Honoring and Utilizing Our Land

When Native Peoples use resources from the land and sea, they must acknowledge the spirits to ensure the resources will return and be available for future generations. They thank the spirits and tell them the benefits that their use will bring.

Harvey Misu', Gnaasad'Upidan clan, Yukutat, wears the Mt. Saint Elias blanket with dreams about the serpent, hoop-placed Alexandra and a two-headed creature. The people of Yukutat tell how when they first came, the spirits of mountains and placers taught them how to live there.

Jackie Johnson, Pani, Lukna, adi clan, spreads down on a blanket to protect the tree as it falls during the beginning of the Sekok shaka harvest season.

“His place called an ish on a river tributary is where the salmon rest. It is a deep pool of clear water and from here they continue their journey.”

— George Ramos, Lukna, adi clan, Yukutat
Protecting the Ownership of Our Lands

In 1941, the United States entered World War II, and the Tlingit and Haida, along with the other Alaskan Natives, joined the war effort. They became known as the Alaskan Native Troops, and many of them served overseas. In recognition of their service, Congress passed the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act (S.1424) that provided the federal government with funds to develop Alaska's natural resources, including its lands and village corporations. The act resulted in an increase in the value of Alaska's lands and resources, as well as the establishment of the Alaska Native Regional Corporations and the Alaska Native Veterans' Benefits Fund.

In Southeast Alaska, the Tlingit and Haida, along with the other Alaskan Natives, are the first to be awarded federal recognition of their land claims. In 1971, the Tlingit and Haida were awarded $2.5 million for the sale of 78,600 acres of land that had been taken from them and used for military purposes.

The Tlingit and Haida, along with other Alaska Natives, continue to fight for their land and resources. They are determined to protect their way of life and ensure that their land is used for the benefit of the people. The Tlingit and Haida are working to ensure that their land and resources are used in a way that honors their cultural heritage and respects their sovereignty.
Honoring Our Ancestors and Our Descendants

Tlingit people maintain strong bonds with their ancestors, honoring them through their lives and in memorial ceremonies. They have responsibilities to future generations, and must protect the land and culture for their children and grandchildren and those who will follow.

“Our memorial ceremonies (ku.éex’) have kept our culture alive.”
— Rosita Worl

The history and legacy of clans are recorded in highly valued sacred objects, known as tkáan. A tkáan may include ceremonial regalia, a personal name or title, a song, a story, or a place where an important event occurred. Here, Aniak Jackson dances during Celebrations into wearing some of the Lukac addiction.

Opposite clans provide assistance and comfort to the other side after a death and during memorial ceremonies which are attended by the grieving clan during the tkáan with feasting and gifts. The spirits of the best clan ancestors are called by name and receive the spiritual essence of the foods and other gifts brought during the ceremony.
The Importance of Names

Names contain clan history and refer to clan ancestors. As atóowu, they are passed down within the clan. Names are given to younger persons who carry the spirit of their namesake, ensuring immortality of the ancestor’s spirit.

Children are born into their mother’s clan. The clan shares ancestors and descendants, and a unique history. During a ḥůan’ clan members call forth the names of their clan ancestors. In this photo, Shangiahdi clan members stand in front of their clan house in Klawock as they welcome guests into a ḥůan’.

“Your name tells you your history... who you are and how you are related to people.”

— Lydia George, Deisheetaan clan, Angoon

Kanka is a clan name and also the name of the big mountain, lake and the village located at the outlet of the lake. The colors, steps and geographical area all are considered to be that of the Shial Kanka ałi clan.
Strengthen of Body, Mind and Spirit

The “Way of the Warriors” path is to achieve physical and inner strength. Hunting, fishing and warfare require training and good physical condition, mental alertness and discipline. Spiritual preparation is also involved, since physical and spiritual conditioning are integrated. Above all, young men and women are taught to protect and to care for their families, clans and communities.

A young man's training included immersing oneself in the ocean for long periods of time. According to T'xai'xen Clan elder Richard Dalton, Sr., young men “worked on strength” by holding on to wooden stakes as the tide came in over them. They were taught to endure the physical pain of cold by focusing their mind with the sea's energy.

“Eventually strength came up from inside, the very powerful strength of water.”
— Richard Dalton, Sr., T’xai’xen clan, Hoonah
Wooch Een: Working Together

Whether engaged in subsistence pursuits, ceremonial activities or warfare, Wooch Een is a fundamental value. Elder Joe Hotch, Kaagwaantaan clan, illustrated this value by speaking of travelling by canoe, for if people do not paddle together in harmony, there will be no forward progress and the canoe will tip over in the life-threatening ocean swells.

Wooch Een is an important lesson of the annual Lax Dance Leadership Academy, when Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian youth are taught the value and benefit of working together.

With groups of strong people pulling together on guide ropes to ensure the pole remains in a proper position on upright, Tlingit men push a newly carved pole into place in the Klukwuk Tsimshian Park, 2009.

Haida and Tlingit women line up on one side of a new totem pole and link; the one on the opposite side carry the newly carved pole in the totem park in Haida Gwaii, 2009, where the pole will be raised.

Every two years, the Saxaidza Heritage Celebration brings six dance groups and thousands of people to screen the strength of their culture.
Maintaining Spiritual and Social Balance

Wooch Yax is a fundamental element of memorial ku.éex’. Mourning songs and ceremonial objects (at.òowu) of the grieving clan are balanced by comforting speeches, songs and displays of at.òowu by guest clans. At.òow evoke the spirits of ancestors embodied in them. The participation of guests from “opposite” clans ensures there is social and spiritual balance, lest spirits of the host clan wander, possibly causing harm to people attending the ceremony.

“Only when we give to the opposite clan whatever we offer...only when this is done does it become a balm for our spirits.”
— Amy Marvin, Chookaneidí clan, Hoonah

Wooch Yax governs interrelationships between Tlingit clans, and between the Tlingit and other tribes, nations and institutions. The settlement of disputes between Tlingit clans and other groups relied on concepts of balance, achieved through compensation, to approach a state of peace among the parties. Inter-clan warfare was formally ended by a Peace Ceremony performed to restore balance.

“Respecting one another is balance. At.òowu, to bring this out is to respect other people... maybe it will be removed from their opposite side, to encourage their spirit... Our leaders from long ago, they really used to prepare it well— their speeches—so that it is equal to the opposite side. This is how it balances out. So through balance there is strength.”
— Joe Hunt, Kaagwitaan clan, CTS, Sept. 30, 2005
In the Tlingit way of thinking, peace ceremonies are held to restore Wookch Yať, or Balance. At the turn of the 20th century, tensions and conflicts between the Tlingit people and the U.S. occupiers remained. In 1980, the Lukaax.ádi clan conducted a peace ceremony both as a cultural event and as an appeal for justice in the struggle of the Tlingit people against exploitation of their tribal land and resources. The Peace Dance was intentionally not completed.

The 1980 peace ceremony was held uncompleted. Although this event took place 35 years ago, these imbalances still exist.

“I tell you for years and years we found in the river our livelihood and our food, the strength of our families. We fished, catching the salmon along these shores. ...It was Raven who taught our people to catch salmon.”

—Austin Hammond, Lukaax.ádi clan, 1980

“War peace is to be made, her arms and weapons would be open, ... The war will remain hidden, for today our peace is not whole, our request is not fulfilled.”

—Austin Hammond, Lukaax.ádi clan