

**Community Forestry Research Fellowship  
Final Report  
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**The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Sitka Tlingit Collaboration with the  
Forest Service, and Cultural Resilience**

Abstract

My Community Forestry Research Fellowship predissertation research, developed in collaboration with the Sealaska Heritage Institute (a Southeast Alaska Native regional corporation's heritage foundation) and conducted in partnership with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Natural Resources Protection Department, emphasized the importance of flexibility, negotiation, and consequential transformation when collaborating with "external" institutions. This lesson is applicable both to tribal organizations and the participatory researcher.

The goal of the research was to examine the present day social and environmental effects of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), passed by Congress in 1971, which divided Alaska Native Peoples into 13 regional corporations and 200 village corporations. In Southeast Alaska, ANCSA resulted in one Native regional corporation (Sealaska Corporation), two small urban Native corporations, and ten Native village corporations who were put in control of Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian land settlements. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was established for Alaska Natives as an alternative to the reservation system in the contiguous United States: it created "shareholder" structures to allow for engagement and potential profiting with the global capitalist economic system. Following ANCSA, corporate resource ownership took precedent over clan ownership in Tlingit communities (Langdon 2000) and Tlingit people became shareholders in village and regional corporations (Mitchell 2003). Yet, in the 1980's a process of "retribalization" began in which tribal governments—established in 1936 with the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA)—advocated reclaiming Tlingit identity and reacquiring lands and subsistence resources from ANCSA corporate entities (Conn and Langdon 1988).

I entered the field in July 2006 with the intent to investigate the present-day realities of the roles of and dynamics between ANCSA corporations and IRA tribal organizations in relation to natural resource management in Sitka, Alaska, where the Sitka Tribe of Alaska are leaders in the retribalization movement. With the help of Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI), my community partner, I developed the following predissertation research questions: What are the roles of the Sitka tribal organizations, Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, the Sitka Conservation Council, and the Sitka ANCSA Corporation, Shee Atika, in Sitka and how do they view each other's roles? Do they have divergent perceptions of how ANCSA has affected Tlingit cultural identity and current natural resource management strategies, as well as different views of the interrelations between cultural resilience and natural resource management? Even with the economic pressures that ANCSA corporations have, are traditional Tlingit land-based priorities emphasized in Tlingit communities? The idea was to test the claims of anthropologists, political ecologists, political scientists, and advocates of retribalization who maintain that ANCSA's corporate restructuring has mostly undermined the core of "traditional" Alaska Native cultural structures, values, and traditional land use practices and is leading to the assimilation of Tlingit culture into capitalist-based culture (Berger 1985; Dombrowski 2001; Mitchell 2003).

Once I arrived in Sitka and met with a representative of the Sitka Tribe, I found out that it would not be possible to follow through with the research question established in collaboration with the regional organization, Sealaska Heritage Institute. Due to particular participatory research-based considerations that I will expand upon in the subsequent pages, I decided to work only with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Natural Resources Protection Department, and over the course of my field research my research question also changed: In the face of the most sweeping transformation of Alaska Native socio-cultural institutions (Thornton 2005)—ANCSA, how

do Tlingit tribal organizations, established with Indian Reorganization Act of 1936, drive and shape ecological and economic negotiations with the Tongass National Forest Service and emphasize their cultural meanings, understandings, and use of the special forest products? My conclusions demonstrate that indeed the Sitka Tribe actively advocates traditional uses and understandings of the forest in their negotiations with the Forest Service, and they collaborate well with the Tongass National Forest Service. This report will explain the process of how I decided to work only with the Sitka Tribe, how the Sitka Tribe and I developed the research question, and how I came to the aforementioned conclusions. I will begin by describing how my experience led me to a much more intricate understanding of what participatory research really means.

## Participatory Research Experience

A few weeks before research was to begin I received an email from a representative of Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI), my community partner, wishing me well on my research and informing me that although they thought Sitka was a good community in which to start my research, they preferred that I not do my dissertation research in Sitka. Their reasoning, I deduced, was probably due to Sitka being one of the few places in Southeast Alaska where the tribal organization has more prominence in the community than the ANCSA corporation and this may be seen as problematic or less interesting to a foundation that is supported by the Sealaska Corporation, an ANCSA regional corporation. The person writing me was an advocate of the cultural and environmental benefits of ANCSA, as she was on the board of Sealaska Native Corporation; the clan-based Tlingit corporate attire that she wore was a clear statement of her positionality and prestige in itself. It was then that I began to realize the challenges that my proposed research would entail, as I had somehow become entangled in the hotbed of local and regional politics, and my partner organization had particular political leanings and goals. I also recognized that my affiliation with SHI may even alienate certain people in Sitka, especially because SHI's involvement and support for programs was somewhat limited in Sitka. I was beginning to reconcile that, despite the positive connotations affiliated with the word heritage, the Sealaska Heritage Institute may be viewed negatively as an "outside" organization affiliated with ANCSA.

