Between Worlds - Investing in Culture

Investing in Culture
Native corporations play a large role in the preservation and recovery of cultural riches.

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Like preschoolers everywhere, the kids at the Douglas Island Tlingit-Haida Head Start are learning to count, name colors and get along with each other.

But when they count, they start with tléix', déix, nás'k; when they name the color of snow, it's dleit; and when they say thank you, it's Gunalchéesh.

The preschool language immersion program is part of an ambitious plan by a consortium of Southeast Alaska Native groups to revive the fading Tlingit and Haida languages.

The Atka Dancers rehearse in the gym of Netsvetov School in Atka.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

The effort isn't cheap - one contributor, the Sealaska Heritage Foundation, pumps much of its $500,000 annual budget into the cause. The money is well-spent, according to Robert Milton, a Tlingit whose grand-son attends the school. \"Speaking and talking about culture in English, there's something missing there, no matter how hard we try to explain it,\" he said. \"When you start speaking your language, you'll understand where you originated from. You'll understand your people and you'll be proud of them.\"

The money for the heritage foundation comes from Sealaska Corp., one of the 13

regional Native corporations created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Collectively, Native corporations report spending more than $3 million some years to revive or hold onto aspects of Alaska Native ways that are threatened by or lost to the Western culture.

But while they give, the corporations also take. Their very existence changes the traditional culture by forcing Natives to adapt to a Western way of life.

Tlingit language instructors Florence Sheakley, left, and Anna Katzeek help Robert Quick, center, and Lupe Flores with Tlingit at the Douglas Island Tlingit-Haida Head Start program.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

\"It's sort of a double-edged sword,\" said Amy Steffian, deputy director of the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak.

Natives talk about the clash between the traditional values of sharing and caring for the land and the Western corporate concept of profit-making.

\"We never viewed this as, 'This is your piece of land, that's my piece of land, that's federal lands,'\" said Georgianna Lincoln, a state senator and Doyon Ltd. board member. Now some corporations put up \"no trespassing\" signs or charge fees for other Natives to hunt if they're not shareholders.

Jana Harcharek, liaison officer for the North Slope Borough Commission on Inupiat Language and Culture, said those who want jobs in the new corporations sometimes have to forego part of the subsistence hunting and fishing cycle. Doing so, they miss out not only on food but on an important aspect of traditional culture. \"It's a Wall Street organization,\" said Ethan Petticrew, an Atka teacher who instructs classes in Native culture. \"Can it really perpetuate the culture and make bucks? How can it play a double role?\"

Sealaska board member Richard Stitt, however, said traditional culture was being lost before ANCSA, a trend that would have continued with or without the act.

Corporations have just given Natives more economic power to control it.

\"What Sealaska is doing is trying to somehow stem the erosion,\" he said.

Holding onto the culture is important for the diversity it provides the world as a whole, and for the sense of identity and self-esteem it provides Native people, Juneau anthropologist and Sealaska Corp. official Rosita Worl said. Learning to value their culture gives children strength to deal with prejudice in a world in which they are now a minority.

Sealaska's cultural preservation effort includes \"Celebration,\" a biennial gathering of thousands of Natives for several days of traditional dancing, art, food and workshops.

Peter Clevenger Sr., of the Fourth Generation Tsimshian Dancers from Metlakatla, participates in a celebration parade through downtown Juneau.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

\"It's a real emotional thing for me,\" said Dorothy Nix, a Native from the Southeast Alaska village of Hydaburg who now lives in Juneau. Wrapped in a sea otter pelt, she waited outside Centennial Hall last spring for the parade of dancers and drummers to come by. \"It brings back a sense of pride and awe,\" she said.

In Kodiak the Native regional and village corporations put $200,000 into operating the new Alutiiq Museum where the ancient tools, jewelry, stone oil lamps and other Native artifacts can be stored and displayed.

Children in northwest Alaska attend a culture camp, sponsored by NANA Regional Corp., where they learn about subsistence hunting and fishing and other Inupiat traditions.

Native corporations across the state are pitching in to help build the Alaska Native Heritage Center, a visitors' center celebrating the culture of each of

Alaska's Native groups, set to open this year in Anchorage.

How much of their unique cultures Alaska Natives will succeed in preserving or restoring remains to be seen.

The cultural loss has been continuing since the 1700s, when Russian fur merchants arrived in the Aleutians and virtually enslaved the Natives.

But there are triumphs.

The Russians changed the design of the traditional Aleut kayak, or ikeak, so it would be slow enough that their ships could keep up with it. About six years ago, when the Unalaska village corporation helped sponsor an ikeak-building project, local schoolchildren found drawings of pre-contact boats and began building them again, said Sharon Livingston, a corporation board member.

Two years ago, during an elders conference in Unalaska, they launched the boats. While an Atka dance group drummed and chanted on the shore, a new generation of Aleuts, proudly wearing traditional hunting visors, maneuvered in 35-knot winds.

Some cried as they watched the thin, fast boats bouncing in the whitecaps, Livingston said.

\"These elders had never thought they'd ever see or hear anything like that again.\"