

Background¹

In 1996, a paleontologist discovered human remains in a cave on Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska. The find triggered an immediate consultation between the government and local tribes, as required by the federal Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

Unlike the contentious case of the Kennewick Man, in which Lower 48 tribes and scientists were at odds, the Southeast Alaska tribes ultimately endorsed study of the remains after determining they were not retrieved from a burial site but scattered in the cave, possibly by scavengers. One reason the tribes supported study of the remains was they believed it would scientifically prove what their oral histories have stated for millennia – that Native people have lived in this area since time immemorial and that they traveled here in canoes. Additionally, the Native concept of *Haa Shágoon* (Tlingit), *Íitl' Kun'ísii* (Haida), and *Hlaagiyadm* (Tsimshian) unites present-day Native people to their ancestors and to future generations: some Native people interpreted the discovery as their ancestor offering knowledge of their past.

It was considered one of the more important archaeological sites discovered in North America in recent years because the remains, which included a mandible, teeth, vertebrae, some ribs and a pelvic bone, were found to be 10,300 years old, making them the oldest human remains ever discovered in Alaska and Canada.

Scientists found through DNA analysis and other testing that the ancient person was a male in his early twenties of Native American ancestry who subsisted primarily on seafood. Stone tools made of non-local materials and found in the cave suggest the early inhabitants had access to watercraft and navigated the coastal region. The evidence collectively bolstered an emerging scientific theory that people first migrated to the Americas from Asia along the northwest coast in watercraft, perhaps during the last ice age. Tlingit oral histories also record coastal migrations into Southeast Alaska. Until recently, many scientists dismissed the idea, believing the coastal area was locked in ice and incapable of sustaining life at that time.

The find ultimately led to a multi-year collaboration among Native groups, scientists and the government that included a Native internship program at the cave sponsored by Sealaska Corporation, the National Science Foundation, the Denver Museum of Science and Nature and the University of Colorado. The Sealaska Heritage Institute, Tongass National Forest, Denver Museum of Nature & Science, and the National Park Service also produced a 28-minute film about the collaboration titled *Kuwóot yas.éin* (His Spirit is Looking Out From the Cave), available through SHI, a regional, Native nonprofit.

In 2007, the U.S. Forest Service conveyed custody of the remains to Tlingit tribes in Klawock and Craig, marking the first time a federal agency has transferred remains of such antiquity to a Native American tribe. The transfer came after the Klawock Cooperative Association, the Craig Community Association and Sealaska Corporation petitioned the agency for custody at the conclusion of the collaborative project to study the remains.

¹ Source: Sealaska Heritage Institute