avon six-man rafts. This would be a lovely canoe stream but unfortunately the Kulik Lodge concession doesn't seem to have any, so people have to use rafts or Kleppers. (It would cost too much to Wien a rigid boat to Kulik.) (And too tricky; they couldn't even get the gear we DID bring to King Salmon, losing a bag or two full of warm clothes and one guy's sleeping bag along the way. They found it later but it was too late and he suffered through the entire trip sleeping in a ratty cotton sleeping bag they loaned him.)

Pilot told us we'd have a heart-breaking portage around a terrible falls which he showed us from the air. Didn't look like a falls at all, just a chute, but he said it was wicked, last raftload had lost raft and all gear there, etc. And we knew the BOR had portaged it, which just goes to show. It was even marked "rapids" on the map. Turned out to be a dinky little chute with a modest roller on each side—the second raft went through one of the rollers sideways (they
hadn't quite figured out how to handle the raft yet) without even taking on any water. (No, this was NOT low water--water was right up to the vegetation--and no, the BOR CANNOT claim that it was running the river in a flood, since there were no signs that the river has ever flooded within the last few decades.) This rapid might be called II+ and the other whitewater a modest II. From the put-in to the confluence with Nonvianuk is 25 miles; after that no whitewater, about 50 miles to the Kvichak. Then into the delta of the Kvichak, where tides and winds are strong--make sure you catch the right tide; if that means waiting a couple of hours, do your waiting upstream from delta, which is just mud. Then we stayed left and five miles after the Alagnak joined the Kvichak we came to the Alaska Packers Cannery, long since closed down but with a caretaker who radioed to King Salmon for a charter pilot to come pick us up. There's a good airstrip at the cannery which is still kept up.

The put-in is a state trophy trout area, and the whole river is packed with trout and salmon, all five species. Nice scenery (not flashy), starting with dry, open tundra, then on into spruce and bluffs. The lower part has many Native allotments and fish-camps but nobody was there that late in the season. We saw 14 ospreys, lots of eagles and a still-occupied nest (in SEPTEMBER?), whistling swans, a gyrfalcon, a rough-legged hawk, four brown bears at very close range, four moose including one exceptional bull, a weasel, a red fox very close (he ignored us), ground squirrels and a porcupine who was swimming doggedly down the river, pooped and too dumb to head for shore. We headed him over toward an island with our raft (he'd tried to land at another island but didn't have much river-sense--he headed for the eddy too late and missed it), and after getting clobbered by a sweater he finally managed to make an eddy and haul out.

We sometimes spent a while searching for campsites because we wanted them perfect (soft, level tundra, safe spot to build a fire, good bear-bag trees, etc.); we always managed to find a perfect one.

The trip was very pleasant; the river rates high, even though its whitewater is quite modest. (Disbelieve any stories you may hear about 30-foot waterfalls on the Alagnak. (Hession n.d:1-2)

In a 1973 draft environmental impact statement, the National Park Service notes uses of the Alagnak River in the proposed Katmai National Park:

Boating opportunities are varied with the rivers well suited to motorized boats, rafts or canoes. . . . Access to the river is by boat coming upstream from the Kvichak River. . . . Based upon aerial reconnaissance and available information, the Alagnak River and its major tributary the
Nonvianuk River meet the criteria for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System in that the river and its immediate environment possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational and fish and wildlife values. The river is of sufficient length to provide a meaningful high quality recreation experience. (1973:291-292)

Richard Russell, a sport fish biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game stationed in King Salmon, has written a number of trip logs and notes on information regarding the Alagnak River. In 1974 he talked with a local resident Ed Seiler, about the Alagnak River area. His notes of that conversation follow:

Ed Seiler came in to the office today. We discussed sport fishing in the trophy area and some past area history.

According to Ed, rainbows have always been hard to come by in the middle section of Branch River. We went in by helicopter opposite Sugarloaf back in 1951-52 and found nothing in the way of rainbow trout (during June).

