**Volunteers needed for Sisualik cleanup**

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One of the most anticipated joys of summer in the Northwest is going to camp. For many people in Noatak and Kotzebue, camp means Sisualik.

"That land gives so much to us," said Noatak resident Tanya Kirk.

Last year, she and her husband Robbie spearheaded a partnership between the community and the school focused on cleaning up the tundra around the campsites.

"Robbie and I started talking to Elders that were there at camp, mainly Buddy Norton who is there from May until September every single year. We were asking him a little bit about the background of how the dumpsite started and how it grew and grew over time. Hearing from him, respectfully as an Elder, he said there never used to be a dumpsite there a long time ago. Over time, not to lay blame on people or where they're from, it became a dumping ground. It grew to a pretty large area right behind the campsite where a lot of the Noatak people go for their spring ugruk hunting," she said. "So, Robbie and I decided — with the go-ahead from the Elders that we talked to — to start a cleanup effort out there. They were 100 percent behind it and were there and helped along the way. We were also told there were a couple of gravesites near that vicinity, so with respect to the burial of ancestors of the Noatak people, we really wanted to restore the land back to its natural state."

They reached out to the local and regional organizations and government offices and community members for help.

About 40 students, teachers, and volunteers from the village went out to the site over the course of a week and hauled out buckets, old bed frames, broken refrigerators, rusting stoves, and more.

Maniilaq Association's environmental program donated gas, rakes, and gloves, while Teck and the Native Village of Kotzebue helped out with funding and other supplies.

"Lo and behold, the response and the volunteering and support that we got was just above and beyond," she said.

The city of Kotzebue even mobilized its fleet of dump trucks to help haul trash from the site.

Several locals with camps in the area also stepped up however they were able to.

"They not only helped with the cleanup, they helped haul the trash, they opened up their cabins, they helped cook the meals, they even housed a lot of the students as chaperones," Kirk said. "So, it was a really great effort and partnership between the community and the school, not waiting for someone to come in and take the initiative from another organization. We decided as a community we could do it ourselves."

Now, a similar group of volunteers plans to return next week for the second phase of the cleanup project, which they hope will not only beautify the land, but help build good stewardship practices.

"People are used to going to dump something in an area and over years and years it becomes a practice and even a behavior and those are really hard to break. This spring we were camping and we saw several people going to the dumpsite again even though we cleaned it up last year, but those patterns and those behaviors are something that will take time for a lot of people," Kirk explained. "The message is if you bring trash in, you bring it out with you. Let's restore the land back to its natural state and keep Sisualik beautiful."

Along with picking up junk at the site, the group will use the opportunity for education.

A handful of teachers plan to bring their classes for outdoor teaching days about topics like water quality. Several Elders will have the chance to share stories about the history of Sisualik with the students, along with stories about hunting and fishing.

Last year, students learned about ugruk hunting in the area and this year, Kirk said some of the adults plan to set salmon nets and teach fish cutting to the kids.

It can be an opportunity for students to put their Inupiaq values to use.

The organizers are still looking for volunteers to help out from Aug. 21-25. People are welcome to come for just one day, or for the whole week, Kirk said.

They need boat drivers, chaperones, cooks, cleanup crew, haulers with vehicles, and anyone who wants to lend a hand. They also still need cabin space or other housing for some of the volunteers traveling from other places. Gas and meals will be provided for helpers.

"We're really excited. I think everybody was surprised how much fun they had, even though it's really dirty work. Not many people would want to do that type of work — you're standing in a dumpsite, you're hauling trash, but there's a bigger picture," she said. "The kids that we're working with are going to be the ones after us to take care of the land, and what better way to model that than to do something like this with them as good stewards of the land?"

More information about the cleanup can be found on the Noatak Announcements Facebook page.

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