



## THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

### HONORING NATIONS: 2014 HONOREE

#### **Swinomish Climate Change Initiative Swinomish Indian Tribal Community**

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*As the climate changes, abnormally high or low temperatures, strong storms, tidal surge and sea level rise, and unusual precipitation patterns are affecting our environment in many ways. After experiencing numerous extreme weather events, the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community (SITC) decided to put in place a far-reaching action plan to prepare for future climate changes. The Swinomish Climate Change Initiative takes a close look at possible climate related impacts and brings the community together to deal with threats to the Swinomish way of life.*

#### **Local Events Prompt Action**

The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community (SITC) is located on the southeastern peninsula of Fidalgo Island in Puget Sound, about 70 miles north of Seattle, Washington. Approximately 3,000 tribal and non-tribal residents live on a 15-square mile reservation that is connected to the mainland via two bridges over the Swinomish Channel. The Coast Salish peoples of the area are known as the “People of the Salmon” and stewards of the Skagit River watershed.

With 26 miles of rich coastline and tidelands, the Swinomish Reservation is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. In the last decade, unusual events in the area have given residents a taste of what could become more commonplace in the future. Severe storms and other factors have produced high tides that surged over expected levels, threatening to cut off the reservation from the mainland. Although the Puget Sound area is normally temperate, the community has also experienced periods of high summer temperatures that led to heat-related illness for local residents and elevated risk of wildfires.

To better understand what to expect and how to prepare for changing weather patterns, the tribe initiated research that found that up to 15 percent of its territory and over \$100 million worth of residential and commercial property could be at risk from flooding. Additional properties valued at \$518 million would be vulnerable to forest fires under changing temperature and rainfall patterns. Warmer temperatures would also allow non-native species

and diseases to thrive, threatening the area's traditional ecosystem. A rise in sea levels would devastate shellfish beds, beach areas, marine estuaries, salmon habitat, and agricultural lands. The tribe recognized that designing an effective climate change plan required a coordinated effort across many tribal government departments as well as beyond the reservation boundaries.

### **Planning for Climate Change**

In 2007, the tribe's governing body, the Swinomish Indian Senate, issued a proclamation on the importance of climate change to the future of the Swinomish people, noting:

The effects of climate change, while evident globally and regionally, have the potential for significant impacts on the local community...due to projected impacts from rising temperatures, rising sea level, and other associated effects on the local environment, natural resources, water supplies, fish and wildlife, and critical infrastructure on which the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community has traditionally relied.

Swinomish launched its Climate Change Initiative the following year. It is a comprehensive effort aimed at assessing and responding to any negative impacts on community members, tribal land, and the regional ecosystem.

At the outset, the tribe reached out to top climate scientists at the University of Washington for the latest data and projections concerning regional environmental changes. Project reports outline probable future climate conditions and potential outcomes of climate change, including ocean acidification, algae blooms, increasing water temperatures in the ocean and rivers, shoreline erosion, and sea level rise. The initial assessment phase of the project also considered how different aspects of life on the reservation might be affected and inventoried reservation assets that were at risk from changing climate patterns.

Based on the scientific data that showed a range of possible outcomes and with funding from the Administration for Native Americans of the US Department of Health and Human Services, the tribe developed a Climate Adaption Action Plan. Tribal departments and staff were asked to review the projected effects of climate change and propose actions to adapt to new realities. To guide the development of the action plan, tribal employees conducted interviews with community members and set up a community engagement group to work with project staff, bringing together tribal leaders, elders, and youth to include all viewpoints on Swinomish health and life ways. This input helped encourage use of traditional knowledge in the planning process and encouraged youth to think about the climate challenges facing their homeland. The tribe also worked with representatives from neighboring jurisdictions, recognizing that some issues will require working together to address impacts.

