Portage Creek

People and Place

Location

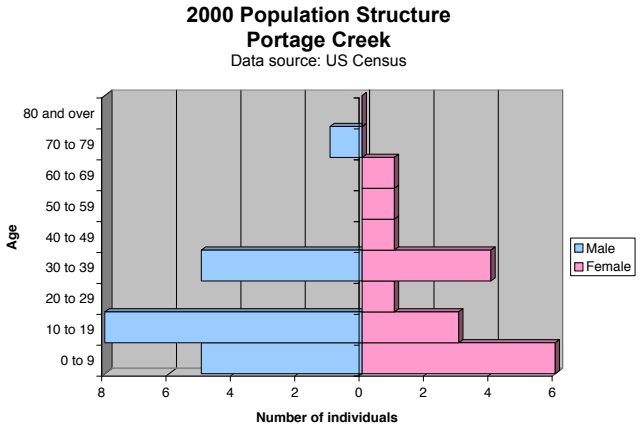
The town of Portage Creek is situated at the mouth of Portage Creek, a tributary of the Nushagak River. It is located in the Dillingham Census Area and is 29 miles southeast of Dillingham. It is comprised of 13.1 square miles of land and 0 square miles of water.

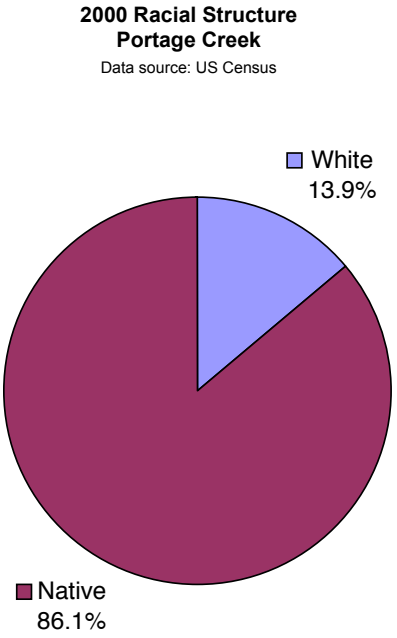
Demographic Profile

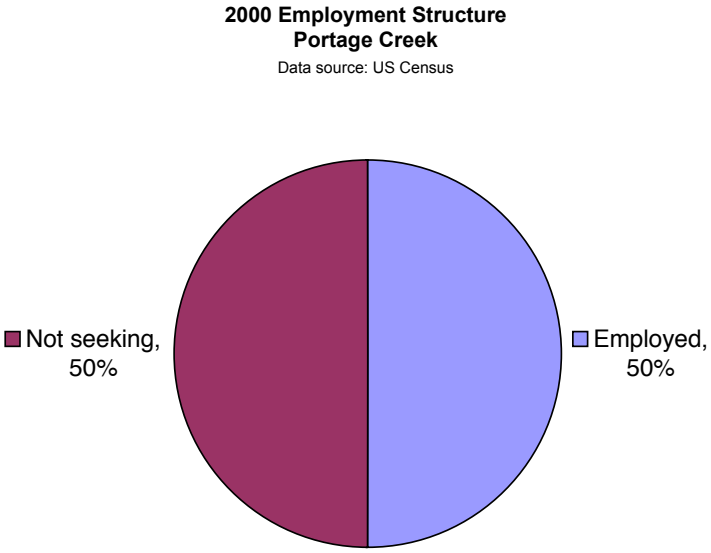
Portage Creek had a total of 36 inhabitants in 2000. The gender composition was skewed more toward males, who made up 52.8% of the population, versus 47.2% females. A population was first recorded by the Census in 1970, at which time there were 60 residents. Since then the population has fluctuated, but has never been as high as when originally recorded. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the racial composition of Portage Creek was as follows: 86.1% American Indian and Alaska Native, and 13.9% White. No one in the community was Hispanic. The median age in 2000 was an extremely young 14 years of age, whereas the national age median was 35.3 years. There were a total of 22 housing units in Portage Creek in 2000; 15 were vacant, and of those, 8 were vacant due to seasonal use. No one lived in group quarters at the time of the Census. Of the population age 25 years and over 50% had graduated from high school or gone on to higher schooling and 50% had completed some high school but had not received a diploma.

History

The area has a long history of human occupation. "Yup'ik and Athabascan people settled the region, known as Naugeik, more than 6,000 years ago" (inAlaska.com). The area of Portage Creek was used as an overnight summer camp by the Yup'ik Eskimos. It was named Portage Creek because it was used to portage boats from the Nushagak River to the Kvichak River. Travelers could portage their boats and then bypass the long journey around Etolin Point and the open waters of Bristol Bay. In 1961 the village was permanently settled by some families from Koliganek and other villages located up the Nushagak River. In 1963 a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school was established in the community. During the winter of 1964-1965, 11 families lived in the community. The community was serviced by a local scheduled air







carrier in 1965. During the mid-1980s, the community was active; since then the population has declined. Portage Creek is also known as Ohgsenakale.

