



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

HONORING NATIONS: 2002 HONOREE

Nation Building Among the Chilkoot Tlingit Chilkoot Indian Association (Haines, Alaska)

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Excluded by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971, the Chilkoot Tlingit's political presence was reduced to a mailbox and storage room in the basement of a meeting hall in Haines, Alaska. Embracing the concept of self-determination, the Chilkoot Indian Association has been engaged in a process of nation building since 1990. The Tribe is rewriting its constitution, developing institutional capacity, rebuilding a land base, forging government-to-government relationships with surrounding jurisdictions, and improving services for its citizens.

Following the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, the Chilkoot Tlingit slowly became a minority population with limited influence in local and regional affairs. Slightly less than half of the Tribe's 480 citizens live in the Haines, Alaska area where they represent between 10 and 15 percent of the total population. Although the Chilkoot Tlingit were formally recognized under the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934, the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 left them a landless community because the population of the community was predominantly non-Indian. Lacking both a land base and status as an incorporated Native village, assets that other southeast Alaskan Native villages had used to build economic and political strength, the tribal government of the Chilkoot Tlingit—the Chilkoot Indian Association—languished. Although periodic efforts to reinvigorate the Tribe and its culture occurred throughout the 1970s, these efforts foundered. Tension between non-Natives and Natives, or worse, Non-Natives' dismissal of Native issues and needs, did not help. Local schools rebuffed the Tribe's attempts to include any Tlingit culture, language, or history studies in their curricula. Often, the only attention the larger non-Native population paid to the Chilkoot Tlingit involved the use of their songs and dances to attract tourism. With a political organization diminished to the point of solely managing internal ceremonial affairs and a summer fish camp, the Chilkoot Tlingit had become, in many senses, an invisible population.

Frustrated by this powerlessness, in 1990 the Chilkoot Tlingit decided to take matters into their own hands and turn their aspirations for practical sovereignty into reality. Their goal was both simple and profound: they were going to build an Indian nation by developing institutions that would advance the Tribe politically, socially, economically, and culturally. Embracing the ideology of self-determination and inspired by other tribes' success, the Chilkoot Indian Association used \$30,000 in revenues from the sale of a tribal building to begin its work. The first task was to reactivate the dormant tribal government and reestablish basic governing institutions.

Rekindling the Chilkoot Indian Association set into motion a process of nation building that has intensified over the past decade. Today, the Chilkoot Indian Association consists of an active six-member tribal council and a president. Council members are elected to two-year, staggered terms and the tribal council appoints a president who serves a one-year term. The president hires staff to develop and manage six governmental departments that oversee tribal accounting, environmental protection, education, real estate, Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act (NAHASDA) funds, and grants from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA). Additionally, the Chilkoot Indian Association has developed a strategic plan to continue to refine its governmental institutions. With input from clan leaders, elders, and tribal citizens who help ensure the legitimacy

and cultural appropriateness of the evolving governing institutions, the Tribe is actively involved in reforming its tribal constitution, governmental structure, codes, policies, and operations.

Having started with a single basement office in the Alaskan Native Brotherhood/Alaskan Native Sisterhood Hall and a pile of unopened mail from the 1970s, the Chilkoot Indian Association is now a revitalized government around which the tribal community has coalesced. Although it started with a deficit of \$1,500 in 1989, the Tribe now administers an annual budget of \$750,000, which funds programs in education, health, housing, land, and economic development. Initially a landless political entity, the Chilkoot Indian Association successfully negotiated for the return of 73 acres that the Presbyterian Church had acquired from local clans. Additionally, the Tribe persuaded the Haines borough government to convey 70 acres of sensitive cultural lands, and the Tribe is now utilizing its status as a government to rehabilitate, with the intention of reclaiming, tribal lands expropriated by the Department of Defense. Once a volunteer effort, the tribal government now has a staff of 38 full and part-time employees. Consistent with the Tribe's insistence that it be treated as a sovereign government—and backed up by proven governmental success—the Chilkoot Indian Association has gained recognition from multiple entities including the city, borough, state, and federal governments. The Tribe also regularly partners with these governments on projects that enhance the well being of tribal citizens and the surrounding communities.

The Chilkoot Indian Association's nation-building efforts have led to many successes. Four are illustrative of its effective problem-solving abilities. First, as recently as the late 1990s, the local medical clinic was operating in substandard facilities, reliant on obsolete technology, and on the verge of closing due to financial instability. When clinic doctors approached the Chilkoot Indian Association seeking assistance, the tribal council worked with the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium to bring the clinic under the consortium's operations. By quickly bringing financial stability and improved services to its Native and non-Native client base, the Chilkoot Indian Association ensured its community access to state-of-the-art health care.