"Old man Hammersly" (Bill), back in 1950-53, tried to get Ed to stop by and fish Kukaklek outlet back when Ed ran a small store in King Salmon. Ed went on to Battle River where he caught a couple 8 lb. rainbow trout. On the return trip he stopped to see Hammersly who had a "gunny sack full" of 10 pound rainbow trout for him . . . as proof that they were present.

Hammersly reported an old native drying rack at Kukaklek with rainbow tails up to 10 inches across on it in the 40's. Seiler never saw the rack.

When Ed went into guiding he asked around to locate the areas that produced the biggest rainbows. The representative of the Fish and Wildlife Service told him beyond a doubt the biggest rainbows around came from Kukaklek Lake.

Ed says that Air Force and Navy exploitation in the late 40's and early 50's really affected the rainbow populations in the areas lakes and streams. He believes the "golden char" of Enchanted Lake are very similar to a "blue back char" found in certain lakes in Maine, I believe. He'd like us to sample some of his char. He thinks they spawn off the creek mouths.

He recommends fly only for the Lower Talarik Creek "Char Hole." Says he's observed air taxi's and guides people snagging char there.

Ed has caught small rainbow trout - up to 8 pounds at Gilbralter River outlet but none bigger in late September.
One of Richard Russell's trip logs follows:

**August 13**

Lou Gwartney, David Sarandria, and I (Richard Russell) left King Salmon at 1340 hours with George Tibbets in Penn Air Widgeon bound for Nonvianuk Lake. We arrived at about 1430 hours. It is blowing east wind about 20 and the lake was unsuitable for landing (big waves) so we landed on a nearby pond approximately a mile downstream.

Following the Widgeon's departure we packed our gear to the river (5-10 minute portage) and set up camp, at a previously used campsite.

From our campsite we could observe several kings holding in pool right in front of us.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon and evening fishing, and exploring the upper mile of Nonvianuk River and the adjacent shore of Nonvianuk Lake. We hooked lots of juvenile rainbow trout in the upper 1/2 mile of Nonvianuk River. These ranged in length from roughly 175 to 350 mm. Arctic grayling, whitefish, chum salmon, and numerous king salmon were observed in this stretch of water. No large rainbow trout or lake trout were hooked on either lures or flies.

No one was occupying Hammersly camp.

Saw one moose, two swans, common loons, a bald eagle, and a brood of mergansers on the river. Also saw otter sign. The willows around Hammersly camp appear to get heavy browse pressure from moose.

**August 14**

Floated down Nonvianuk River to its confluence with the Kukaklek fork, and then continued another 4-5 miles. Camped tonight on an island.

Saw many kings today. Don't think there was a 2 minute stretch of floating anywhere in which we didn't see a king.

Fished a couple locations in Nonvianuk River while stretching our legs. . . . Hooked a few small rainbows. Lou saw a couple of sockeye in a slow backwater area we passed.

Negotiated Nonvianuk River rapids with no trouble. Observed chums spawning along the bank in several areas we passed.
At the Nonvianuk-Kukaklek confluence we spent about an hour. Lou caught a king out of the big hole at the confluence and between us we caught about 10 grayling on wet flies. The grayling ranged in length from about 300 to 400 mm.

About 2 miles farther downstream we spotted a large concentration of kings in a hole where two channels came together. We stopped to attempt catching a king. However, on about the second cast, Henry (David) hooked a char, and he another on the next cast . . . so we began catching char. In all we caught about 15 out of this particular hole. They ranged in length from about 300 to 500 mm. They were healthy, robust and active when hooked. Several had begun to show spawning coloration. Males had quite pronounced kypes. We photographed a couple.

Henry also caught a lake trout from this hole. It was slender, approximately 500 mm in length, and was immature. There was nothing in its gut. It was retained and consumed.

This evening we fished around camp. Several grayling and one char were caught.

It rained tonight.

Wildlife seen today included 1 porcupine, 1 eagle nest (1 eaglet in nest), and several harliquins. Bear tracks were observed on one occasion.

