

March 17, 2020

RE: Request for Cultural Red Cedar Trees and Economic Assessment of Traditional Carving, Weaving, and Artisan Economy

Dear U.S. Forest Service Chief Christensen and Tongass National Forest Supervisor Stewart:

Our sovereign, federally-recognized tribes have lived in what is now known as the Tongass National Forest since time immemorial. We have stewarded this land for over 10,000 years, and the land has provided for our people to develop complex societies and cultures that are rich in tradition and artistic expression. Tlingit and Haida people are renowned artists, carvers, blacksmiths, weavers, painters, and our artistic capabilities are internationally recognized. Our artistic expression is tied to our land, and we have always drawn both inspiration and materials for our creations from our surrounding lands and waters. Our totem poles are carved out of red and yellow cedar trees, which are durable and transmit our stories to future generations because they last for hundreds of years. Our regalia is woven from the wool of mountain goats, adorned with abalone buttons and other shells. We weave hats and baskets from red and yellow cedar bark. We have sustainably interacted with and depended on the abundance of these natural resources for thousands of years, and are just now coming to a period in which the future provision of these resources is in question. This letter signifies our intent and desire to engage proactively with the Forest Service to procure cultural use trees, identify how much red cedar is left in the Tongass, and conduct an economic assessment for our local demand and cultural and economic use of red cedar trees so that collectively, our tribal governments can engage in long-term planning for the provision of cultural use trees for the next seven generations - which is our traditional forest rotational timeline.

Prior to contact, our land remained in balance, which was maintained by our principles of good stewardship, hard work, and respect. Our land provided us with traditional foods, health, and materials for our prosperity. The natural resources from our traditional homelands are used to create clan houses, totems, canoes, regalia, baskets, hats, utensils, and our *at'owu*, our sacred clan objects. These items and the stories that they express are used as a method to pass on knowledge and information. Our people were able to live in balance with the land for such a long time because we had the foresight and knowledge of our ancestors to guide us.

The post-contact period and subsequent colonialism in Southeast Alaska destroyed this careful balance that we cultivated over millennia. Our resources were plundered for quickest economic return, as we first saw the desecration of the sea otters, followed quickly by our

salmon, and then our own forest. Although the pace of the logging has slowed, because the trees that are easiest and most economical to reach have already been harvested, there is still an attitude shared by the U.S. Forest Service and the present-day timber industry that the cedar trees of Southeast Alaska are better off being shipped to foreign countries, or to the contiguous United States, and sold as quickly as possible because of a spike in lumber prices rather than being used to provide for a long-term, sustainable return to our local economies and art.

Our creations have been stolen for years, shipped to far away museums and displayed for the enjoyment of many, at the expense of our people. Our tribes have been robbed of our cultural heritage for years, while it provides economic gain and respect to these museums and their collections. This steady flow of cedar from our homelands to the outside world has continued unabated for decades. We are thinking towards the future and our ability to continue creating our art, to continue passing down our traditions and stories to the next generations. Both the rate at which red cedar is being liquidated from our forests for the commodity market, and the rate at which yellow cedar is dying off due to climate change, endanger our cultural survival. Thus, we are writing to you in our capacity as tribal sovereigns to request your assistance in continuing our cultural traditions and strengthening our local artisan economy. We believe that fulfilling this request is the fiduciary duty of the U.S. government to our collective tribal members.

As the land manager and deciding official for our traditional homelands, which are now called the Tongass National Forest, you are tasked with making critical decisions regarding the use of resources that these lands and waters provide. You have been at the center of the debates and conflict over the years on how these lands are used, and whom your decisions should benefit. We have seen where there have been times when it was the American public at-large who benefited from decisions made by the Forest Service. We have seen where decisions have been made that have benefited the timber industry. But the overwhelming trend for us, as tribal nations, is that we have experienced times when decisions were made that did not benefit our indigenous people who have lived on these lands since time immemorial. The Forest Service has a chance to change this and start addressing some of our needs.

There are three specific things we would request of you as tribal governments.

1. **Procurement of cultural use trees for totem poles for the tribes of Kasaan, Klawock, Hydaburg, and Kake (Summer 2020)**

2. An economic assessment calculating the local demand in Southeast Alaska for cultural use wood and wood products used by carvers, artists, and local business owners working in Pacific Northwest art traditions

- a. This demand needs to include cultural use wood (based on the above economic analysis) being specifically calculated into the Tongass Timber Reform Act mandate to "seek to meet market demand for Tongass timber."

