

Southeast Alaska Native Language Summit

Ketchikan, Alaska

March 7-8, 2009

The Southeast Native Language Summit was co-sponsored by Cape Fox Heritage Foundation and Ketchikan Indian Community (KIC). Seventy-three people pre-registered for this event. The planners did an excellent job in scheduling a variety of formats, including individual speakers, panels and all group feedback. The organization was excellent.

The content was also excellent, beginning with Sealaska Heritage Institute Haida Linguist Dr. Jordan Lachler and Alice Taff who spoke about the stages of language loss and vitality in indigenous languages throughout the world and specifically in Southeast Alaska. Other speakers were Marsha Hotch, Chilkat Indian Village, mentors and apprentices —Ben Young, Linda Schrack, Phyllis Almquist, Martha Denny and Delores Irvins. KIC Tribal Council has directed their JOM funds to pay three mentor-apprentice teams—one for each of the three languages in Ketchikan.

The president of KIC and four tribal council members attended the Summit and stayed the whole time, participating in all activities. They spoke several times about their interest and support for the language programs and their own personal goals.

Fred Olson, Jr., presented his 15 minute movie, “Surviving Sounds of Haida”, documenting elders from Kasaan, including Erma Lawrence. Jordan and Sealaska Heritage Institute Tlingit Language Specialist Linda Belarde gave an overview of SHI programs and then talked specifically about the institute’s language resources and new grants. There was a lot of interest in the proposed intensive teaching program to be based in Ketchikan. Hans Chester spoke very movingly about his own journey towards language fluency.

The keynote speaker was Daryl Baldwin, Director of the the Myaamia Language Project. He had a great story. His tribal language was dead—there were no more speakers. With the help of documents he found, he learned the tribal language and has been working to teach it. Mr. Baldwin talked about the social and cultural contexts that support language revitalization. He posed four questions for us to consider.

1. What is our language and what is it not?
2. What caused our language to fall into disuse?
3. How will we define success?
4. How will our language live?

Mr. Baldwin was a very thoughtful and knowledgeable speaker. One of his comments was that “knowledge is power but it is also responsibility”. His tribe has an excellent relationship with Miami University in Oklahoma. The language project is not in an academic department—it is associated with student services.