August 15

Floated down to the point that has two cabins on it (one with moose horns over door) today.

Stopped to fish periodically. At one hole this morning, Henry and I both hooked kings. I landed one and we photographed it. Several char and small rainbows were caught also.

This afternoon we floated up on one of Ray Loesche's fishing parties. He had two 180's on floats parked along the riverbank and about 10 people spread out over 100 yards or so of stream. They were all using legal gear fishing for kings, silver, char, rainbows, or whatever they could catch. They said they'd kept nothing today.

We stayed tonight in the cabin with the moose horns over the door. We fished the area in the vicinity of the cabin catching mostly small rainbow trout (200-250 mm) and an occasional grayling. Most of the kings observed in this particular area appeared to be upmigrating. Several hundred chums were noted spawning within a mile of the cabin (downstream). Found a spinning rod along the bank tonight. I caught 10 juvenile rainbows in 2½ hours of angling this evening.
August 16

Floated down to Cusack's scow (several miles below the ADF&G Comm. Fish counting tower site).

This morning we stopped in a braided area about 4 miles below the cabin we stayed in last night. Here we caught grayling, small rainbows, and a couple of char. In a small, quiet, backwater in which about 15 chums were spawning, I noticed several rainbow trout feeding and I caught 3. Of these, two were between 420 and 480 mm in length. They were slender, very darkly colored, and were probably fish that spawned in the river this spring. Rainbow fingerlings were also noticed in this area.

We ate lunch near Agnes Estrada's cabins. Caught nothing there but a short ways downstream we spotted some kings and stopped to fish them. I caught a small rainbow (approximately 300 mm in length). I also observed a large male king grab a spent male pink salmon in its mouth and swim a ways with it held sideways like a dog would carry a bone. He eventually released it. Quite impressive. Also saw a mink along the bank here.

We floated most of the remainder of the afternoon watching ducks. Mallards, wigeon, pintails, harlequins, teal and mergansers were quite numerous. Also saw several loons.

On a sand bar just a short ways below the Fish and Game tower side, we observed a lame, one-antlered bull caribou sunning itself. It got up and ran (rather haltingly) a few yards when we stopped to photograph it. It had been lying on a sand bar.

Saw the scar of a recent fire (involving one of Loesche's crew) this afternoon.

At 1800 hours we reached Cusacks. After waiting a while for the airplane and swatting a few no-see-ums, we decided to investigate a fish that was jumping on the other side of the river. We rowed across and cast out near where the splashes had been and caught two very robust rainbow trout (456 and 492 mm respectively). These were steelhead-like in appearance. A third was caught shortly later (494 mm). The largest was about 4-5 pounds in weight. We killed the first two. They'd been feeding on smelt and whitesocks. One also had a shrew in its stomach.

We also hooked a couple of pike. None were retained. Silvers were observed jumping, but none were caught.

At roughly 8:00 P.M. the Widgeon arrived and we flew back to King Salmon. A very interesting trip.
A 1978 report by Steven R. Behnke, Resource Specialist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, details subsistence and recreational use of the Alagnak River. According to Behnke (1978:7) the waterways of the Katmai National Monument are very important for subsistence use: "Since much subsistence related travel is by boat or snowmobile, the lakes, rivers and open country where travel is easiest are particularly important for resource harvest." Behnke writes that residents of Naknek "hunt moose in the Branch (Alagnak) River, and access is mainly by boat or float-equipped aircraft. Several families with ties to Levelock regularly utilize the Branch for moose hunting" (1978:143-144). He also adds that the "Branch River is becoming increasingly popular for float trips and hunters are dropped off in Nonvianuk Lake to float downriver with rafts, watching for moose and fishing. Most of these hunters are not local residents" (1978:144).