These realizations forced me to plunge into what participatory research means and how strategic one has to be in developing organizational affiliations and partnerships from the very beginning. If this research was to be truly participatory, then the main idea of this research would be to develop relational foundations and research questions in collaboration with the local organizations of Sitka. Yet, now SHI, a regional organization and my current community partner, had dedicated a great deal of time and effort to my project, and I, therefore, also gave priority to the importance of respecting their wants and needs. Nevertheless, if I were not to return to Sitka, what would be the point of me going to Sitka at all? I did not want to ask the people in Sitka to collaborate with me to develop dissertation research and then not come back to follow through with what we had agreed upon; I did not want to waste anybody's time for my own academic and professional benefit. After discussion with the people at CFRF, I decided to proceed with research in Sitka, as my proposal stated I would do, to see what would develop over the course of my predissertation field work.

In early July, on a typical Southeast Alaska overcast and drizzly day, I embarked on the ferry from Juneau to Sitka. As we proceeded through the channels between the myriad islands of Southeast Alaska, I wondered if it was ANCSA corporations who were responsible for broad clear-cut stripes in the forest along the shores of the islands. These thoughts led me to contemplate how difficult it was going to be to come into a new community and navigate the complex relationships between organizations and to try to understand who decided how to use particular natural and cultural resources; after all, I had worked with the Chachis of the Pacific Coast of Ecuador for eight years and I was just on the brink of really understanding their political ecological dynamics before I began research in Alaska. I began to feel a bit nervous about walking into a new community with my research project in hand. I had not contacted any of the local Sitka organizations, except for the Sitka Tribe, to ask them if they would be interested in collaborating with me because the woman in charge of reviewing my proposal in the Institutional Review Board at UC Davis had "gone on vacation" for a few weeks and the IRB had just ap-

proved my project the day before I had left for Juneau. My first plan of action once I arrived in Sitka was to ask each of the organizations if they were interested in participating in the proposed research. The participatory element of the research in these beginning stages was that I would create a space for integrating their own research interests and goals, but I had hoped to keep the basis of my project somewhat the same. And then it dawned on me: I remembered Ajit Krishnaswamy's "Participatory Research: Strategies and Tools", and I realized that I had forgotten an essential preliminary step in participatory research: to build trust. It was then that I came to terms with the idea that my research would probably not proceed as neatly as the proposal had stated, and that I should be prepared for taking considerable steps back and take time to simply get to know the people and the organizations of Sitka and vice versa.

Once in Sitka, I had no phone and no cell service. Dressed in full raingear, I rode a bike that my new roommate let me borrow through the rain to a coffee shop, where I continuously tried to call the Sitka tribe and catch the person I had been told to contact between meetings. I did this a few days in a row until I finally reached that person and we scheduled an appointment for later that day. I had sent her my proposal from Juneau and I had hoped that she had a chance to look at it, but she hadn't. She therefore took ten minutes and looked over the proposal. She then put it down and looked at me and said, "It is an interesting project, but I have no interest in being involved in it. Sitka Tribe and Shee Atika have finally found a place of peace and collaboration and I do not want to be responsible for creating waves between us". I told her I understood and asked her how we should proceed. "Well, some men went out fishing today, and tomorrow and in the next few weeks we will need help passing out salmon to the elders. You could come help us with that, so that you get to know the community and they get to see you trying to get involved". The meeting then ended and I rode my bike home in the rain in disbelief that I had to throw out my whole project. Once I got there, I looked for clothes that I could splatter in salmon juices for the next few weeks.

I then pulled out my field journal and began to write. I debated about if there was anything that I could do to proceed with the proposed project. I realized it would be impossible to speak to anybody else in the Sitka Tribe because she was the contact I had been given and I could not go above her head. I was almost sure that at least the Sitka Conservation Council and the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, if not Shee Atika would also be interested, but I realized that I could not proceed with the project without the participation of Sitka Tribe. I concluded that if the Sitka Tribe said that they were not interested in the project, then I would need to start from scratch.

The next day I passed out Salmon to the elders. That afternoon my Sitka Tribe contact put me in touch with the Director of the Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Natural Resource Department, and from then on I worked with them, building trust and ultimately feeling much like a volunteer. I, however, was appointed to assist them in a very relevant and interesting project: to help them complete the field guide and attend the meetings of the Kayaani Commission. The Kayaani Commission's goals and their present-day and future work, which I will discuss below, created a space with dissertation potential. That was my last day that I passed out salmon because the Tlingit men who had continuously gone out fishing had come back with very little harvest, and they finally concluded they had somehow missed the salmon run.

