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The land of many welcomes

In Alaska, Native culture and environment are intertwined

By Richard Walker, Today correspondent
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Hoonah/Icy Strait Point Xuna: "Shelter from the north wind"

That this is a sensitive environment was clear as we walked the wooden boardwalk to a forested viewing platform from which we were most likely to see bear.

The boardwalk provided safe transit over a muskeg, but security was still precarious. A bear paw print and scat showed humans are not alone in their use of the boardwalk. A six-foot stick dropped into the muskeg illustrated the importance of staying on the walk: The stick disappeared.

Photos by Molly Neely-Walker

Former cannery homes and a boardwalk add to the charm of Icy Strait Point, a former salmon cannery and purse seine port. The Tlingit-owned Huna Totem Corporation transformed it into a charming village with a cultural center, museum, restaurants and shops.

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A visitor noted an oily sheen on the muskeg's surface; the sheen was left by decaying plant matter. "You could drill for oil here," he said in all seriousness.

An oil well in a wetland? Apparently, the biggest threat out here is not bear.

But by the end of the tour, any advocates of exploiting resources in a sensitive environment were better educated about this land that is central to Huna culture and existence – where forests meet fjords, and land and sea provide not subsistence survival but a way of life.

At [Icy Strait Point](#), the Tlingit-owned [Huna Totem Corporation](#) has created a cultural and environmental showcase that steps lightly on the land.

Huna Totem transformed a 1912 salmon cannery and purse seine port into a charming village with a cultural center, museum, restaurants and shops. This is where you go to take one of 16 outdoor excursions, ride the world's longest zip line, and see a performance in the Native Heritage Center Theater.

Icy Strait Point is the only privately owned cruise ship port in southeast Alaska, but only one cruise ship is booked here each day; the ship must anchor out and lighter passengers to the cannery dock. Sixty-nine ships are scheduled to call this year.

"Many of our features are found nowhere else in Alaska and only one ship is booked into the port on any given day in order to preserve the authentic Alaskan experience," said Johan



Icy Strait Point is the only privately-owned cruise ship port in southeast Alaska, but only one cruise ship is booked each day; the ship must anchor out and lighter passengers to the cannery dock; 69 ships are scheduled to call this year. "Many of our features are found nowhere else in Alaska and only one ship is booked into the port on any given day in order to preserve the authentic Alaskan experience," said Johan Dybdahl, a Huna Tlingit and former Icy Strait Point CEO who helped develop the site's tourism initiative.

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Dybdahl, a Huna Tlingit and former Icy Strait Point CEO, who helped develop the site's tourism initiative. He is now a member of the Juneau city council.

"Staff members interacting with visitors are largely Tlingit Natives from Hoonah, helping to ensure that guests receive an authentic account of Native life and heritage, including traditional means of subsistence."

There is a lot worth preserving – and experiencing – here.

Icy Strait Point and the neighboring city of Hoonah are the centerpieces of Chichagof Island, which is stunningly beautiful. Chichagof, at 50 by 75 miles, is two times larger than the state of Rhode Island and is the fifth-largest island in the United States.

Hoonah is accessible by boat and plane; the island's other three communities are accessible only by boat. Travel to Juneau by state ferry takes 3.5 hours.



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Elizabeth Jack, Tlingit, said going for a drive here means going "out the road" and it's immediately clear what that means. There are 800 miles of logging road on the island, but only 300 miles are driveable. When you drive "out the road" here, you are in wilderness.

On a summer day, sunlight glistens on the waters of Port Frederick and the snow-capped mountains of the [Tongass National Forest](#). In winter, snow blankets the island and residents can go through one cord of wood every two weeks. But snowfall isn't heavy enough – give city snowplows partial credit – to give schoolchildren a break from the books.

"They don't get a 'snow day,'" Jack said.

Xuna, or Huna, means "shelter from the north wind" and it has long been a safe haven. At the Hoonah Marina, boats bob lightly and a juvenile

eagle rests on a jetty, undisturbed by the hum of marina activity.

Tlingit interpreter Mamie Williams pointed to a rocky cliff, on which is painted a mural depicting a raiding party's canoe. The canoe pullers' hands are raised as a symbol that they would not return in hostility. The raiding party painted the mural with their own blood 1,000 years ago. The mural is there today.

And it was here 300 years ago that the Tlingit people of *Sít' Eeti Gheeyi*, or Glacier Bay, relocated after a rapidly advancing glacier overtook their village.

Hoonah has some interesting features. A local pub was named one of the best in the U.S. by *Esquire* magazine in 2006. Hoonah Trading Company is believed to be the only Ace Hardware on dock pilings in the U.S. Down the street is Hoonah School, featuring totem poles carved by Tlingit artists/brothers Rick and Mick Beasley. The poles overlook a shelter with two canoes carved by the Beasleys with student assistance.

Hoonah has a population of 800, 70 percent are Native, and is the largest Tlingit village in southeast Alaska.

Jack loves Hoonah. She tried life in the big city, working as an assistant case manager in the neurosurgery department of a Native hospital in Anchorage. "I got homesick."

She now works as an interpreter for Icy Strait Point, which has created so many jobs that the local unemployment rate during tourism season is one percent.

The restored cannery has equipment and interpretive displays showing how salmon was canned for half a century beginning in 1912. There are 10 cannery shops offering unique local products; it's a great place to buy Alaska Native art, jewelry, and, of course, salmon.



Elizabeth Jack, Tlingit, called going for a drive on Chichagof Island going "out the road." There are 800 miles of logging road on the island, but only 300 miles are driveable. When you drive "out the road" here, you are in wilderness.

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In the heritage center, Huna Tlingit dancers in regalia share their history through interpretive dance, song and storytelling. One dance told of Raven's pursuit of Wolf as a wife.

The celebration turned poignant when, after the dance, the group offered a song in memory of a village elder who passed away. The experience became an intensely personal one.

The Huna Tlingit have been shaped by the land and sea. Their culture of sharing shapes those who are open to learning from it. Online: www.icystraitpoint.com.

Richard Walker is a correspondent reporting from San Juan Island, Wash. Contact him at rmwalker@rockisland.com.

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Tuesday, Oct 20 at 4:23 PM Tom wrote ...

I was in Vancouver in august and I saw a cruise ship docked that was heading for Alaska, how I wished I was on it. Icy Strait Point looks so quaint, is wireless access for a 311 available here? If I visited i'd like to be able to have access to the internet via a netbook or phone.

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Sunday, Sep 20 at 10:29 PM Koo Hook wrote ...

Aat Tlein Gunalcheesh (Thank You Very Much) Indian Country for portraying us in the appropriate manner in which you did...

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Thursday, Sep 17 at 12:47 PM Tori wrote ...

cool website lol

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Thursday, Sep 17 at 11:13 AM TKM wrote ...

What a beautiful story. It shows that the old and new can be incorporated to exist in these days and times. I particularly love the way they intermingle with nature. It does my heart good to see these things. Best wishes to Huna Totem Corp & the Alaska Native peoples.

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