Writing further about hunting on the Alagnak, Behnke states that "residents of Levelock and Igiugig hunt moose along the Kvichak River and up the Branch (Alagnak) River by boat in the fall. One method of hunting on the Branch River is to drift downriver in the evening, watching for a moose to come out on a riverbank" (1978:149). It is clear from Behnkes' study that subsistence plays an important role in the life of natives in the Alagnak River region. According to Behnke (1978:149-150):

While men are working or fishing commercially in the summer, some elder people and women set gill nets near the village or out at fishcamps to take salmon for family use and dogfood. A few families use fishcamps upriver from Levelock and down river from Igiugig, as well as on the lower Alagnak. . . . Some fishing is done by local residents far up the Alagnak River. Villagers occasionally ascend the Alagnak River and go up into Nonvianuk Lake and even Kukaklek Lake, pulling boats up through the falls. . . . Fish are also taken through the ice along the Alagnak River and on Nonvianuk Lake.

Trapping in the Alagnak River region is outlined in Behnkes' study:

The Alagnak River is recognized as a particularly good area for mink and otter trapping, and traps are also set along its course for fox, lynx, wolf, and wolverine. The river is used as a snowmobile route once it freezes as well as its sloughs and tributaries. It gives access to a large area for hunting and fishing and trapping in the winter.

Igiugig people trap around the western slope of Iliamna Lake, into the Kaskanak Creek area; toward Big Mountain, into the Kukaklek Lake area, and toward the Alagnak River. (1978:150)

Finally, Behnke discusses the harvest activities of residents in the Alagnak River region:
The Katmai proposal's area of ecological concern encompasses much of the Alagnak drainage ..., including Nonvianuk and Kukaklek Lakes. It is within the traditional subsistence area of the residents of Levelock, Alagnak, Igiugig, and Kakhonak, who were dependent on the salmon and big game of the area. By the early 1900's they were herding reindeer in these areas, a use which lasted until the 1940's.

Today, residents of Levelock, Alagnak, and Igiugig, and their relatives in other communities, make considerable use of the Alagnak River for fishing, trapping and hunting. They use gill nets for subsistence harvest of salmon along the lower portion of the river and fish with hook and line along its length for grayling, trout, char, and other species. People frequently ascend the river to the "forks" where the Nonvianuk River joins the Alagnak and there are a number of cabins which are utilized by travellers along this stretch of river. Occasionally, boats are taken into Nonvianuk or, less often, because of the falls, into Kukaklek Lake.

Moose are hunted along the Alagnak both in fall and winter. ... Beaver, lynx, mink, otter, fox, wolf, and wolverine are all trapped along the Alagnak, with trappers from Levelock, Igiugig, Naknek, and South Naknek travelling to different portions of it by snowmachines and aircraft. The families living at Alagnak also do considerable trapping in these areas. (1978:156-157)

The Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service conducted a number of studies of the Bristol Bay region and in a 1979 wild and scenic river analysis said of the Alagnak:

The state of Alaska's sport fishing regulations single out the Kvichak River drainage as a wild trout area, thereby placing the Alagnak River under special trophy fishing regulations. Primary trophy fish caught in the Alagnak are rainbow trout, dolly varden, grayling, and lake trout. Although all five species of Pacific Salmon utilize the river, the red salmon is the most abundant.

In a 1979 bulletin, Alaska Float Trips, Southwest Regions, HCRS wrote that the Alaguak River has "seasonally very good fishing for all five species of salmon, especially sockeye, dolly varden, rainbow, and lake trout, grayling and pike" (1979:8).

The booklet also describes recreational characteristics of the Alagnak River:

The upper Alagnak (above the Nonvianuk confluence) offers an exciting float on a moderately swift rocky river flowing in part through an incised canyon. The lower Alagnak slows to create a leisurely float through an open tundra expanse. ...
Recommend raft on the Kuklaek variation, kayaks could be used but will suffer damage as the first 14 miles are a shallow rock garden. Canoes are not recommended. On the Nonvianuk variation, rafts, kayaks, and canoes are all suitable. (1979:8)

In one instance, because of high water conditions in mid-June, 1979 a federal-state interagency float team ran into trouble on the Alagnak, resulting in some capsaied rafts.