## Research Problem and Goal

"The medication that is on our land- up from the mountain on down to the sea- we can never let go of this... We have to speak to the leaves and to the ones that are out at sea, we have to speak. If it's going to take, we are going to get it easy... But if it's not going to help, we can't get it easy. This is something I want to do, in Tlingit [language]. We can't let go of it."

– Naomi Kanosh

As part of the largest remaining Pacific Coast rainforest in the world, Southeast Alaska's Tongass National For-

est is composed of hemlock, spruce, and cedar trees that blanket the Alexander Archipelago (6,756,367 acres). Sitka, which is one of the two small urban areas located within the Tongass National Rainforest, is also situated in Sitka Sound, on the west coast of Baranof (Shee in Tlingit language) Island. Sitka is the second biggest city in Southeast Alaska, with a population of 8835 people; 1641 of these people are Tlingit (Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development 2006), representing 24.7% of the population. In 1997, the USDA Forest Service proposed that there be a national and regional "Special Forest Products" (SFP) permit to allow commercial harvesting of non-timber forest products in United States National Forests. Special forest products "...include, but are not limited to: mushrooms, tree boughs, Christmas trees, bark, ferns, moss, burls, berries, cones, conks, herbs, roots, and wildflowers" (National Forest Service 2000), as well as cuttings and transplants. The Tongass National Forest requires permits for subsistence use, personal use, other non-commercial uses, and commercial use (Tongass National Forest Service 2006). Both the Alaska Region Interim Special Forest Products Resource Management Policy and the Tongass National Forest Interim Special Forest Products Resource Management Policy state that "...local tribes shall be directly notified of any proposed commercial SFP resource harvest activities within their use area in interest of government-to-government relations" (National Forest Service 2000; Tongass National Forest Service 2001). As the Tongass National Forest around Sitka Sound continues to be important place to harvest traditional plants to the Sitka Tlingit people, they began to meet, forming the Kayaaní Commission.

"Back: Irene Jimmy, George Bennett, Sr., Scott Brylinsky, Libby Watanabe

Front: Jessie Johnnie and Ethel Makinen."

Photo taken from Sitka Tribe Kayaaní Commission website (2006).

The Kayaaní Commission monitors the guidelines for the Special Forest Products permit in the Alaska region and is part of their official review process. They offer recommendations to the submitted permit applications, which are then returned to the Forest Service for final approval. The original founding members of the commission were Naomi Kanosh, Irene Jimmy, Jessie Johnnie, Ethel Makinen, Robert Sam, Marion Donthier, and Lori Peterson (Sitka Tribe 2006). Today the commission is "...a group (mostly elders) that still includes Irene Jimmy, Jessie Johnnie and Ethel Makinen, but George Bennett, Sr., Scott Brylinsky, and Libby Watanabe have joined. They are concerned with preserving and protecting plants and the traditional ways they are used. The Commission was established by an ordinance of the Sitka Tribe of Alaska, a federally recognized tribal government" (Sitka Tribe 2006). They were formally recognized by the Sitka Tribe of Alaska in 1998. The commission mediates between the staff of the Forest Service, Sitka Tribe of Alaska, and other Southeast Tribes. In 1999, the Kayaaní Commission received a grant from the National Park Historic Preservation and they hosted a regional plant conference in 2001 (Sitka Tribe 2006). Other projects include the production of a plant field guide and a computer program that is to be used for educational purposes to teach people about traditional uses of and ways of knowing about plants.

These materials include English, Tlingit and scientific plant names. They also discuss traditional Tlingit uses and understandings of the plants, although they explicitly warn people against trying to use Tlingit plants traditionally if they are not versed in the foundations of Tlingit spiritualities: "We have apprehension about sharing detail. We're going to skim the surface on these kinds of things, so we're not responsible for people trying to practice these kinds of things. Because there are people that take on what's on the surface and try to practice without the actual total knowledge of its spiritual intent, as well as medicinal use" (George Bennett Sr. in Kayaaní Commission 2006). The latter quotation, as well as the statement made by Naomi Kanosh that begins this section, reflect the alternative way in which Tlingit elders feel they relate with the land and the emphasis they place on their special relationship with the forest. Tlingit language, memories of plant use teachings by their elders, as well as oral histories of each particular plant have therefore become strategies in the strengthening of their cultural resilience, and they play an important part in establishing foundations for forest use negotiations. In the future the commission plans to travel to other communities to support them in forming their own plant

groups; they have plans to hold meetings where they can document other community's traditional plant use and they ideally would like the Kayaani Commission to become regional. We discussed the potential for dissertation research in documenting the processes of the Kayaani Commission's networking and the sharing of traditional Tlingit understandings and uses of plants between communities in the region.

“Tribal citizen digs for Indian Rice with blacktail deer antler.”

