

The Haines Story

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Haines is a small town geographically located between the Chilkat and Chilkoot river systems in the northern part of Lynn Canal in Southeast Alaska. To the north by way of the Haines Highway are our Canadian neighbors and to the south by water or air is Juneau and the remainder of Southeast Alaska.

This northern part of Southeast Alaska is blessed with resources commonly associated with geographic youth. Its ruggedness, beauty and purity are enjoyed and loved by those who live there and never forgotten by those who visit and return to their homes elsewhere.

The people who live in Haines, whether they were born there or were transplanted, have such characteristics as independence, pride, resourcefulness, productivity and possibly a healthy streak of stubbornness. These are the same qualities one would find in most healthy communities, but Haines residents possibly have these characteristics a trifle more than most folks.

When I was given the privilege of living in this part of the world, everything was very simple and yet, in its own way, very complex. Customs and traditions were very strong—so strong they could control the behavior of new arrivals. I will never forget the respect for the land that meant so much to all. There was no waste of the moose or goat people hunted. There was no waste in harvesting the sea or the plants from the land and those activities provided a large percentage of the food people consumed. These natural resources were and still are very important assets to people of the Haines area.

I will never forget the pure and simple way that people helped one another, often as simply as in the 1960s, when the postmistress kept the post office open on Christmas Eve to distribute Christmas gifts that had come in the latest mail. In those days the problems of the outside world seemed far away and we handled ours with one poorly-trained policeman. Life was indeed simple. But there was a strong desire to have community improvements such as a new high school. The old high school gym was so small that when spectators in the balcony got excited, the basketball backboards would sway, adding another variable to the skills needed to play the game.

The economy at that time was limited. Commercial fishing was dominant, with Haines Packing Company providing the greatest cash flow on a part-time basis. State and federal government, the Haines gas pipeline, highway work and many new school teaching jobs provided local employment. Tourism and logging were in their infancies, with minerals having already declined from the heyday of gold rush days.

At that time the eagle was not considered a valuable natural resource. In fact, some

people picked up extra cash by shooting eagles for the bounty offered by the Alaska Territorial government from 1917 to 1953. Yes, life was simple and organized, but the complexity of our country and its future demands were coming closer.

As the years progressed, economic development and the use of local resources to create a higher standard of living became a goal for many Haines people. The timber industry grew and as mobility developed within the Lower 48 states, the Haines tourism industry flourished. Meanwhile, the fishing industry in Haines declined when Ward Cove Packing purchased Haines Packing and consolidated its operations at Excursion Inlet, 75 miles south of town. Even when the Haines pipeline was closed down in 1970, the overall economy was growing and with it the public infrastructure, demanding a stronger tax base. Things were getting more complex.

In the river valleys near Haines, a combination of geographic phenomena attracts great seasonal concentrations of eagles (Boeker 2008, Menaker 2008). This unique occurrence, which the people of Haines took as a normal part of their life, became of strong interest to people throughout the United States in the early 1970s. Left by themselves, the people of Haines would have lived with and appreciated the eagles for many generations to come. But pressures from outside the valley demanded that resources should be thought about, listed and set aside, covered by strong words to guarantee their existence. This mentality was new to the people of Haines, but it was understandable to the minds of outsiders, for whom the Bald Eagle represented an endangered species. For Haines people these events meant the simple handshake signifying understanding and commitment was replaced by a lack of trust.

All the social reactions a sociologist could predict occurred in response to these outside pressures. Fears and frustrations, anger and resentments became commonplace. Ultimately, however, on June 20, 1982, the 48,000 acre Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve was established, enlarging the original critical habitat area.

Even before establishment of the preserve, the people of Haines had begun to understand the correlation of the eagle with future environmental health. In 1977, meetings had taken place to discuss what could be done to further the positive relationship between humans and the eagle. In the early 1980s, with the help of Hans Fluehler of Montreal and Douglas DeVries from Vermont, the American Bald Eagle Foundation became a federally approved, tax exempt reality, dedicated to understanding the complexity of the Chilkat River Valley and making that understanding available to the rest of the world.

As people began to understand the importance of the eagle as a resource, they began to contribute time, money and effort to create an eagle information center in Haines. The city donated land; and volunteers from Haines and as far away as Indiana and Alabama cleared the land, hauled fill, laid a foundation, raised walls, put on a roof, put up siding and hung doors and windows. More than \$300,000 was contributed; the eagle information center was opened in spring 1991. Educational displays and video presentations change and grow year after year.

The center will make it easier for people to understand the eagle and its relationship to environmental health. People who visit the center can take new understanding home and in turn make our planet a better place on which to live. It will be a gift from Alaska, a state that has not yet been damaged by population density.

When the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve was created in Haines, federal and state monies were to have been appropriated for ongoing research on the eagle. Unfortunately, the money never materialized. In a way, the preserve has become a 48,000-page book full of valuable information whose pages have never been turned.



A Bald Eagle waits for a chance to feed on salmon along the Chilkat River. Photo by Scott Gende.

But the private sector and common citizens are strongly attracted to our Nation's symbol. The Bald Eagle is a litmus test of our time. Our responsibility to future generations is to leave the Nation's symbol healthy and strong.

Editor's Note: In 1996, Mr. Olerud and others of the American Bald Eagle Foundation, University of Alaska Southeast and other private and public sectors have redesigned and re-designated the original research institute as the Jay Hammond Bald Eagle Research Institute or the Bald Eagle Research Institute. The Institute's principle objects are to promote research and education programs designed to enhance the survival and propagation of the Bald Eagle.

Literature Cited

Boeker, E. L. 2008. Eagles on the Chilkat: Winter ecology. In: Wright, B.A. and P.F. Schempf, eds. Bald Eagles in Alaska.

Menaker, R. R. 2008. The Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve: How it all began. In: Wright, B.A. and P.F. Schempf, eds. Bald Eagles in Alaska.