

Researcher extends study of human migration in isolated Aleutian islands

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Seasick, cold and lugging around 3,000 pounds of equipment during her first research venture upon Alaska's Aleutian Islands 20 years ago, Dixie West nonetheless fell in love with unearthing history in the frigid, remote archipelago.

"Minimal archeological work had been conducted in the western Aleutians," said West, today a research associate at the Biodiversity Institute at the University of Kansas. "Numerous, well-preserved prehistoric village sites contained a bounty of unexplored cultural and biological information. I envisioned a career of scientific exploration in this remote area of the globe. I finished my dissertation on European prehistory and turned to the Bering Sea."

West said the Aleutian Islands have been vital to the history of [human migration](#) and preserve a unique record of human habitation of both the east and west.

Now, the KU researcher has earned a new three-year, \$425,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to continue her research in the Islands of the Four Mountains, perhaps the most isolated and treacherous isles in the Aleutian chain.

"They're a group of seven volcanic cones located in the eastern Aleutians," West said. "Little biological and archaeological research has occurred in these [islands](#). One of their volcanoes, Mount Cleveland, is active and potentially quite dangerous. The island group is also host to

frequent earthquakes. Additionally, these islands are comparatively small with few bays, making boat access quite difficult."

While they have been little studied, the Islands of the Four Mountains could offer a rich trove of information to West and her colleagues about early human migration.

"Through these islands prehistoric hunter-gatherers, called the Unangan, voyaged and settled as they migrated toward Asia," said West, who also serves as an adjunct assistant professor in KU's Department of Anthropology. "Previous Bureau of Indian Affairs surveys identified village sites that indicate large groups of sophisticated prehistoric peoples opted to live and apparently flourish in the Four Mountains."

Humanity today could learn crucial lessons from the experiences of these ancient people living on the Islands of the Four Mountains, according to West.

"These islands provide an excellent opportunity to assess the development of prehistoric human adaptations to geological hazards and environmental change," she said. "Why did people opt to live on the flanks of volcanoes? How quickly did the Unangan return to their villages following a volcanic explosion? Did they abandon the villages for decades or centuries? How did earthquakes, sea level change, warming and cooling climate, and occasional tsunamis influence human choices? Equally important, what lessons can these prehistoric life ways provide for humans currently living in volcanic and earthquake zones?"

West said that following Russian discovery in 1741, native Unangan populations rapidly decreased from influenza, cholera, measles and other diseases. Moreover, Russian traders forcibly relocated Unangan men away from their villages to hunt fur seals and otters for the Russian Empire.

"After particularly severe Russian treatment during the 1761-1762 hunting and trapping season, a confederacy of Unangan warriors from the Four Mountains and surrounding islands killed members of a Russian fur trading expedition," said West. "The Russians brutally put down this revolt during 1763-1764. Russians destroyed all the villages in the Four Mountains and nearby islands. Most of the Unangan men were killed and the women and children either starved or were resettled on a nearby island."

Several village sites have been scouted and surveyed on the islands, but no archeological work has been carried out. With the new grant, West will excavate and analyze these sites and any artifacts therein.

"It's necessary to determine what the Four Mountain Unangan hunted, how they fashioned their stone and bone tools, how they built their houses, and how they adapted to geological and climatic perturbations," she said. "We should be able to determine how the Four Mountain Unangan culture changed over time; if the prehistoric inhabitants had contact with peoples who lived in nearby areas—either on the Alaskan Peninsula or with Unangan who moved past them to live in the western Aleutians, and how the culture changed following contact with Russians."

West said the research on the Islands of the Four Mountains could push forward understanding of one of the world's most ecologically and economically important regions—the north Pacific and Bering Sea—as the area is transformed by a warming planet.

"Most people are willing to accept that the world climate is changing," she said. "Past Aleutians people experienced waxing and waning sea levels, climate change, and geological forces. We hope to discover how those past peoples coped with their changing world."

Provided by University of Kansas

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