A 1979 letter from John C. Moore of the Bristol Bay Native Corporation to Curtis V. McVee, State Director of the Bureau of Land Management, describes use of the Alagnak River: "the area around both lakes have been historically and still are trapped in the winter by residents along Iliamna Lake and the Kvichak River. In the fall, skiffs are run up the Alagnak River to Kuklaek Lake, loaded with equipment and supplies which are utilized during the winter after freeze up."

A recent Wild and Scenic Rivers proposal, published by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, addresses recreational use of the Alagnak River:

Flowing through a moderately incised canyon with large volumes of water, the Alagnak offers the floatboating enthusiast excellent boating opportunities. Powerboats do ascend the river for the first 20 miles. . . . Hiking, nature study, sightseeing, and wildlife observation add to the recreational value of this river.

Existing uses within the river corridor consist mainly of subsistence fishing, hunting and trapping, sport fishing and hunting, and recreational floatboating. Natives have used and still use the river, especially the lower reaches, for subsistence activities. . . . Commercial barging operations navigate up the Nonvianuk River, a tributary of the Alagnak, to provide supplies to the Nonvianuk Lake area. A number of guiding operations also use the Alagnak area. Recreation use is estimated at 200-250 user days annually. (1980:111-3)

In 1980, WICHE Intern Kathy Dissler wrote a report on historic waterbody use in the Kvichak River area. That portion of the text dealing with the Alagnak River follows:

The lower reaches of the Alagnak have already been determined navigable. Therefore, from here on, when speaking of this river, I will be dealing specifically with the Upper Alagnak and will refer to it as such. This portion of the river extends approximately 10 miles from Kuklaek Lake to the final set of rapids on the river. . . .

The Upper Alagnak is designated (along with the rest of the river) as one of Alaska's trophy waters (U.S. Bureau of Land Management 1971). Fishermen from all over the world fish this portion of the river because of its abundant rainbow
trout, grayling and red salmon. It is also heavily utilized in the fall for hunting. The primary point of access for this river is Kukaklek Lake, where hunters and fishermen land by floatplane.

Because of this river's popularity it has been used consistently by Natives and guides in the area. It has also been the focus of several government reports.

The Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Iliamna Resource Range (U.S. Department of Interior 1974b:56-57) stated that the main recreational effort on the Alagnak was fishing. It also reported an increase of hunting in the area during the winter of 1972-73, when a caribou herd from the Mulchatna populated the region. Normally, moose, brown bear, wolves, beavers, muskrat, wolverines, ptarmigan and a variety of game ducks inhabit this area.

A considerable amount of research was also conducted on the Upper Alagnak by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS) for its potential inclusion, along with the Nonvianuk River, as a Wild and Scenic River.

On June 28, 1972, an aerial reconnaissance of the Upper Alagnak was conducted, and it was stated that this river was accessible by floatplane from Kukaklek Lake (U.S. Bureau of Outdoor Recreation n.d.).

From August 24 to 30, 1975 two Bureau of Outdoor Recreation representatives were once again on the Upper Alagnak. In this instance, they were to give technical assistance to ABC Sports. This network was shooting a John Denver special about Alaska. Denver was filmed floating on the Upper Alagnak. Six rafts were used on this trip to accommodate Denver and the ABC crews. A report of this trip provides the following information:

"The first two days of the trip were spent shuttling in 16 people and tons of gear to a camp on Kukaklek Lake near the Alagnak River outlet. John Denver and his friend Harney Wykoff arrived in the afternoon of August 26. That evening and all of the 27th were spent filming camp and fishing scenes around the outlet.

"On the 28th, we began floating the river in our armada of three 12 foot rafts, one 13 foot raft, and two 15 foot rafts. We traveled about 10 miles the first day, stopping to film at several locations. Those in the movie were John Denver and bush pilot Red Dodge in one BOR 12 foot raft and guide/bush pilot/dentist Tony Oney and his dentist friend Michael Darling in our other raft."
"That evening half of us shuttled back by helicopter to the 'base camp' on Kukaklek Lake which we had left up in order to save room on the rafts for all the camera gear. As it turned out, camp sites for 16 people would have been hard to find on the river.