Photo taken from Sitka Tribe Kayaani Commission website (2006).

I edited, helped to write the introduction, and assisted in the organization of the Kayaani Commission's Ethnobotany Field Guide. I also attended their meetings and transcribed tapes. In addition, I gave them past papers about ANCSA, Tlingit cultural and natural resource management and Tlingit cultural resilience, and Tlingit language revitalization that were relevant to the work they are currently doing. My final research intent, developed in collaboration with the people with whom I was working, was to understand the role of the Sitka Tribe's Kayaani Commission in driving and shaping cultural meanings of the forest and their strategies in maintaining their cultural priorities for use of special forest products within their negotiations with the Tongass National Forest Service.

### Preliminary Findings

Again, my principal research question asked the following: In the face of the most sweeping transformation of Alaska Native socio-cultural institutions (Thornton 2005)—ANCSA, how do Tlingit tribal organizations, established with Indian Reorganization Act of 1936, drive and shape ecological and economic negotiations with the local Tongass National Forest Service and emphasize their cultural meanings, understandings, and use of the forest? My conclusions demonstrate that the Sitka Tribe actively advocates traditional uses and understandings of the forest in their negotiations with the Forest Service. Within their workshops and educational materials they push forward traditional Tlingit wisdom and demonstrate how they learned to live from the forest's medicines and foods. Their website and pamphlet explicitly state that the Kayaani Commission's mission is “to preserve our [their] spiritual way of life...[and] to preserve and protect traditional ways of ancestral knowledge. Their educational materials reinforce the use of Tlingit language, Tlingit traditions, and most importantly, Tlingit oral histories. They have successfully been able to negotiate their needs and understandings of the special forest products with the Tongass National Forest Service and the Sitka National Historic Park. Only one permit for mushrooms has been approved by the Kayaani Commission and the Tongass National Forest Service, but the man who had applied for the permit decided it was not viable (Helen Dangle, Director of Sitka Tribe's National Resource Protection Department, personal communication 8/15/2006). In a personal communication, Dangle stated, “The relations of the forest service and the Sitka tribe are peaceful. We work well together. We collaborate on other projects as well, especially with subsistence, like fish weirs and other archeologically based projects. We have biannual meetings and there is little conflict.” My preliminary findings therefore demonstrate that their work is evidence of Sitka Tribe's cultural resilience and their ability to successfully work in collaboration with the Tongass National Forest Service, even within ANCSA's corporate-based framework, where one might think that Shee Atika, the Sitka ANCSA corporation would take this role.

### Benefits to the Community

I believe the preliminary research I did had two main benefits. One benefit to the community was that the Sitka Tribe was grateful to work with a researcher who was respectful enough to throw out a project that the tribe perceived to have the potential to cause waves in the community. They were glad to work with someone who believed in participatory research to the extent that he/she would prioritize the tribe's need and protocol to establish trust and the tribe's research interests over their own need to gather a particular data and produce knowledge that was of most interest to him/her. Therefore, I believe the tribe was grateful to have the experience in

which research could be a real collaboration, and in which both the researcher and the participants hold agency over the direction of the research.

The second principal benefit to the community is derived from the work that I contributed to the Kayaani Commission's projects. I also hope that the members of the Sitka Tribe benefit from the research papers I gave from them, and I hope that they find interest in this document. If I continue to work in collaboration with the Sitka Tribe and do participatory research about the Kayaani's regional expansion and networking, about how communities are benefiting from educational forums and the sharing of materials of traditional knowledge about the forest, the community could potentially benefit in other ways as well.

## Lessons Learned

The most important lesson that I learned in while in the field in Southeast Alaska is that conducting participatory research is complex, but well worth the challenge. If research is not participatory from its beginning stages, it is difficult to see how the research results benefit the community or why the community would be interested in taking part in the research in the first place. After all, if a community is not an active part of the research process and is not interested in the outcome, then it seems the research is little more than self-serving for the researcher and his/her institution, and thus a reinforcement of its colonialist origins. It is absolutely necessary to improve the relationships between researchers and the communities in which they work to support communities in becoming more self-determinative, in becoming increasingly interested in higher education for their children, and in wanting to be involved in learning how to conduct integrative and problem-posing research to help improve the well-being of their communities. To integrate one self with a community and form collaborative relationships takes time and patience. We must allow for time to build trust in our proposals if we want to make the proposed research timeline both realistic and feasible. Most importantly, I learned the importance of researchers contacting local organizations—not regional organizations—to ask them to be our community partners and to collaborate on the research proposal from its inception. We must work with local organizations to be sure that the community will be interested in our research (to avoid having our research proposals being thrown out upon arrival) and to be confident that we are creating a solid, community-supported proposal to present to the Institutional Review Boards of our respective research institutions (to only have to go through that process once).

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