

February 5, 2020

Members of the Senate Resources Committee

**RE: HB 122: FUNTER BAY MARINE PARK: UNANGAN CEMETERY**

Sealaska Heritage Institute strongly supports the protection of the Unangan cemetery as a unit of the State Parks Division, which is a matter of high cultural and historical importance to the Unangan people, as well as to the Tlingit people of Southeast Alaska who provided material assistance to them during their incarceration in the form of food and blankets. The preservation of the graveyard is significant to the relatives and descendants of those people laid to rest there, who are remembered and held sacred by their living descendants. A crucial dimension of this significance stems from the circumstances of their presence there, as incarcerated persons brought there involuntarily under extreme circumstances.

I can personally attest to the social and historical importance of this bill to the Unangan people of St. Paul and St. George from my experience with them in 1981, which I conducted research into their subsistence practices over a 3 week period. As I got to know the islanders, I soon learned about how their families were forcibly removed from their homes and taken to Southeast Alaska. They spoke to me about how they were given 1 hour to pack what they could carry with them, and to leave everything else. They were very concerned about their Russian Orthodox icons that were left behind in their churches, and which were never recovered as far as I know.

I heard about how they were taken to the wooden cannery building in Funter Bay, and how they stayed in one large room and had to hang up blankets which served as walls between the different families that were put there. Cold came through the wooden walls and plank floors of the uninsulated building. They also spoke of the shortage of food, and not knowing if they would ever return to their homes.

I worked for the National Park Service for 14 years running a research program documenting the attachments between communities and groups with social and historical connections to places that extended through generations. I learned how such places remain significant to groups even though they may have been separated by decades from their experience of the place, and how such connections remain significant to subsequent generations as part of a shared history. In the case of Funter Bay, this history is very close to the surface because it is recent, and because the families have close relatives who are buried in the cemetery.

The Tlingit peoples' ties with the Unangan people go back to the days of Russian occupation in the region when their ancestors were brought here to hunt sea otters. New relationships were formed during the WWII when Unangan people were incarcerated at several sites in Southeast Alaska.

Sincerely,



Chuck Smythe, Ph.D.

Director, Culture and History Department