"The next day, we returned and floated down through the canyon rapids which provided excitement but were not especially difficult to raft. Although it was raining, they said they got some good footage through the canyon. We were picked up at the end of the day about 18 miles below the outlet and transported by helicopter back to the Kukaklek Lake camp. From there we flew by float plane to the Brooks Camp in Katmai National Monument. Some of the gear was left at Kukaklek because of darkness and poor weather." (U.S. Bureau of Outdoor Recreation 1975)

After a considerable amount of research by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and, later, the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, it was decided that the entire Alagnak met the criteria for its potential inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System. A detailed description of this river is included in a pamphlet published by HCRS entitled *Alaska Float Trips: Southwest Region*.

Many of the people I interviewed and corresponded with also had knowledge of this river.

** Ray Loesch, guide and owner of the Rainbow King Lodge in Iliamna says he brings his clientele on the Upper Alagnak frequently. He lands them on a small lake just south of Kukaklek and then has them float down the river to fish.**

** Richard Russell, Sport Fish Biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has floated the entire Alagnak, from Kukaklek Lake to its confluence with the Kvichak.**

** Dennis and Chris Branham of Branham Adventures have utilized this river from 1950 to the present. They wrote that they bring clients to the Upper Alagnak for fishing, photography, research and sightseeing, usually from May through October. They state the Upper Alagnak is easily navigable by riverboat. They have had a 14-foot V-bottom with an outboard on this river. They related that in summer they boat to the rapids. They have also had a floatplane on the river and floated with it "the first three miles."**

** Bud and Mike Branham of Adventures Unlimited, Kokhonak Lodge have used this river from 1937 to the present for hunting and fishing.**
** Gren Collins, owner of the Kvichak Club, wrote that the
[SIC] has been on the Upper Alagnak with a floatplane
and raft and has been bringing his guests there since
1931.

** Monty Handy of Greichen Air Service has been on the
Upper Alagnak with a floatplane.

** Ron Hyde of Alaska River Safaris responded that he has
traveled the full course of the Alagnak in a 20-foot
riverboat.
Personal Communication Regarding Use of the Alagnak River (1928–1982)

This section of the report contains information received through oral interviews, telephone conversations and questionnaires. Oral interview and telephone conversation information is presented in its original form. The results of two separate questionnaires are presented in a narrative manner. Copies of all questionnaires received are included in the appendix. In addition, a statistical review of questionnaire results is included in Appendix 1. My decision as to whom to send questionnaires was based on available guides in my office: Alaska Department of Fish and Game personnel directory, State of Alaska guide register, Alaska Department of Natural Resources directory of Alaskan companies and prospectors, the National Park Service Alaska region commercial use license directory, and the Alaska State Division of Tourism's official State of Alaska vacation book. One questionnaire dealt with general use, and the other specific use, of the Alagnak River.

I corresponded with a number of people who worked on or near the Alagnak River or who had experience with the river. Steve Behmke, a resource specialist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Dillingham, wrote that "local residents make considerable use of the Alagnak ("Branch") River for trapping, hunting and fishing" (1981). His detailed report on the use of the Alagnak River was presented earlier in this study. According to Dave Morris, superintendent of the Katmai National Park and Preserve:

At this writing, we have 13 commercial operators authorized to float the Alagnak. While it is doubtful that all of these people are active in a given year, we estimate that at least 25 parties, consisting of ~100 people, floated the river during 1981. Reportedly, this represents a major increase over previous years, and we anticipate that recreational use of the river will continue to escalate. (1981)

Alaska Department of Fish and Game employee Lou Gwartney, who has worked in the Bristol Bay region for a number of years, related:

The Alagnak River is the most popular river for float trips in the Bristol Bay area. The river is long, relatively easy to float and offers good angling for trout, char, grayling and all five species of salmon. Moose hunting is good and many sportsmen enjoy combined hunting and fishing trips in September. Trips start at Nonvianuk Lake and end near the mouth where the river meets the Kvichak.

