

A Southeast Alaska Indigenous Guardian-Watchmen Network: Support for Indigenous Stewardship

“We govern our ancestral traditional territories and safeguard the health of our ecosystems. We are the Guardians and Watchmen of our territories.”

– Coastal First Nations’ Coastal Guardian Watchmen Network Vision

The Setting

There may be nowhere on earth where the natural environment plays a more integral role to a region’s ecological resilience, economic sustainability and cultural vitality than southeast Alaska. Our remote coastal communities are scattered throughout our region’s 18,000 miles of coastline and surrounded by 20 million acres of coastal rainforest. For thousands of years the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian peoples have adapted to this environment and relied upon its natural resources for food, art, trade and tradition. Today, the abundance of these resources, including fish, deer, berries, trees, and others are at the very foundation of the southeast Alaskan way of life.

The Challenge

Community resilience in southeast Alaska is threatened by a quickly changing climate, unsustainable natural resource extraction, shifts in the global economy and the evolving legacy of colonialism. These factors have complex impacts on the environment, food security, social equity, and community health. Taking action to protect our region’s resources and adapt to these changes is extremely challenging due to the size and complexity of these issues; but action is central to long-term community well-being.



The Opportunity

Residents indigenous to southeast Alaska have been practicing natural resource stewardship in one of the most dynamic landscapes on earth for millennia. This traditional stewardship knowledge, in combination with the rural setting and lifestyle of their communities, makes rural community residents inherently well-suited to monitor changes in the environment; protect and restore critical habitats; and use their voice in the management of natural resources.

Influential “Indigenous Guardian-Watchmen” programs that practice indigenous stewardship exist all over the world. In Southeast Alaska, some communities already have successful natural resource programs or are active in management arenas; many aspire to build or grow on this success.

We see an opportunity to catalyze upon these conditions by connecting existing programs, aspiring community leaders, natural resource management agencies and NGOs to strengthen indigenous stewardship in our region. This network would provide technical and social support necessary to grow our collective capacity to monitor and manage our lands with a common voice and by sharing resources. This network could potentially provide a boundless suite of services and benefits to participants, and will be designed based on a shared vision reflecting the voice, needs and suggested approaches of the communities.



Next Steps

In 2017 and 2018, we will work with community and regional partners on the following key objectives:

1. Facilitate a common vision for an indigenous guardian-watchmen network in southeast Alaska.
2. Create and implement an action plan for the envisioned network.
3. Develop a sustainable business plan for long-term funding of the envisioned network.
4. Launch a network rooted in this vision.

