Between Worlds - Balancing Profit and Protection

Balancing Profit and Protection
by LORI THOMSON
photographs by MICHAEL PENN

Conflicts have developed over harvesting resources such as timber and oil on lands also needed for fishing and hunting.

Financial charts were posted for the corporate meeting, when a drum beat rose outside the hall.

About two dozen Huna Totem Corp. shareholders in traditional red, blue and black button blankets sang in Tlingit: \"If you walked on our land as our ancestors did, you would know what we are going through now.\"

The song, sung by their grandparents, captures a dilemma that ripped apart families in Hoonah last year - whether their village corporation, Huna Totem, should trade land right behind town for federal acreage it would log.

Dennis Gray, Sealaska shareholder and logging truck driver for White Stone Logging near Hoonah, coils cable after delivering a load of logs to the sorting yard.

The Hoonah controversy is one that has haunted many villages since the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed: How does a Native corporation balance its need to earn profits with its goal of protecting the land?

\"It's like the land is a part of your soul. If you don't have the land, you don't have anything to sing about,\" said Hoonah resident Harlena Sanders.

Sanders is among those in Hoonah who didn't want to surrender the parcel near the heart of the village. Supporters of the land trade said if the land stays in Huna Totem's hands, sooner or later it will be logged.

Development poses a conflict particularly where timber and oil abound, in places such as Southeast, the North Slope and the Chugach region on the Gulf of Alaska coast.

The village of Hoonah is located in Port Frederick on Chichagof Island in Southeast Alaska.

In Angoon, about 55 miles south of Juneau, preservation of the land has prevailed. People enjoy rich hunting and fishing grounds nearby, but pay the price in jobs. Hoonah, about 40 miles southwest of the capital city, has reaped money and jobs from logging, but some residents worry about the future of deer hunting as they look across the channel at about five uninterrupted miles of clearcuts.

Timber around Hoonah has been cut by Huna Totem and Sealaska Corp., as well as buyers of U.S. Forest Service timber sales.

Huna Totem logged because it wanted to get out of a financial bind from its early years.

\"We were in such bad debt we had to do massive logging,\" said Albert Dick, chairman of Huna Totem and mayor of Hoonah. \"We put our land up as collateral, which was a horrible mistake. For the next two or three years, we logged 60 or 70 million board feet to get us back on our feet. The interest was eating us alive.\"

Longshoremen work to load and tie down lumber aboard the container ship Ocean Blue in Hoonah. The ship takes Sealaska timber to sell in Japan.

Although few locals fell trees, Sealaska provides more than 20 local jobs for people loading logs on ships. That work lasts about three days once every two months, said Bill Bennett of Sealaska.

Timber royalties helped the city pay for projects such as a new gymnasium and a youth center. Sealaska donated $73,000 to a youth center, helped build a playground and donated rock for the harbor's breakwater and for roads.

\"You can't deny the fact it's helped the community,\" said Alessandro Hill, former vice mayor of Hoonah.

But others fear the amount of nearby logging will hurt deer populations in coming years.

\"If [Sealaska's] 16,000 shareholders understood what they're doing here, they wouldn't be for this,\" said Wanda Culp, 50, of Hoonah. \"It looks like it's been nuked.\"

Some forget the climate of the early 1980s. Hoonah's city council attempted to put a 2-mile no-logging buffer around the town. The council backed down because public pressure in support of logging was so strong.

In contrast, the people of Angoon on Admiralty Island fought for and won approval to make Admiralty a national monument, protecting most of it from logging.

\"Admiralty National Monument is not a monument to us,\" said Matthew Fred Sr., chief of Angoon.

\"It's a shrine.\"

Twenty years later, that monument not only preserved hunting and fishing for the people of Angoon, but for residents of other towns as well.

\"Let our island be thought of as a dish,\" Fred said. \"Eat out of it, but don't break it.\"

Some people say Angoon remains one of the strongest bastions of Tlingit culture in part because it protected its land.

K.J. Metcalf, who moved to Angoon 16 years ago, is awed by the skills of Angoon's top hunters, who he's seen shoot, dress and prepare deer for packing back home in about 10 minutes.

\"There's no wasted motion. It's an art,\" Metcalf said. \"This culture is in part kept alive by their ability to use the land in a traditional way.\"

Walter Jack, a resident of Angoon, rides in the front of a skiff in Mitchell Bay with dressed coho salmon and bags of salmon eggs.

Angoon's village corporation, Kootznoowoo, did log, but about 180 miles to the south on Prince of Wales Island. That area was used by other Native groups for fishing and hunting. But Gabriel George, a former Kootznoowoo board member, said the corporation cut in areas already slated for logging by the U.S. Forest Service.

Logging has been the major contributor to dividends, totaling $59,400 since 1990 for each average Kootznoowoo shareholder.

However the tradeoff was that logging jobs were far from home, preventing many people from taking them.

Harold Frank Sr., who owns a tackle shop, would have liked to have seen logging closer to town.

\"It's good to preserve, but it's not doing us any good,\" Frank said. \"There's no jobs. There's no economy.\"

Unemployment is at about 80 percent in Angoon, where rotting hulls of fishing boats on the beach are reminders of the commercial fishing industry that has largely died in this town. That's left few ways to make money.

All Angoon students are offered free lunches because of the town's weak economy, said school superintendent Virgie Fryrear.

With the decline of commercial fishing in Angoon, wooden fishing boats rot on the beach near the harbor.

\"A lot of people suffer when they can't pay their light bills or their house payments, and some people get evicted,\" said Wally Frank Sr., former mayor and president of Angoon Community Association.

Some corporations have tried to balance using natural resources with maintaining the land. In northwest Alaska, NANA Regional Corp. built the Red Dog zinc and lead mine, which village subsistence committees say has not seriously hurt hunting or fishing. Goldbelt, Juneau's urban corporation, opted to selectively log some of its land, leaving those forests looking virtually untouched from a distance.

\"It's difficult to balance all that. To be a social entity as well as an economic entity is difficult,\" said Harold Frank Jr., Kootznoowoo's land and resource assistant manager. \"I'd be curious to ask the congressional delegation 'Is this what you intended?'\"