

CULTURAL HISTORY OF TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

The Tongass National Forest: Where the Past Meets the Future

For thousands of years people have called Southeast Alaska home. Ongoing cultural traditions provide a spiritual link and transform a visit to the Tongass into an unforgettable encounter with history. Here we can find clues about the first people of Southeast Alaska and the natural environment they faced. The forest chronicles the history of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples as well as later immigrants who opened canneries, fox farms, mines, and new communities. The cultures of Southeast Alaska are alive and provide meaningful links to our past.

What are heritage resources?

Heritage resources can include:

- an ancient stone tool
- Indian rock art
- an abandoned Tlingit village
- an historic salmon cannery
- a geographic place name
- a family oral history
- an historic photograph

Heritage resources are the physical and mental remnants of a people's way of life that archeologists and historians study to interpret the human past. Heritage resources are important, because they allow us to learn from our past; how did people affect the environment and how were they affected by the environment? There is a mystery and nostalgia associated with the past that captivates the soul as well as the intellect -- the desire to understand how we got to where we are.

The Tongass National Forest has a major commitment to protect heritage resources for the enjoyment and education of future generations. Congress has passed numerous laws which are aimed to protect heritage resources, but the National Forests need your help to ensure that these resources are protected!

Prehistory of the Tongass

The land was there. It had simply changed. Raven came, releasing the Sun, Moon, and Stars. His cunning creations, the elders say, changed the world...

The earth warmed and the glaciers began to melt. Streams carried silt and gravel out from the glaciers down to the sea, constantly layering new land upon the old. And, even as the seas rose, the earth rebounded, lifting forests of lodgepole pine, hemlock and spruce, and created new beaches.

In this cool dry climate, the early maritime people moved out along the newly formed beaches, pursuing seals and sea lions. They hunted with bone harpoons, some tips lined with deadly sharp microblades of obsidian, a natural glass.

By their fires, families roasted and ate the rich oily meat of seals and fish. Discarded seal and fish backbones remain as links, still connecting past to present, still supporting the strongest evidence that these were early maritime people. Fishing in deep water required boats, and hooks and line, but none of these remain. Blades, pollen, shells, bones and charcoal are the sole reminders of an ancient Siberian tradition.

In a cycle of warming and cooling, glaciers melted and advanced for thousands of years, the land continued to change. What happened to these families? Where did they go? Perhaps they kept moving south, or up the rivers into the interior, or perhaps they remained on uplifted land precariously pocketed between sea and lobes of ice.

The Elders tell in the oral histories of the Flood: that the families prepared for uncertainty, filled seal stomachs with water, and climbed to high stone fortresses they had built. Twisting tree limbs into ropes, they anchored themselves to juts of mountains as the waters rose and swirled. And when the waters receded, the families came down.

Gradually the natural forces that shaped the islands and mainland valleys began to subside. A cool wet land cradled the cedar; it welcomed the salmon. The families gathered to harvest, building houses to last over time. With greenstone adzes, the men smoothed planks of cedar to wall and roof their families' homes. With slate and mussel shell knives, the women stripped the bark from the cedar and split the roots of the spruce. With these they wove clothes and baskets that held seaweed and herring roe and their infants.

The Elders tell of migration histories, of families returning to the coast. Some came from the southern coast. Some came out of the interior, and as they moved down the rivers, they were stopped where the rivers ran under the glaciers. Some families climbed over the glaciers; others went under and they came down to the salt water.

The sea and the land grew riches, and the families harvested at traditional camps. With weirs and traps they gathered the returning salmon. With nets they scooped up the eulachon. Wood and bone hooks brought halibut up from the bottom. Rich red meat added variety. Sumptuous furs and wools were woven into elaborate robes.

Families grew, creating larger villages with many Big Houses. Some family members, seeking more resources, moved on, carrying with them their histories and crests. Within each Big House, master artists were hired to carve and paint and weave each family's crest. Ceremonial regalia and coppers, houses and poles, all of these proclaimed each family's prerogatives and magnified the families' crests. And as the winter's darkness settled, invited guests gathered in the Big Houses. In elaborate ceremonies, the hosts brought honor to the families' birthrights.

From the islands to the south, more families migrated northward. As they sailed, they sought good fishing.

In 1741, Captain Chirikof sailed into waters near Sitka. Other explorers followed, seeking the Northwest Passage. They traded iron and metal for sea otter pelts. When the merchants of Europe heard of the fur prices, their interests in trading ventures were kindled. Yet, the

European traders were dependent on the people's whims and needs: iron or blankets, potatoes or gunpowder, molasses or cloth. By 1830 the sea otters were depleted and the traders shifted to land mammal furs.

Of all that had been introduced, disease was the most devastating. Smallpox killed thousands; it ripped the families and the villages apart. Yet, the identity of one's mother's kinsmen and recognition of one's ancient birthrights remained.

Russia's sale of Alaska to the United States increased western development in the region. People from all parts of the world came to Alaska to seek their fortune, to see the sights of the new frontier, to build homes and to invest in business. Commercial fish traps spread along families' traditional fishing areas. Miners extracted gold and marble, copper and zinc.

Government regulated the resources. Lumber mills sawed the timbers for continual construction. Fox farms sprang up on small islands. Houses perched on beach pilings and bedrock slopes. Towns grew.

The fishing industry kept crews working through winters and into the long summer days. These were the foundations of our commerce today.

And Raven tried to make People out of a Rock so they would not die and a Leaf so that they would change. Rock was too slow. So People were created from the Leaf. It was light, it was quick, it changed....

TIMELINE OF HUMAN HISTORY

Paleomarine Tradition

10,000 years ago

Sea levels once lowered by maximum glaciation rise with melting of the glaciers. While people could have lived here before, the first evidence is 10,000 years ago. Microblades and cores found at campsites tie early maritime people to Siberian migrations

8,000 years ago

Evidence indicates people subsisted on clams, fish, seals, sea lions, beaver, deer, and blueberries.

Transitional Period

7,000 years ago

Glacial activity crests, fluctuation in sea level and climate. Minimal evidence of people's activity is currently documented.

Developmental Northwest Coast Traditions

5,000 years ago

The development of a new technology is evidenced by ground and polished stone and bone tools.

3,000 years ago

Specialized subsistence camps marked by fish weirs and large deposits of shell refuse.

2,000 years ago

Heavy house posts and floors signal the use of large houses in permanent villages.

500 years ago

The wide variation in tools such as stone lamps and native copper shows the diverse technologies of the people.

Euro-American Exploration and Trade

250 years ago

Chirikof and other explorers sail waters of Southeast Alaska. Iron and beads are evidence of early contact. Following Vancouver's charting of inside waters in 1793, trading posts and forts are established. Excavations uncover nails, hinges, knives, axes, bottles, pottery, and structures.

Developmental Industrial Period

130 years ago

Abandoned gear and campsites along the Stikine River mark the first gold rush in Southeast Alaska. Mining and exploration continues. Russia sells Alaska to the U.S. in 1867. Most visible structures from this period are the U.S. Coast Survey lighthouses.

110 years ago

Early canneries represent the development of industrial endeavors. Associated artifacts recall the Asian laborers' contributions to this effort.

70 years ago

With the expansion of the fishing industry and the establishment of new communities, saw mills flourish. Some of these structures remain, but evidence of Russian mills is gone.

Statehood for Alaska in 1959

Present