

Indian Point Not for Sale; Or, Reflections on Indian Point

Rosita Worl

IN THE 1960S, I PARTICIPATED IN AN ALASKA NATIVE SISTERHOOD (ANS) CEREMONY that announced to the Tlingit world that I was to assume my mother's role after her death. I hadn't thought my responsibilities would begin so soon. The protection of Indian Point was to be my first public challenge.

I had received my mother's *kookéinaa*, which is a ceremonial banner, worn by members of the ANS and Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB). Shortly after my mother's death, the ANS held a ceremony in which her ANS hat and banner were transferred to me. I had been selected because I had been under her formal training since the age of ten. My mother was a demanding teacher who observed my every action, even to the point of ensuring that I stood, sat, and held my head in the proper Tlingit manner. Her teaching also involved bringing me to her meetings.

After I received her *kookéinaa*, I returned home and sat on the beach in the front of our house reflecting on her contributions to the Tlingit people. She had worked tirelessly to secure political and economic equity for our people on multiple fronts. She worked as a union organizer for the salmon cannery workers and attended a continuous round of political meetings. She challenged the openly discriminatory practices towards the Tlingit that were prevalent throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Through her work and noble deeds, she had given my brothers and sisters a great gift. I wondered to myself what would I leave behind for my children.

I had grown up knowing that Indian Point was a Tlingit sacred site. At the time, I don't think I understood what the term "sacred" meant. However, I knew that it was a significant site and special to the Tlingit People. I was quite aware that I didn't have formal ties to Indian Point. My family was always reminded that we were "Chilkats" or Tlingits from the Haines and Klukwan area. I recall a prominent Auk Elder, Cecilia Kuntz, repeatedly telling us that we were not "Juneau people" or Auks, and that Juneau belonged to them. However, the Auk people were gracious in allowing us to use their land for subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering. One of our favorite activities was gathering herring eggs at Indian Point (Figure 1).

Indian Point is significant to the Tlingit community (Figure 2). It is important to the Tlingit of the past, the Tlingit of the present, and the Tlingit of the future. It is a place where Tlingit people worked, played, laughed, and sang. It is a place where the Auk greeted their visiting neighbors. It is a place where our warriors and shamans conducted their purification



Figure 1 Auk Indians preparing herring oil, Indian Point, ca. 1895. Photo courtesy of the Alaska State Library (P87-0081 Winter and Pond Photograph Collection).

and spiritual rites. It is a place that contains healing medicinal plants and powers. It is a place where our brothers and sisters, the raven and eagle, abound. It is a place where we buried our dead. It is a place where some day soon the Auk may re-enter the remains of ancestors who were taken away in the name of science and now may be reclaimed under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. It is the place where the spirits of the ancestors of the Áak'w Kwáan inhabit. It is a place where we sing our songs to our ancestors and call for spiritual assistance. It once was an important subsistence area until it was polluted after the non-Tlingit began to develop the northern shores of Indian Point. It is also a place that is highly coveted by others, but Indian Point is a sacred site to the Tlingit.

While we may dress as white people and speak the language of the white man, our hearts remain true to our old ways. Tlingit people have been reluctant to speak openly about our beliefs and our spiritual relationships to our ancestors lest they unleash the wrath of the proselytizing agents who sought to eradicate Native spiritual beliefs. We, who grew up during a period when Tlingit culture was repressed and were punished for speaking our language, are hesitant to openly discuss our beliefs lest we subject ourselves and our children to ridicule. However, we came to realize that we had to explain our spiritual beliefs so that non-Natives would understand our opposition to the construction of a governmental facility at Indian Point.

Tlingit people are culturally different from the larger society not simply because we have different cultural beliefs and practices. We conceive of space, time, life, and death in a different way than non-Tlingit.



Figure 2 View of Indian Point and Indian Island from Auke Bay. Photo courtesy of Rico Worl.

