

Returning To Homeland



Skilled craftsmen have been working for years on decorative elements for the interior and exterior of the new Tribal House.

Most visitors approach Glacier Bay with an eye to capturing something new—perhaps a first glimpse of an ice-blue glacier, a few days of solitude in wilderness waters, or peaceful moments walking through the mossy forests of Bartlett Cove. Even those who return again and again have the opportunity to experience some new sight or sound, to reflect on some newly awoken feeling.

For the Huna Tlingit, Glacier Bay is a place not of new discoveries, but rather of reconnection with the life ways, knowledge, and ancestors of the past. The four primary Huna Tlingit clans lived in *Sít' Eeti Geiyi*, the “Bay in Place of the Glacier” and along Icy Strait and the Outer Coast for countless generations; the Tlingit say since time before memory. This

landscape sustained their families with a rich abundance of fish, wildlife, and plants both before and after the Little Ice Age. And it is a place that continues to sustain them through stories, songs, dances, and ongoing traditional practices. Although most Huna Tlingit today live across Icy Strait in the modern village of Hoonah, they return again and again to commune with ancestral spirits and to retrace the footsteps and actions of all those who have visited before them.

When Glacier Bay became a national monument in 1925, its borders encompassed much of the traditional Huna Tlingit homeland. New federal laws severely curtailed Native activities within the monument’s boundaries. So began a painful period of strained



relations between the Huna Tlingit and the National Park Service.

Time and new understandings have brought much healing. In recent years, the National Park Service and Hoonah Indian Association, the tribal government, have worked cooperatively to reinvigate traditional harvest activities that are compatible with current regulations, develop educational programs for Huna youth, sponsor summer culture camps, and collect and preserve oral histories.

Perhaps the most significant cooperative venture is currently under construction on the Bartlett Cove shoreline. The *Xunaa Shuká Hít*—roughly translated as “Huna Ancestor’s House”—is the first permanent clan house in Glacier Bay since Tlingit villages were destroyed by an advancing glacier over 250 years ago. A long-awaited dream, it will serve as a gathering place where tribal members can reconnect with their treasured homeland through ceremonies, workshops, camps, tribal meetings, and other events. It will also provide thousands of park visitors with opportunities to learn about Huna Tlingit history, culture, and life ways.

Working closely with a team of clan leaders, craftsmen, planners, architects, and cultural resource specialists, the NPS and tribal government designed the building to reflect a traditional architectural style while providing for the needs of contemporary tribal members and park visitors. The focal point of the Tribal House is a large open gathering area with a central fire pit. However, visitors’ eyes will also be drawn to the elaborately carved and painted house front, four richly detailed massive cedar interior house posts that support the house’s main beams, and an interior house screen that depicts the stories of the four primary Huna Tlingit clans. Tribal craftsmen continue to work on totem poles that will flank the building. These precious cultural elements will impart spiritual value to the Tribal House, but as importantly, their design and completion has expanded the circle of tribal members sharing cultural knowledge. Many images of the carved elements are available on the Glacier Bay National Park website and Facebook page.

Construction of the Tribal House began in 2015; a return to homeland celebration is planned for August 2016. The event is expected to attract hundreds of tribal members who will breathe life into the Tribal House that is evidence of their enduring tie to Glacier Bay. The *Xunaa Shuká Hít* will become a place of discovery and of reconnection for generations to come.