Second, the Chilkoot Indian Association brought necessary funding and expertise to the Haines community's solid waste management problem. To achieve this, it partnered with the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indians. The Chilkoot's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) director succeeded in upgrading the community's recycling efforts, installing a transfer station, and bringing together Indian and non-Indian parties to create a process for developing a more effective community-wide solid waste management plan. Although the Chilkoot Tlingit previously had no say in such issues, their efforts not only addressed the problems of solid waste management, but also raised the Tribe's visibility within the community as a government that can get things done.

Third, the Tribe sought its own NAHASDA grant, and through this effort, has been able to improve both the access to and the quality of the stock of housing for its tribal citizens. For example, the Tribe uses NAHASDA funds to assist tribal citizens in undertaking necessary housing renovations and home improvements. It also uses NAHASDA funds to provide housing assistance grants for its college students, wherever they pursue their post-secondary education. That the Tribe itself administers these funds is significant: Up until the 1990s, all Native programs were administered outside the community and the limited services and programs that were available were often inaccessible, slow to be provided, or did not meet local needs.

Finally, through a Memorandum of Understanding with the US Army, the Chilkoot Indian Association is partnering with the Bethel Native Corporation to demolish an inactive tank farm located on ancestral tribal lands. The Tribe received funding to undertake contamination testing and has to date removed four buildings containing significant hazardous waste. Not only has this effort created eight employment opportunities for tribal citizens, but it also has allowed the Tribe to consider development options that would follow the completion of demolition and remediation (if it is able to get the land deeded back to the Tribe).

Significantly, the rebuilding of the Chilkoot Tlingit's political presence has resulted in a cultural resurgence. For decades, ceremonies were infrequent, ancient traditions were being forgotten, and

cultural pride was waning. Yet the process of nation building, through its focus on empowerment and self-determination, has reversed these trends. Tribal citizens are now proud to identify themselves as the area's aboriginal people and have reinstated their historic relationship with the land, the sea, and the larger Tlingit community. This pride has practical consequences. For example, the Chilkoot Indian Association is working with the local school system to institute Tlingit history, culture, and language into its curriculum. The greatest measure of the Tribe's success at reinstilling cultural values and of the recognition and respect now afforded Tlingit Indians came during the 2000 high school graduation, when the entire audience, Native and non-Native alike, stood and sang a Chilkoot song that has been adopted as the Tlingit's national anthem. In short, the Chilkoot Indian Association recognizes that political development can and should coincide with cultural investment.

The Chilkoot Indian Association has solidified its status as a tribe—a status that it has earned by building capable institutions of self-governance and by becoming known as a government that can get things done. The Tribe has leveraged its limited financial resources through collaborative efforts and partnerships with local schools, the library, health clinic, utilities, and the US Army to provide services to its tribal citizens. Additionally, the Tribe works collaboratively with the regional Native corporation and surrounding Native villages, village corporations, and First Nations of Canada. The Chilkoot Indian Association also participates in the National Congress of American Indians, the Alaska Intertribal Conference, and the Alaska Federation of Natives. The Tribe's president was appointed a seat on the State Tribal Relations Committee that drafted the Alaska State Millennium Agreement in which the State of Alaska officially recognized the continued existence of sovereign tribal governments within its borders. Indeed, the Chilkoot Tlingit have demonstrated the effectiveness of building such relationships—they have mutual benefits and can produce results that a small tribe cannot achieve alone.

Whether taking control of programs that have long been administered outside the community, acquiring a land base, engaging in government-to-government relationships, or working with citizens to create a vision for the Tribe that is dramatically different than that held in the past, the Chilkoot Indian Association is exercising its sovereignty in exciting and important ways. Further, the Chilkoot Tlingit prove that assertions of sovereignty, supported by capable institutions of government, assist in successful tribal nation-building. This is a tribe that is not only here to stay, but will continue to grow stronger long into the future.

Lessons:

- Indian nations' social, economic, and political goals are nearly impossible to pursue in the absence of core institutions of self-government. Effective self-governance often requires tribes to build or reform tribal institutions – constitutions, political structures, policies, and procedures – so that they can make full use of natural, human, and financial resources.
- Leveraging partnerships with other governments and organizations may be especially important for small and/or rural tribes. Such partnerships allow tribes to access funding and expertise that might not otherwise be available to them.
- The only way for Indian nations to gain non-Indian citizens' and governments' respect is to earn it. Tribes that are able to solve compelling problems and administer programs and services well are more likely to cultivate widespread support for their nation-building efforts.