



WRANGELL COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION
Shakes Island Renovation Project

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Wrangell Cooperative Association Completes Shakes Island Totem Pole Condition Survey

The Shakes Island totem poles, which largely date from 1939-1940, are showing their age.

Wrangell, Alaska – 10/27/2011 Earlier this month, the Wrangell Cooperative Association (WCA) brought in expert Steven Brown to assess the condition of the Shakes Island totem poles. Several poles need full replication and the life of the remainder, except for the Eagle and Three Frogs totems, can be extended only another 20 years with restoration and proper maintenance.

The physical condition of each pole varies depending on the original characteristics and condition of the logs used and the sculptural depth of the carved images. Deeper sculptures with more exposed end-grain transmit more water and fungus spores into the totem interior, promoting rot and decay.

The work required for each pole ranges from restoration, including spot-replacement of problem areas, treatment with anti-fungal borate solution, judicious re-painting with a stain, and waterproofing, to full replication with new carving. Cleaning, waterproofing and anti-fungal treatments, which require repeat applications at least every 2 years, would help maintain the totem pole collection, including those in the Kiks'adi Park and inside the Chief Shakes tribal house, in the best condition possible and further extend their life.

For all of the Shakes Island totems, some of the worst damage is at ground level. Water wicks up from the grass and keeps the area damp, causing fungal decay. Weed whackers cause further damage. Base damage would have to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Some patching might be possible, but often it's a terminal condition.

The condition of each pole is as follows:

- **Eagle Totem** – This totem is in the best condition of all of the Shakes Island totems and only requires a new top figure, various smaller restorations throughout and the issue of

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the deteriorated base addressed. With restoration and regular maintenance, this totem could last another 40 years.

- [Double Whale Crest Hat Totem](#) – The column upon which the top figure sits is in good condition and needs only repainting and maintenance. The top figure, however, may or may not be salvageable. If restorable, it would only last another 20 years.
- [Bear Up The Mountain Totem](#) – The column supporting the bear figure must be replaced. The bear figure can be restored but will only last another 20 years.
- [Undersea Bear Totem](#) – This totem has advanced decay throughout and should be recarved.
- [Chief Kadashan Red Snapper and Crane Totems](#) – These poles can be restored but would only last another 20 years.
- [Sun Totem](#) – This pole has advanced pockets of decay. Spot and restoration could extend the pole's life by 20 years.
- [Strong Man Totem](#) – This pole has extensive decay, and should be recarved.
- [Three Frogs Totem](#) – This pole is relatively recent but is in need of maintenance.

The costs for restoring a pole are much less than the cost for recarving a pole. Total repair and restoration cost for six poles: Eagle, Double Whale Hat, Bear Up The Mountain, the two Kadashan poles, and the Sun totem is approximately \$69,000. Total replication cost for the three poles in the worst condition: the Undersea Bear, the Strong Man, and the 'Mountain' or column portion of the Bear Up The Mountain is \$187,000. Total replication cost for all seven poles, except for the Eagle totem, is \$655,000.

Further information on the damage assessment for each pole follows.

Eagle Totem

At seventy-plus years of age, the general condition of the Eagle totem is excellent, with relatively minor areas that require restoration or replacement. The top eagle figure displays the most damage, including deep woodpecker nest cavities and decay commonly associated with a top figure and unprotected end-grain. Restoration required includes removing the eagle head and replacing it with a new carving and recarving or replacing other small problem areas. The original paint and carved surfaces are in good condition so the paint simply requires retouching. Like the rest of the Shakes Island totems, some of the worst decay is at ground level and must be addressed.

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Woodpecker damage on Eagle totem pole.



Missing wing and cracks in Eagle figure on Eagle totem pole.



Missing piece on Eagle totem pole.

Double Whale Crest Hat Totem

The Double Whale Crest Hat pole, like the Bear Up the Mountain, is a combination of a vertical column with a horizontal figure carved from a separate log section attached at the top by mortise and tenon. The horizontal top sculpture protects the vertical column beneath from weather-erosion and water ingress. Consequently, the column with its carving of a clan leader sitting atop a small creature, is in good condition.

The top portion depicting a whale hat carved by Brown, Price, and Burkhart in 1984 is now in an advanced state of erosion and decay because of its horizontal orientation and lack of maintenance. Repainting and spot restoration may or may not work for this sculpture. Because the upper surface was re-designed by Brown to aid in water runoff, the interior may be in fairly good condition. A major restoration, with epoxy-filled areas and careful repainting, could allow the carving to endure another 20 years. However, if the interior is compromised, recarving is recommended.



