

106 SUCCESS STORY

Discoveries Open Insights Into Early History, Strengthen Tribal Relationships

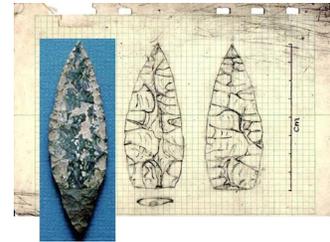
Prince of Wales Island, Alaska



“Though it is hidden and almost forgotten in the complex web of communications that led to project successes, Section 106 consultation was the foundation without which later discoveries would not have been made or relationships formed.”

— TERRY FIFIELD

Former Forest Service Archaeologist and Tribal Liaison for Prince of Wales Island



THE STORY

Within the Tongass National Forest at the northern tip of Prince of Wales Island, a kilometer from the coast, sits the small entrance to a cave hidden by dense vegetation. Formed from the chemical reaction between percolating groundwater and surrounding limestone bedrock, On Your Knees Cave (OYKC) consists of two narrow passageways and contains significant fossils dating back more than 50,000 years. Discovered in 1992 and originally named for the way one enters the cave, OYKC eventually yielded one of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the last 20 years.

THE PROJECT

The Tongass National Forest, as part of US Forest Service (USFS) management efforts, proposed timber sales and harvesting within the forest, including access roads to support logging efforts. In 1992 and 1993, USFS conducted a vulnerability survey and assessment for sinkholes and caves as part of the environmental planning for timber sale. These efforts led to the identification of the cave and determination of its significance.

THE 106 PROCESS

USFS, the federal agency carrying out these projects, was responsible for conducting the Section 106 review process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the historic property when adverse effects may occur.

Consultation with the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and other consulting parties on the proposed logging and timber sale (the initial project affecting the cave) was resolved in 1994 by USFS with specific modifications to the proposed harvest and road plan to avoid effects to historic properties. These avoidance steps were not specific to OYKC, which was not identified as a historic property at the time because it had been found only to contain paleontological resources. Having completed its Section 106 requirements, USFS moved forward with the timber sale. In July 1996, OYKC became the center of intense academic and tribal interest when human remains and cultural artifacts were discovered within the complex of underground passages.

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Photos: Above, archaeologist at work at second cave entrance called Ed's Dilemma; Right, On Your Knees Cave opening; sketch and photo of biface tool found in cave (photos courtesy USFS). Second page: Left, archaeological staff exiting cave entrance; Right, award poster presented to partners in 2008 (photos courtesy USFS); Shuká Kaa's Burial Box (photo by Terry Fifield, box design by Jonathan Rowan Jr., cedar liner by Debbie Head)



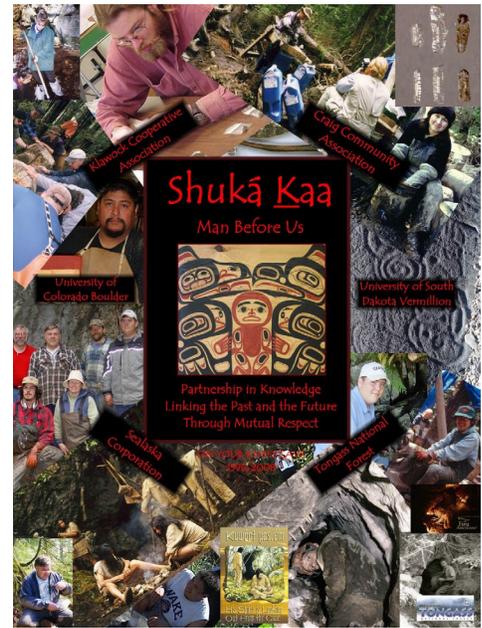
Following discovery, USFS initiated consultation with the tribal governments under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which stipulates a process for federal agencies to return Native American cultural items—human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony. USFS initiated consultation under NAGPRA with the tribal governments of Klawock and Craig concerning the status of the remains. Additionally, USFS recognized the site as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and undertook further Section 106 consultation on activities that could affect the site, resulting in the development of a Memorandum of Agreement guiding all further cave consultation. This facilitated a collaborative environment surrounding the research affecting the cave and aided in USFS's consultation efforts under NAGPRA for the eventual return and reburial of the discovered remains.

THE SUCCESS

Over 12 years of investigations and consultation, the Alaskan tribal communities were closely involved in decision making with scientists sharing information with the communities. Due to this successful cooperation, tribal members supported field investigations and analysis, including DNA and isotope analysis—dating the remains back 10,300 years and providing remarkable insights into some of the earliest human activities on the northwest coast. In 2007, the tribes and USFS arranged for the transfer of the remains, eventually named Shuká Káa by a council of elders, for reburial. In 2008, the remains were reburied in the Tlingit homeland where the life of Shuká Káa was celebrated by tribes with their federal, state, and academic partners. Recently, USFS has also moved to referring to the cave as Shuká Káa instead of On Your Knees Cave.

The excavation activities and examination of human remains from Shuká Káa were only possible through open partnership among USFS and consulting parties, Alaska Native communities, and scientists forged through the Section 106 and NAGPRA processes. The efforts surrounding the site changed the understanding of the earliest prehistory of the northwest coast while also fostering an atmosphere of improved trust, strengthening relationships between the Tongass National Forest and tribes.

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Consulting Parties:

- Tongass National Forest
- Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer
- Klawock Cooperative Association
- Craig Tribal Association
- Organized Village of Kake
- Sealaska Heritage Institute

For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov



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