Indigenous Tongues: Policy Recommendations for Tlingit Language Revitalization Efforts

A Policy Paper for the National Indian Health Board

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**Introduction**

There is a dire need for native language education for the preservation of the Southeastern Alaskan Tlingit language, and Alaskan Tlingit Tribes must prioritize language restoration as the a priority of the tribe for the purpose of revitalizing and perpetuating the aboriginal language of their ancestors. According to the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council, not only are a majority of the 20 recognized Alaska Native languages in danger of being lost at the end of this century, direct action is needed at tribal levels in Alaska.

The following policy paper states why Alaskan Tlingit Tribes and The Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, a tribal government representing over 30,000 Tlingit and Haida Indians worldwide and a sovereign entity that has a government to government relationship with the United States, must take actions to declare a state of emergency for the Tlingit Language and allocate resources for saving the Tlingit language through education programs.

**Background on Tlingit Language**

Among Alaska Native people, we believe that when Alaska Native languages die, they do not become anything else. They are gone from us, for all time. There are estimated to be only 200 Tlingit speakers remaining, and each year, the Tlingit nations loses fluent elder speakers. Tlingit language is embedded within traditional oratory, in songs, stories, and speeches. There were times where the different clans held each other in such high regard during potlatch speaking that they achieved the highest levels of human compassion and empathy. Tlingit language, reflects the Tlingit culture worldviews, with great knowledge and experience embedded in that language. These worldviews are represented in the diagram in Appendix I. It is a language that personifies life, death, feelings, animals, everything, and is losing ground in the fight for indigenous language preservation. The work forward should focus on research efforts to document and record the concepts and history of Tlingit potlatch speaking by elders for future preservation and education.

Potlatch speaking is a form of traditional Tlingit oratorical speeches that were in a different form of speaking within itself. It was beautiful, metaphorical, based on balance, reciprocation, and respect. It had the ability to bring clans together in harmony - socially, and spiritually. A diagram of how all aspects of Tlingit Culture, including language is provided below in the supporting documents appendix. This diagram displays the interconnection between all aspects of Tlingit culture that contribute to a Tlingit persons wholeness.

**Health in Indigenous Languages**

In Indigenous cultures, health is directly tied to languages in the following ways:

**In History:** Language is a key component of models of health by indigenous people. Language loss is driven not by intrinsic linguistic factors but by the historical social determinants of colonialism, including systematic oppression and poverty (UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2016).

**In Vitality and Health:** Research from Miami University's ongoing partnership with the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma suggests a link between an indigenous community’s language vitality and its members’ health (Wagner, 2016). This research has found that language revitalization efforts result in health benefits for Native Americans and other indigenous populations (Whalen, 2016).
In Health Deficits: Forced language shifts for Indigenous people in North America caused the loss of social and behavioral knowledge and understanding that was created over thousands of years, and this loss of knowledge contributed to health deficits (Gracey & King, 2009)

In Spiritual Aspects: Intergenerational historical trauma has been termed as traumas that have led to carried ‘spiritual injuries among Indigenous peoples’. A large driver of this trauma includes the forced taking away of our languages and being forced to speak English (Duran, 1998).

How Language Efforts can be Developed
Efforts from Tlingit Tribes should include taking action to record and preserve as much Tlingit language as possible before we lose more of our remaining speakers. The long-term goals must include a goal to take action to use the recordings collected, archived, and made available to all interested language students for future preservation and leadership training for Tlingit youth that can be utilized in Alaska native language nests and tribal schools.

Alaska Tlingit Tribes could consider developing collaborations with Sealaska Heritage Institute “Latseen Leadership Academy”, a summer leadership academy for Southeast Alaska youth aged 14-17. The program would a lot recording equipment to each Southeast village involved for the students to go and record extensive video or audio of elder speakers, this close-relationship can be seen as a mentor-apprentice circumstance, where the combination of oral, audio logical, and visual elements will be brought into use. The students could then return the equipment to Yakutat Heritage Tribe, where the recordings will be sent to University of Alaska Southeast, for the Tlingit language students can work closely with the University linguists for transcription in both Tlingit orthography and English. The footage could serve as important tools in Tlingit language preservation.

Where The State of Alaska Is Now:
In Alaska, HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 19 is a resolution in the senate that is urging Alaska Governor Bill Walker to issue an administrative order recognizing a linguistic emergency for Alaska Native Languages. This order allocates resources for saving Alaska's 20 indigenous languages through education programs. HCR 19 has currently passed the state House committee will now go to the House Rules Committee. Should it later pass in a House vote, Senator Donald Olsen will introduce it in the Senate.

If HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 19, then this means that appropriate, legislative and policy measures can be followed through with the state to support the language preservation efforts. These efforts should include:

- building upon successful models of language programs such immersion schools;
- To creating a statewide Alaska Native School Board for Alaska Native tribal and charter schools.

All Alaska Native Tribes should advocate for the passing of HCR 19.
Closing Statement:
The history of the assimilation of the Tlingit people undoubtedly always overcome obstacles to make transitions and survive from one generation to the next. There was a time for the people, where they would feel their world would never recover from the brutal discrimination and assimilation that sought to eradicate the language and culture. When Alaska Native languages die, they do not become anything else. They are gone from us, for all time. There are Tlingit people willing to go into battle for the language. As human Indigenous tribe that has existed for thousands and thousands of years, must work to be able to capture and preserve that traditional knowledge through our future work and foster relationships between learning and leadership, and ultimately, to perpetuate and protect the Southeast Alaskan Tlingit culture.