Indian Point is a burial site, but it is unlike a Western cemetery. As I understand it, when Westerners and those who adhere to their beliefs bury their dead, they believe that their souls go to a place called heaven or hell. They do not seem to mind if their graves have to be moved to make way for progress and development. I respect the rights of those who espouse such beliefs, but they are unlike traditional Tlingit ideologies.

Traditional Tlingit people believe that when we die, our spiritual being divides, with one part going to a supernatural abode and the other remaining at the site where our physical remains are interred. We respect the burial grounds inhabited by the spirits of our ancestors. Sacred grounds, such as Indian Point, bond us to the land, they unite us with our ancestors, they unify us with our living Tlingit brethren, and they ensure our survival as Tlingit people through future generations. The spirits of shamans remain powerful even after their death and can also bring both harm and good will and fortune depending on whom and the manner in which his or her spirit is approached. Burial sites embody the Tlingit cycle of life-death-life. Even to this day as I fly into Juneau and pass Indian Point, I call for spiritual assistance, and I reach to my heart to throw out any illnesses I may have. This site is sacred to the Áak'w Kwáan. Indian Point is sacred to the Tlingit.

We Tlingit who are from other areas outside of Juneau acknowledge the aboriginal tie of the Auk to Juneau and Indian Point irrespective of the fact that the Auk no longer hold legal title to the land. We stood unified with the Auk people because of this recognition and because we share the same beliefs and concerns. We knew that if the desecration and destruction of this sacred site can occur, they will occur elsewhere.

Shortly after receiving my mother's *kookéínaa*, I learned that the city of Juneau intended to rezone and subdivide Indian Point and to sell residential lots. The Native community was extremely upset. We all knew the significance of Indian Point. I called my fellow brothers and sisters from ANB and ANS to testify at the city council meeting in opposition to the proposed action. [Ed. note: for a discussion of this meeting, including Worl's testimony, see Tom Thornton's paper in this volume.] I was joined by several other Tlingit people. I thought we should have a greater representation, and I ran out of the meeting onto the street and asked those Tlingit people whom I saw to join us and to testify against the action. I also called my friend, Tommy Richards, who was a reporter with the *Tundra Times*, the statewide Native newspaper, to help us by bringing attention to our plight.

We were successful in persuading the city council of the importance of Indian Point to the Tlingit, and they tabled their action to sell the residential lots. In retrospect, I can see that we were quite naïve in thinking that Indian Point would be forever protected.

In the summer of 1996, when I assumed the position of interim president of the Sealaska Heritage Foundation (now renamed the Sealaska Heritage Institute, or SHI), I was startled to find, amidst the mounds of paper left on my desk by my predecessor, a letter to a former SHI president about the draft report on historic and prehistoric heritage associated with a proposed development of Indian Point. Nearly 30 years after my first episode with Indian Point, the federal government proposed to build an office complex and research center there. I immediately held a meeting with our SHI board of trustees. I briefed them on the proposed action and one trustee, who was also a clan leader, told me in no uncertain terms that we would die to protect the burial sites of our shamans. I quickly responded to the author of the letter (and the study) and noted that the legally required "consultation" with the Native community had not occurred. I instantly wrote a letter to that effect to the agency and asked for the status of the project. The Native community quickly responded, expressing opposition to the facility and insisting on formal consultations.

An archaeologist who had been under contract to assess Indian Point visited me. He advised me that he had met and consulted with a number of Tlingit elders to discuss the project. I reminded him that discussions with individual elders did not constitute consultation.

A few months after this discussion, the responsible federal agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), organized a series of meetings with me and with the community. One meeting in particular stands out in my memory. We met in the Centennial Hall, and a number of Tlingit people testified to the agency representatives about the importance of Indian Point. We cried as a young Tlingit woman and man tried to hold back their tears as they spoke about the significance of Indian Point and their concern about the potential desecration of the site. The young man, who was from Angoon (a nearby Native village), told of burning food there to transfer the food to his deceased relatives.