3. The development of a long-term forest management plan for providing cultural use wood with adequate supply for the next 7 generations -- the traditional forest rotation time period practiced by Native master carvers - that includes an official inventory of standing timber appropriate for cultural use wood

Our first request is to procure cultural use trees for carving into a totem pole and canoes. We ask that you designate a specific Forest Service employee that works with us to identify the trees and work through your agency processes so that we may be able to strip the bark, and harvest these trees to use for totem pole and cultural product carving.

The second request is for the Forest Service to conduct an inventory of the standing timber that is suitable for cultural use wood and bark weaving. We are currently in a time of wide-ranging conflict over the use of wood products on the Tongass. We are in the midst of transitioning from old growth to young growth harvest. However, our carving and weaving traditions require a supply of old growth wood, especially Red Cedar. At the same time that the agency and stakeholders are figuring out this transition, the timber industry is rapidly liquidating the remaining supply of old growth forests, especially the culturally significant Red Cedar trees that we depend on. We understand that the price in foreign and domestic markets for Red Cedar timber is high right now, and the timber industry wants to make as much money as it can while the prices are high and while there are still some old growth trees to harvest. However, our culture bearers and master carvers have always taught us to think out at least seven generations in the future. We need to ensure that we can still practice our culture, including bark weaving and totem carving, seven generations from now. Therefore, we would request that the Forest Service conduct an inventory and an assessment of the remaining timber supply to ensure that we have a supply of Red Cedar trees and bark that can be used for cultural uses like totem poles, canoes, regalia, clan houses, paddles, and other cultural and artistic expression. We would also ask that the Forest Service begin planning for seven generations of supply and a timber management rotation that ensures the supply and availability, on demand,

of the right type of wood. Our carving elders can help your silviculturists understand the characteristics of the wood that we are requesting.

The third request is that the Forest Service do an economic assessment of the local use of Red Cedar and calculate the "demand" for cultural use wood and wood products to supply our carvers, weavers, and artists. We know of the Tongass Timber Reform Act's mandate instructing the Forest Service to "seek to meet the market demand for Tongass timber," but we have never seen where Forest Service staff, economists, silviculturists, rangers, or Forest Supervisors have actually figuring out what that demand is for our local artisan market. We have seen studies that have calculated the demand that foreign nations might have for our timber and wood, but to our knowledge the local demand from the Alaska Native carvers, weavers, and artists that live here on the Tongass has never been assessed or reported by the Forest Service. In fact, much of the time, we have felt that our art, our culture, and our long tradition of local ecological knowledge, and our use of these wood products has been ignored, disrespected, underappreciated, and not factored into agency management activities, forest management, and timber demand studies. We do not know where this disregard comes from, whether it is disrespect, racism, continued colonialism, or just because Forest Service staff and economists are not sufficiently knowledgeable, educated, trained, and informed on our cultural use of wood and Northwest Coast Alaska carving and art traditions. This assessment of local demand can then be calculated into the metrics of the Tongass Timber Reform Act. The knowledge gained from this experience should then be used to develop a long-term forest management plan for providing cultural use wood with adequate supply for 7 generations, which is the traditional forest rotation time period practiced by Native master carvers.

Please consider this letter as a formal effort to inform you of the undocumented and documented value of Alaska Native artistic tradition, and our necessity for a supply of raw materials to create it. The economic significance of art to Alaska Native artists and the local economy has not been thoroughly surveyed, but a preliminary 2014 report by Raincoast Data on the Arts Economy of Southeast Alaska indicated that the arts sector, and specifically Northwest coast art, is a huge economic driver for Southeast Alaska that supports rural communities with otherwise limited employment opportunities in particular. Alaska Native artists are also twice as likely as non-Native artists to say that their art provides all their personal income. Ensuring a sustainable supply of the raw materials that Alaska Native artists depend on for their craft, especially the highly-contested resource of red cedar, is of our utmost concern so

when we are thinking about the supply of these wood products to supply our weavers and carvers for the next seven generations.

We would like to harvest the bark and the trees this summer. We would like to begin work on the inventory this spring. We would like the economic demand study to begin by April 2020. We request official government-to-government consultation on this project between the four tribes involved and USDA leadership at your earliest convenience. We will look forward to working with you and your staff on these efforts.

Sincerely,



Ronald Leighton, President

Organized Village of Kasaan



Barry Peratrovich, President

Klawock Cooperative Association

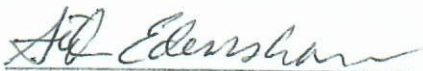


Joel Jackson, President

Organized Village of Kake



Organized Village of Kake



Sid Edenshaw, President

Hydaburg Cooperative Association