I have floated the Alagnak twice and can understand why it is the most popular float in the area. Fishing particularly for large rainbows and grayling was outstanding. Bears, moose, caribou, eagles, and the usual variety of local birds were abundant. The river flows through a variety of scenery and has enough fast water to be exciting for the inexperienced rafter. (Gwartney 1981)
According to Richard Russell (1982: personal communication), of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in King Salmon, three people moor 10-ton barges in ox-bow sloughs 7 to 8 miles up the Alagnak from its mouth and use the barges as fishing lodges between June and September. On the average, those barges accommodate 12 fishermen. Owners of the barges transport the fishermen up river from the barges on guided fishing expeditions. Skiffs with standard props are used and often ascend the Alagnak River 12 miles in a day.

Dorothy Hill, Vice-President of the Bristol Bay Historical Society, writes that "as a boy living in Levelock, my husband used to camp, hunt, and trap on the Branch. A family cabin still exists at the headwaters on Nonvianuk Lake" (Hill 1981).

Questionnaire #1 was sent to 166 guides, air carriers, hunters, fishermen, and lodge owners. Of the questionnaires sent out three were returned as non-deliverable, and 53 were returned with statements regarding use of the Alagnak River. Sixteen replied that they had never used the river and 37 replied that they have used, or still use, the Alagnak River. I sent 126 questionnaires to guides, 18 to air carriers, 5 to lodgeowners, and 17 to people reported to have used the river.

The earliest use noted is 1928, but the questionnaires indicate continuous use from 1941 to the present. Nearly every type of watercraft has been used on the Alagnak River. Types most commonly used are rubber rafts, riverboats, kayaks, and canoes. A few barges and scows have plied the first few miles from the river's mouth, and commercial fishing boats have gone 10 to 15 miles up river. Pilots have landed aircraft on the Alagnak River and its sandbars with wheels and floats in summer and with skis in winter. A few people have snowmachined, skied, and dog sledged on the river's frozen surface in winter.

Reasons for using the Alagnak River are numerous. Most questionnaire respondents have used the river for sport fishing, hunting, and recreational floating and scenic viewing. A few use the mouth of the river for commercial fishing and some have used the river for commercial freighting purposes and for guiding. Loads carried by watercraft on the Alagnak River are generally between 500 and 2000 lbs. A few quoted 100 to 500 lbs and over 2000 lbs. All questionnaires returned to this office are attached to this report.

Questionnaire #2 was sent to all people who indicated on the first questionnaire that they had used or are still using the Alagnak River. Thirty-two questionnaires were sent out and fourteen were returned. Nineteen questionnaires were sent to guides, one to an air carrier, one to an outdoor adventure business, and six to private citizens who have used the river.

Three questions were asked. The first dealt with obstructions to ascent or descent of the river. Five people responded that there were obstructions in the river. Generally the obstructions noted are rapids. As shown on the maps attached to the questionnaires, the rapids are below the Igiugig village selection area. Question two asked the respondent to mark on the map places where aircraft landings
had occurred on water. Question three asked for the respondent to indicate approximate areas of use of the Alagnak River.

Due to the difficulty of narrating results of map markings, copies of questionnaire #2 are also attached to this report.