During one of these meetings, I noted the non-compliance with Section 106 consultation, and that the cultural resource study did not assess the site as a traditional cultural property (TCP) and did not investigate the dynamic relationship between the tangible and intangible cultural resources and the Tlingit beliefs and practices and values associated with Indian Point. I also said that Native people would pursue all administrative and legal options

for the protection of Indian Point, which could delay the project. We also asked NOAA to consider the other two sites that had been identified in the Juneau area as possible sites for the facility. We understood that some within their ranks viewed one of the sites as acceptable.

One of the federal agency officials asked me what could be done to “mitigate the adverse impacts.” I recall thinking to myself for a moment, and then offered that I didn’t know if spirits could be contained to a specific area if a fence were to be constructed to keep the spirit enclosed and the public away. I also emphasized that our sacred sites were unlike those of non-Natives, which could be deconsecrated, such as a church that is transformed into a meeting hall. I told them, however, that I would think about their question.

I recommended that a TCP evaluation be conducted. I had recently attended a Keepers of the Treasures meeting sponsored by the National Park Service in the Southwest and learned about TCPs. I thought that Indian Point was a perfect candidate for a TCP. I suggested that they contract with a Native entity.

Although I am an anthropologist and was thoroughly familiar with the history of Indian Point, I knew full well that the government would not ask me to conduct the study. I suggested a number of possible anthropologists who were familiar with the Tlingit culture. To do the study, a colleague at the University of Alaska was contracted with (see Tom Thornton’s paper in this volume). Additionally, NOAA also contracted with a traditional Tlingit leader to meet with the Auk people. I interpreted this effort as a measure to divide the Tlingit community.

In early 1997, before the TCP study was started, I learned that NOAA was offering us \$1 million and 50 acres of land in the Auke Village Recreation Area if we would drop our opposition to the construction project at Indian Point. They suggested that we could use the funds to build a village at another site. We were indignant with the offer. At the same time, we sadly recognized that some of our people might not hold Indian Point in the same regard as we, and could well be tempted by the million-dollar offer. The powerful governmental entity wanted the Auk and the Tlingit to redefine and restructure their culture and ideologies to meet its need. The clan mother of the Auk, Rosa Miller, adamantly opposed the destruction and desecration of their sacred site. She did not believe that the sanctity and spiritual attributes of Indian Point could be transferred to another site to satisfy the federal agency. The Auk immediately rejected the offer.

The Tlingit community stood solidly behind their decision. The Native community, including the Áak’w K̄wáan, Douglas Indian Association, ANB, ANS, Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indians of Alaska, Sealaska Corporation, and SHI opposed the construction of a building at Indian Point. However, one Tlingit individual, who had lived away from home for decades, urged her fellow Auk to accept the offer and warned that they would probably lose anyway, and the powerful government would eventually build on the sacred site.

The clan mother knew that if her people accepted the money, they stood to lose intangible treasures of their heritage that no amount of money could buy—least of all their honor. This clan mother, who was trained through her lifetime in the ways of her ancestors, stood her ground against the federal government.

At one point, I was called into the office of the chief executive officer (CEO) of Sealaska Corporation. Sealaska Corporation is the regional Native corporation established under the

Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971, which resolved our aboriginal land claims with the government. After its formation, Sealaska Corporation created an affiliate organization, SHI, whose mission was to protect and perpetuate the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures of Southeast Alaska. The CEO advised me that the powerful senior US senator of Alaska, Ted Stevens, had called him and asked why the Tlingit were opposing the construction of the NOAA facility. The senator conveyed that he was trying to help the economy of Juneau. Our CEO responded that when it came to cultural matters, he was required to yield to the traditional leaders and elders. I also reminded our CEO that very few of our tribal members had jobs with NOAA. I was also to learn later that the new facility would be named after our Senator Stevens.

