

**Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs  
Building on the Status of  
Tribal Fish and Wildlife Management Programs  
June 3, 2003**

**Testimony of Gordon Jackson,  
Director, Business and Sustainable Development,  
Central Council Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska**

Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the United States Senate Indian Affairs Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Native people of Southeast Alaska regarding this important legislation you are considering.

I represent the Southeast Alaska Inter-tribal Fish and Wildlife Commission that includes most of the 20 federally recognized tribes of Southeast Alaska, and I serve as Manager of the Division of Business and Economic Development for the regional tribal organization, the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. I also provide staff support to the very first Inter-tribal Fish and Wildlife Commission in Alaska.

The history of interactions between Alaska Natives and the government of the United States developed on a different track than that of our Native American friends of the continental U.S., or what we in Alaska call the "Lower 48."

For decades after the 1867 purchase of Russian interests in Alaska, the U.S. government paid little attention to its northernmost territory. This period of "benign neglect" had some fortunate consequences. Congress had ceased ratifying treaties, so unlike many tribes in the lower 48, we were not confined within reservations leaving us free from the paternalistic control of white bureaucrats.

Not being confined to reservations, the Native people of Southeast were able to participate in the economy of our region. I grew up in the village of Kake, and during the fishing seasons we had full employment: while the men went fishing aboard large seine boats, their families worked at the canneries. In cities like Juneau, Natives were employed in the mines, worked service jobs, or on fishing boats. Many became skilled tradesmen.

We had our struggles, we had to fight for the rights to equal education, the vote, to sit where we pleased in public places, but we won these rights decades before Congress passed the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s.

Among the less fortunate results of our historical circumstances left unresolved until recently many legal issues. Ownership of the land and resources of Alaska was a big one, largely resolved in 1971 with the passage of the Alaska Natives Claims Settlement Act. Not every issue was settled. To this day, the rights of Native people to fish and

hunt for subsistence purposes remains unsettled. Until quite recently, left unresolved was the question of whether or not we even had “tribes” in Alaska. Tribes have been around Alaska for a long time. Almost 90 years ago, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1936 made Alaska Natives eligible for economic activity under that law. Most Southeast communities have organized IRA councils. In the communities of Kake, Klawock, Hydaburg, Angoon, Hoonah and Metlakatla they got into the fishing industry. By the end of the 1940s, these federally recognized tribes ran canneries, owned boats, land, and fish traps. They were major players in the fishing industry. Our village canneries were vibrant but began to fail with the small fish runs of the 1950s and abolition of fish traps. New Alaska policies of limiting entry to the fisheries also contributed to this as well as falling fish prices and loss of processors on or near our villages.

Tribes continue to flourish in Alaska and were made even stronger with the passage of PL 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act and the production of a list of tribes in Alaska over 10 years ago. This list recognized over 200 tribes in the State of Alaska.

This brings me to the present day and my reason for being here.

We have attempted, with the creation of the Southeast Alaska Inter-tribal Fish and Wildlife Commission, to unite the 20 tribal organizations of Southeast Alaska so that we can answer, with one voice, the question we are so often asked: “What do you people want?”

If you want to raise the hackles of any ethnic group in America, just start speaking to them as “you people.” We’re no different. After all, we call ourselves American, we take great pride in being citizens of this great country, pledge allegiance to the same flag, and honor at public occasions those of us who have served our country in the armed services.

But on a practical, political level, Alaska Natives know that we have always been more successful when we speak with one voice, so I am here to tell you that “my people” want to be more directly involved in the management of fish and wildlife resources of our region.

As other speakers have alluded to, Native people feel a deep affinity for the land, waters, fish and wildlife of our homelands. We tend to remain where we were born and raised, and therefore have more of a proprietary interest in what happens to these resources.

Last summer the people of Angoon, the only village on Admiralty Island, a Tlingit community of about 600 people, took it upon themselves to manage an important salmon stream. Kanalku Creek flows across federal land, Tongass National Forest, and empties into salt water controlled by the State of Alaska. No state or federal officials were monitoring or managing the salmon returns, yet Kanalku is Angoon’s most important sockeye salmon stream. Community leaders became concerned, got together, and

requested that the people of Angoon got in their skiffs, went to distant sockeye streams, and made up the harvest. Kanalku is getting healthier.

Last summer, the federally recognized tribal organization for my home town, the Organized Village of Kake, joined with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game to conduct a scientific monitoring project that measured the returns of salmon to a stream important for subsistence harvests. Other Southeast tribes followed the initiatives in Angoon and Kake.

For “my people,” Alaska Natives, subsistence is a hugely emotional issue, and occupies a great deal of our political efforts, but economic considerations are even more important. We are trying, desperately, to regain lost opportunities in commercial fisheries. A state program to limit participation in commercial fisheries had the, perhaps unintentional, consequence of stripping from our villages the economic benefits of the salmon and herring fisheries. Federal changes in laws relating to bottom fish, halibut and black cod, have converted these public resources to private ownership, and again, perhaps unintentionally, the result is that participation of Natives in these fisheries have fallen precipitously since the laws were changed.

In the village of my birth, Kake, we have struggled to rebuild the once vibrant commercial fisheries over the last twelve years. Our community hatchery spawns millions of salmon, our local, though much reduced, fleet of salmon seiner’s harvest the returns, and our processing facilities prepare everything from fresh fillets, frozen whole fish, and value-added smoked and dried seafood. But, obstacles remain. We have lost our markets to *farmed salmon*, prices have been dropping like a rock the last 10 years, and processors have left most of our villages. With these trends, many of our native fishermen left the industry resulting in the loss of hundreds of jobs.

If we are to continue progress in reclaiming economic ground lost in recent decades, we need new tools. We need to be more directly involved in monitoring and managing fish and wildlife resources. We also need to be involved in processing. If history is any gauge, it will show that at the peak of our employment in the fishing industry, we owned the processing units. Today, we have few processors in our villages. They choose to be located in the larger communities where they say it is more efficient.

For all the reasons so eloquently addressed by my colleagues, for sound economic reasons, and to realize social justice, we ask that you continue your good work that will create a means for Native Americans to more fully participate in the management and stewardship of our country’s natural resources.