References


Yakutat Tlingit Tribe Resolution 00-0X
Preservation Of Tlingit Language

WHEREAS, Yakutat Tlingit Tribe is the federally recognized Tribal governing body for the Tribal members of the village of Yakutat: and,

WHEREAS, the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe recognizes that the need exists to preserve and revitalize all aspects of the Tlingit language: and,

WHEREAS, the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe recognizes that there are only there are estimated to be only 200 Tlingit speakers remaining, and each year, the Tlingit nations loses fluent elder speakers: and,

WHEREAS, the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe identifies that traditional Potlatch speaking is a form of traditional Tlingit oratorical speeches that were in a different form of speaking the Tlingit language within itself, and recognizes that a more critical need exists to preserve and revitalize the category of Potlatch speaking: and

WHEREAS, we recognize that the appropriate method of doing this through recording and preserving all aspects and methods of Tlingit language from the remaining fluent elder speakers: and,

WHEREAS, the Tribe sees an opportunity to work with Tlingit youth throughout Southeast Alaska to gain leadership experience and life skills while working towards the preservation of all aspects of the preservation and revitalization of the Tlingit language, including the preservation of Potlatch speaking: and,

WHEREAS, the Tribe sees an opportunity to work with the Sealaska Heritage Institute, a Southeast Alaskan non-profit organization whose mission “seeks to perpetuate and enhance Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures.” and,

WHEREAS, the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe must recognize that the authority for this action lies in our mission statement: “To preserve, maintain and protect the unique culture, land and resources of Yakutat Tlingit people; to maximize our social, health & well-being while creating economic development benefits to all tribal members”,
NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe hereby authorizes the members of the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe or their designees, youth of Yakutat Tlingit Tribe, Yakutat Tlingit Tribal members, to collaborate on all needs and aspects of preserving as much of the Tlingit Potlatch Speaking Methods and values {Targeting from now onward }: and,

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that Yakutat Tlingit Tribe President or designee is hereby authorized to allocate funds from the State of Alaska and other entities to preserve and revitalize the all current available knowledge and history of all aspects relating to Tlingit language revitalization programs.
{Targeting from now onward}:

Certification

We hereby certify that this resolution was duly passed and approved by the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe Council on this _th day of May, 2018 by a vote of _ yes, _ no, _ abstain.
Appendix III:
Supporting Document 2:  HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 19

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 19
01 Urging Governor Bill Walker to issue an administrative order recognizing a linguistic
02 emergency.
03 BE IT RESOLVED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA:
04 WHEREAS the state is home to 20 officially recognized Alaska Native languages,
05 Inupiaq, Siberian Yupik, Central Alaskan Yup’ik, Alutiiq, Unangax^ Dena’ina, Deg Xinag,
06 Holikachuk, Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, Gwich’in, Tanana, Upper Tanana, Tanacross, H?n,
07 Ahtna, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian, alongside English; and
08 WHEREAS House Bill No. 216, enacted as ch. 116, SLA 2014, signed into law by
09 Governor Sean Parnell, adding the 20 Alaska Native languages to the official languages of
10 the state, was the culmination of hundreds of hours of effort by legislators, Alaska Natives, and
11 others; and
12 WHEREAS Senate Bill No. 130, enacted as ch. 48, SLA 2012, signed into law by
13 Governor Sean Parnell, established the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory
14 Council to advise both the governor and legislature on programs, policies, and projects to
15 provide for the cost-effective preservation, restoration, and revitalization of Alaska Native
16 languages in the state; and
17 WHEREAS the state is critical danger of losing those languages and, according to
18 the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council, the state may lose the last
19 fluent speakers of all 20 Alaska Native languages by the end of the 21st century if current
20 rates of language loss continue as they have since the 1970s; and
21 WHEREAS one Alaska Native language, Eyak, lost its last fluent speaker in 2008; and
22 and
23 WHEREAS 50 years of research shows that early, total language immersion
24 education for English speakers increases academic proficiency in both English and the
25 immersion language, as well as in other academic subjects; and
26 WHEREAS indigenous peoples should be able to provide education in the peoples’
27 own languages in a manner that is appropriate to the peoples’ cultural methods of teaching
28 and
29 learning;
30 BE IT RESOLVED that the Alaska State Legislature urges the Governor, the Alaska
31 Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council, and other state agencies to work
32 actively with the legislature and Alaska Native organizations to ensure the survival and
33 continued use of all 20 of the state’s Alaska Native languages; and be it
34 FURTHER RESOLVED that the Alaska State Legislature encourages the Governor,
35 in cooperation with the legislature, to work with Alaska Native organizations to initiate and
36 strengthen, as appropriate, legislative and policy measures that prioritize the survival and
37 continued use of Alaska Native languages; and be it
38 FURTHER RESOLVED that the Alaska State Legislature urges Governor Bill
39 Walker to issue an administrative order recognizing a linguistic emergency.