Those who supported the construction of the NOAA facility at Indian Point blamed the Native community for the delay of the construction project. They claimed that we would be responsible if the funds for the NOAA facility were lost. From my perspective, the delay in construction could not be attributed to the Native community. Had NOAA met the federal requirements of consultation, they would have learned that Indian Point is a sacred site. They would have known that the Tlingit community would oppose the development on these grounds, and perhaps they would have known that they should have selected an alternative site for their facility.

I was at a loss to understand why it was expected that Indians must allow one of their sacred sites to be put in jeopardy and to sacrifice our beliefs because a governmental entity wanted to build an office facility on our sacred lands. I was exasperated that the federal employees rejected another possible site for the facility as “not acceptable” because the 45-minute drive was too far for them to commute.

At this point in my life, I was somewhat more knowledgeable of the laws that might offer us some protections. However, I also fully understood that we could go through the required legal process and ultimately, a decision could be made that was adverse to our Tlingit interests. I met privately with the NOAA officials and conveyed to them that we would use all the resources available to us to halt and delay the construction of the facility at Indian Point, even if it meant going to court. We recognized that we could lose Indian Point to a powerful government agency; however, we were determined, as our trustees had directed, “to die to protect a shaman’s burial site.”

The Auke have lost all of their traditional territory to those of us who have moved into Juneau. Today all of us enjoy the beauty and bounty of this land. We felt that it was imperative that the Auk and the Tlingit people be allowed to maintain this sacred site.

In 2002, we nominated Indian Point for inclusion in the National Register and submitted the nomination to the Alaska State Historic Preservation Office for concurrence. In the subsequent months and years, we continued to respond to the seemingly unending questions posed by the office. I attended a Historical Commission meeting in Anchorage to request the status of our nomination and was advised that approval was imminent. However, when I attended a follow-up meeting in Juneau in 2006, we were again asked for additional information, which again we provided. We have since contacted the office several times asking about the status of the nomination. The federal agency, NOAA, determined Indian Point to be eligible as a TCP for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places in 1997.

However, we continue to await the State Historic Preservation Office's decision. For many years, Native people have had a strained relationship with the state of Alaska over the protection of our subsistence rights under federal law. Early this year, I wrote yet another letter to the State Historic Preservation Office asking for its decision.

This experience prompted us to add the selection of sacred sites to our legislative initiative. As a member of the board of directors of Sealaska Corporation, I reported to the board that we had been actively working on this TCP nomination for ten years (since 1997). I conveyed that we needed another mechanism to protect our historic and sacred sites in view of the time and energy we had expended to try to protect just *one* sacred site. I reported to the board that we were preparing to publish a cultural atlas which included over 3,000 place names in the Tlingit and Haida languages, and I felt that we had to do something different to protect our sacred sites. I also proposed that we look at the possibility of creating a Tongass Heritage Area in southeast Alaska. At this time, we were working to finalize Sealaska Corporation's land entitlement in Congress to ensure the conveyance of all lands due to us, which would require an amendment to ANCSA. The board of directors decided that we would include in the proposed legislation 4,000 acres for sacred and historic sites. Corporations do not generally own or seek the ownership of non-productive or non-economic lands. However, as a Native corporation, we view our cultural survival and the protection of our sacred sites as major objectives along with our financial enterprises. At this time, we have introduced legislation in Congress to amend ANCSA to allow us to select and maintain ownership of a significant number of our sacred sites. We also continue to advance the notion of heritage areas as another mechanism to protect our historical and sacred sites.

Indian Point offers a clear lesson that can be learned or affirmed: that we as Native Americans view the protection of our sacred sites as essential, and we will avail ourselves of every mechanism to do so. We are not apologetic that our cultural beliefs may conflict with Western values or stand in the way of progress or the construction of a new facility. Our cultural values must be interpreted and applied on their own merit and not defined or structured in the context of national laws or needs.

Rosita Worl, Sealaska Corporation / Sealaska Heritage Institute, One Sealaska Plaza, Suite 301, Juneau, Alaska 99801; rosita.worl@sealaska.com