As a follow-up to questionnaires and phone conversations, I traveled to King Salmon and Naknek between January 11 and 15, 1982. The purpose of this trip was to gain additional information on river use from respondents to questionnaires as well as from new informants. To my surprise the greatest source of information came from state and federal employees (much of that information is presented earlier in this study). No questionnaire respondent provided me with any more additional information than that which appeared on the questionnaire.
APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE #1 RESULTS: STATISTICAL

QUESTION NO. 3 (Transportation Methods you have used on the Alagank River)

fishing boat (9)
barge (3)
scow (2)
riverboat (10) [jet unit (5) skag (3) lift (2)]
dory (1)
skiff (4) [under "other"]
rubber raft (22) [man: 2 (1) 4 (3) 6 (12) 8 (8) 10 (4) 12 (7) oars (6)
outboard (8)]
canoe (5)
kayak (3)
airplane (30) [floats (23) skis (8) wheels (7)]
snowmachine (5)
ATV (0)
snowshoes (0)
skis (2)
dog team (1) [under "other"]

QUESTION NO. 4 (What have you used the Alagnak for?)

floating (17)
sport fishing (31)
hunting (16)
commercial fishing (2)
mining (1)
trapping (5)
commercial transport (8) [freight (2) people (6) mail (0)]
guiding (4) [under "other"]
photography (1) [under "other"]

QUESTION NO. 5 (How much weight can your watercraft carry?)

100-500 lbs. (1)
500-1000 lbs. (13)
1000-2000 lbs. (10)
over 2000 lbs. (6)
APPENDIX 2

Prehistoric and Historic Sites
(Adapted from the Alaska Division of Parks, Alaska Heritage Resource Survey File)

1. Name of site: DIL-036
   Location: South bank of the Alagnak River 18 miles upstream (east) of its confluence with the Kvichak River. Sec. 29, T12S, R42W, SM. Dillingham (A-2).
   Description: Abandoned village with several barabaras, remains of log church and graveyard with wooden Russian Orthodox crosses in various states of disrepair.

2. Name of site: None
   Location: West shore of Chignik Bay. Sec. 7, T44S, R58W, SM. Chignik (B-2).
   Description: Homestead with two cabins in obvious disrepair. Indefinite age. Land patented to Thomas Wootton in 1914 as a soldier's additional homestead (he filed for it in 1918), but no details of his subsequent use of the land. Local natives claimed no knowledge of Wootton.

3. Name of Site: Russian-Greek Mission Reserve
   Location: At the south end of the village of Levelock, right (west) bank of the Kvichak River. Sec. 28, T12S, R45W, SM. Dillingham (A-3).
   Description: 20 acres of land that includes the "Protection of the Virgin Mary" Russian Orthodox church that was built about 1900, burned in 1970, rebuilt in the same location in 1975. Eight houses noted in 1908 USGS survey plat and a grave yard.

4. Name of site: NAK-019 [Kvichak]
   Location: On the east bank of the Kvichak River, 17 miles northeast of Naknek.
   Description: Historic and modern village. Eskimo village name reported by the early Russians and published by the USGS in 1898.

5. Name of site: DIL-017 [Levelock]
   Location: On the right (west) bank of the Kvichak River, south of the mouth on Levelock Creek. Sec. 28, T12S, R45W, SM. Dillingham (A-7).
Description: Modern and Historic Eskimo village. Consists of about 25 houses, cannery, school, and airstrip and post office that was established in 1939. Village is spread over about one mile along the west bank of the Kvichak River. Evidence of prehistoric use of the village area found in 1979.

6. Name of site: DIL-033

Location: Within the village of Levelock, right (west) bank of the Kvichak River. Sec. 28, T12S, R45W, SM. Dillingham (A-7).

Description: A ground slate projectile tip fragment, chert biface base fragment, 19 waste flakes, 11 ceramic fragments, burnt bone fragments, and one machined iron piece. Surface collected from six separate locations scattered within the village. Artifacts collected indicate prehistoric use of Levelock village area.
APPENDIX 3

Present Waterbody Names and Historical Variations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Name</th>
<th>Variations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alagnak River</td>
<td>Branch River</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alaganak River</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lockanok River</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aliknuk River</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lockenuk River</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kukaklek Lake</td>
<td>Lake Grant</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aliknuk Lake</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonvianuk Lake</td>
<td>Alaganak Lake</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kukaklek Lake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nanwhyenuk Lake</td>
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