The SITC Climate Adaptation Plan is over 100 pages long and lays out a series of responses to be carried out in the near future and over the longer term. As an example, the plan proposes modified training, new forest management practices, and fire buffers to protect forested land. To safeguard coastal resources, the plan recommends new shoreline regulations, land acquisition, infrastructure work, and habitat improvements. Suggested activities with a longer time horizon include building up dikes, developing back-up infrastructure, and relocating or abandoning certain roads. To maintain community wellness, the plan also focuses on improving emergency preparedness, making recommendations for better reporting of illnesses, stockpiling emergency supplies, and addressing food security measures.

The Swinomish Climate Change Initiative has raised awareness of climate change throughout the community and mobilized resources to deal with the issue. For example, the tribe used its action plan to leverage funding for implementation grants addressing several identified priorities, including an expanded community health indicator program. Other actions are being targeted toward resource protection, such as the reintroduction of indigenous oysters, which are more tolerant to acidification. Perhaps most importantly, however, the initiative has put climate change at the forefront of tribal government planning.

### **Protecting a Way of Life**

The Swinomish Climate Change Initiative strengthens tribal sovereignty by adopting a proactive approach rather than waiting to react to events as they happen. Many of the actions recommended in the Climate Adaptation Action Plan are aimed at preserving key traditional practices, such as beach fishing and the conservation of shellfish habitat. According to one tribal official, the action plan places “paramount importance on those actions that best serve the long-term ability of the tribe to protect and preserve the land base, resources, community integrity, and cultural values which are the critical underpinnings of successful self-governance.” By planning ahead of time for possible climate change effects, the tribe can make sure that responses are strategic and consistent with Swinomish values.

Critically, the Swinomish Climate Change Initiative has embedded climate knowledge in community thinking. Work on the initiative brought together residents, tribal leaders, tribal department staff, and climate scientists to focus on the many issues facing the region. A wide cross-section of the community was involved in determining the most valued aspects of the Swinomish way of life – decisions that formed the basis of the tribe’s climate adaptation goals. The action plan reflects citizen concerns such as, “Our biological cycles are attuned to the life cycles of the salmon, and we have to force ourselves to adapt to other patterns, it’s generally going to have a severe impact on our well-being, our mental, or social, or psychological well-being.” The plan’s detailed technical options ensure that all tribal government departments know how to include climate change forecasts when planning new policies or projects. With its systematic and broad approach, the initiative provides the means for Swinomish community

members, policymakers, and elected leaders to be more effective natural resource caretakers on behalf of future generations.

The Swinomish Climate Change Initiative also has created opportunities to coordinate with other governments around shared climate objectives. Recognizing that climate change requires cooperative solutions, the tribe helped establish local intergovernmental working groups to address concerns. The Skagit Climate Science Consortium brings together scientists from government and academia to share data and research insights about the local ecosystem, while a strategy advisory group consisting of representatives of Skagit County and neighboring towns addresses inter-jurisdictional developments. On several occasions, the tribe has sent representatives to national gatherings on climate policy and has given testimony on climate issues in Washington, D.C. These “cross-border” activities allow the tribe to deepen its knowledge and to include Swinomish perspectives in broader dialogues around climate change. The tribe also uses these networks to advocate for policies that address climate change and to emphasize federal treaty responsibilities in the context of climate change.

### **Bringing the Lessons Home**

It is easy to feel pessimistic about governments’ lack of action to deal with climate change. Yet rather than be overwhelmed by the scope of the problem, the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community took concrete steps to plan for the future. Through its far-sighted Swinomish Climate Change Initiative, the tribe is using the latest scientific data as well as community input to protect tribal assets and decide how best to preserve traditional practices. Working with its own citizens as well as other governments, the tribe has found a constructive way to prepare for the disruptive effects of climate change.

### **Lessons:**

- Responses to climate change cannot happen in isolation. Policies must be comprehensive and cooperative, and have influence across all borders and all jurisdictions.
- To be most effective, climate change adaption plans must be integrated across all governmental programming.
- By exercising their sovereignty through advocacy, tribes are able to influence national and international policy development.