Infrastructure

Current Economy

The residents of Portage Creek all depend on subsistence activities to a certain degree. Community members harvest salmon, moose, caribou, duck, geese, and berries. Exchange relationships exist with other coastal communities in order to acquire walrus, seal, and herring roe. Most families have fish camps which are located at Ekuk or Lewis Point. During the summer, the Portage Creek General Store and Lodge are in operation. There were three commercial fishing permits issued to residents of Portage Creek in 2000 and three community members were licensed crew members. According to the Census, of residents age 16 and over in 2000, 50% were employed and 50% were not in the labor force. The two people who were employed in the community were classified as government workers. The median annual per capita income in Portage Creek was $8,010 and the median household income was $41,250. No one in the community was below the poverty level at the time of the Census.

Governance

Portage Creek is unincorporated and is not part of any organized borough; therefore there are no city or borough officials present in the community. The Village Council and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) recognized Traditional Council is the Portage Creek Village Council, which is also known as the Ohgsenakale Tribe. The Native village corporation is Choggiung, Ltd., which is the merged corporation of the communities of Dillingham, Ekuk, and Portage Creek The Native regional corporation is Bristol Bay Native Corporation, and the regional non-profit for the area is the Bristol Bay Native Association. The Community Development Quota (CDQ) group in which the village is included is the Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation (BBEDC). The closest office of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) is located in Dillingham. A National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) field office is located in Bethel, an office is located in Homer, and a main office is located in Anchorage. The nearest Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS) office is located in Anchorage.

Facilities

Portage Creek is accessible by both air and water. The most frequent mode of reaching the community is by chartered air. A 1,900 foot state-owned sand-surfaced airstrip is located in the community and is only maintained during the summer months. Seaplanes land on the Nushagak River. The approximate cost to travel by air roundtrip to Anchorage from Portage Creek is $464. There are no docking facilities in the community, and cargo goods are lightered to the beach. Locals use skiffs as the primary means of transportation and snowmachines are used for winter travel. There are no hotels or accommodations for visitors in Portage Creek. There is one school, Portage Creek School, which teaches grades K-7. The Portage Creek School had a total of 14 students and two teachers in 2000. There are no health care facilities in Portage Creek. A clinic was constructed by the village in 1979, but is not in operation. The nearest health care facility is in Dillingham. There are no police services in the community. There are no central electric, water, sewer, or refuse facilities currently in operation in Portage Creek. Most community members haul their water from down the river, as the central well is rusty. Residents use honeybuckets for their sewage needs. There is no functioning electrical system and the landfill has been deemed inactive.

Involvement in North Pacific Fisheries

Commercial Fishing*

The commercial fishing permit data for Portage Creek and Dillingham is combined by the CFEC and is explained in the Dillingham profile (see Dillingham profile). Three residents of Portage Creek were licensed crew members in 2000. No one in the community owned a vessel which participated in the federal fisheries; however, one resident owned a vessel which participated in the salmon fishery.

*Commercial fishing permit data presented here is from the CFEC and is for the communities of Dillingham and Portage Creek combined.

According to data separately supplied by CFEC and analyzed by AKFIN, a total of three commercial fishing permits were issued to residents only of Portage Creek in 2000, and of those one was fished. Two of the permits were issued for salmon (one fished). One permit was issued for herring (not fished).

There were no landings of any kind in Portage Creek in 2000 because no processor was located in the community.

The CDQ group in which Portage Creek is included, the Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation (BBEDC), was recently granted $75,026 by the Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference as part of the Steller Sea Lion Mitigation Program "in recognition of the negative economic impacts of federal measures to protect the Steller sea lion" with money which had been allocated by the U.S. government (Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference 2003).

Sport Fishing

There is little available evidence of sport fishing in Portage Creek in terms of licenses sold and businesses. The Department of Community and Economic Development's Alaska Community database does mention that Portage Creek "is a popular recreational fishing and camping site from May through July, and a hunting location for Yup'ik residents." There were no sport fishing licenses sold in Portage Creek in 2000 and no sport fishing guide or related businesses were present in the community in 2002, according to the ADF&G.

Subsistence Fishing

Little data is available for the community of Portage Creek in terms of exact numbers of subsistence harvests and species harvested; however, subsistence plays an important role and all residents are dependent upon it to some extent. Residents harvest berries, geese, duck, caribou, moose, and salmon. Trade relationships exist with neighboring communities, and walrus, seal, and herring roe are sought after. It has been established by the ADF&G's Division of Subsistence that the annual wild food harvest for Portage Creek is 387.4 lbs per person. The daily wild food harvest is 1.0 lbs per person. Also according to ADF&G, two household permits were issued for subsistence salmon to residents of Portage Creek in 1999 for an estimated harvest of 59 total salmon. Residents of Portage Creek are not eligible to apply for halibut subsistence certificates.