Double Whale Crest with missing top pieces and extensive rot.



Rot into interior

Bear Up The Mountain Totem

The Bear Up The Mountain pole is also composed of a vertical column with a horizontal figure attached at the top. The bear, which was carved in 1984 by Brown, Price, and Burkhart, has considerable erosion on most of the upper surfaces and extensive decay between the elbows and knees, where cavities extend into the interior. The vertical 'mountain' column shows

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considerable interior decay, primarily on the top horizontal surfaces. The rounded shape of the bear provided less protection for the vertical column below. Therefore the vertical column should be replaced, due to safety concerns over the weight of the top sculpture. The bear itself may be able to be restored, though its future survival is dependent on installing a metal cap all along the back of the bear and regular maintenance. However, these measures will only extend the bear's life about 20 years before full replication will be necessary.



Bear figure with rot on bottom.



Bear figure with rot on head and missing ear.



Base of column with rot damage.

Undersea Bear Totem

The head of the seated bear at the top of the Undersea Bear pole is hugely decomposed within. The decay most likely extends down the entire center of the sculpture, even though the exterior surface of the lower column appears fairly sound. The Undersea Bear pole requires full replication using photographs of the 1865 original pole to replicate the original carver's style.



Head of Undersea Bear after cleaning and removal of plant material displaying extensive rot.



Undersea Bear figure displaying extensive rot.



Rot and damage on base of Undersea Bear.

Chief Kadashan Red Snapper and Crane Totems

The Chief Kadashan Red Snapper and Crane poles are in similar condition, with some areas of extensive decay, such as the top figure on the Crane totem, and others less greatly affected by

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weather and rot. Restoration with epoxy, recarving of the worst areas, and maintenance treatments could extend the life of these two poles another 20 years.



Top figure of the Chief Kadashan Crane totem displaying extensive rot.



Top figure of the Chief Kadashan Red Snapper totem displaying rot.



Rot and damage on base of Chief Kadashan Crane totem.

Sun Totem

The Sun totem has pockets of decay, some of which are fairly advanced, in the expected places where end-grain wood is exposed. The base shows the typical extensive decay at ground level, which caused the pole to lean and prompted its removal from Shakes Island in the late 1990s. Spot restoration or replacement of decayed areas could extend the life of the pole for another 20 years, again depending on maintenance treatments.

No pictures available.

Strong Man Totem

The Strong Man totem has extensive decay in the upper figures and the bottom bear image, which is largely hollow. This and the poor condition of the base prompted its removal from Shakes Island in the late 1990s. The Strong Man pole should be recarved in full with special emphasis on reproducing the style of the original from 1860-1870 using photographs and the middle section of the original pole which survives in the Wrangell Museum.

No pictures available.

Three Frogs Totem

Even though this totem is relatively recent, it's showing a lot of growth and would benefit from maintenance procedures such as cleaning and borate and water repellent treatments.

No pictures available.

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About Shakes Island

Shakes Island is located in the harbor at Wrangell, Alaska and contains the Chief Shakes Historic Site, a National Register site that receives over 10,000+ visitors a year. The island stands as one of the few lasting reminders of Southeast Alaska Natives and their unique totemic art. The site's main feature is a replica of a 19th century Tlingit tribal house which is set on the authentic location historically occupied by Chief Shake's lineage. Not only is the site important to the national chronology of Native-white contact, it is still used today for Tlingit ceremonies and contains the prized clan artwork – at.óow – of the Stikine Tlingits. Shakes Island is owned and operated by the WCA.

About the Shakes Island Renovation Project

The Shakes Island tribal house was completed in 1940 built by collaboration between the CCC, the Forest Service and the local Tlingit tribe. Except for minor repairs, no major reconstruction has taken place to the structure. Because the tribal house is listed on the National Historic register, the replacement timbers must be hand adzed. Master carvers from other communities are overseeing and training locals to complete the adzing. The old structure needs to be dismantled and then a new structure erected in its place with the hand-adzed timbers, new electrical and a new roof of split cedar shakes. The totem poles on the island also need to be refurbished. When the project is complete, a celebration of project completion will be held. Learn more or make a donation to the project at www.ShakesIsland.com.

About the Wrangell Cooperative Association

Wrangell Cooperative Association (WCA) is the federally recognized tribe of the Stikine River region. WCA's charter was approved by the Department of the Interior in 1942. The tribe's mission is to support the cultural, ceremonial and subsistence lifestyle for all Alaskans and to promote the safe use and availability of a healthy environment for present and future generations. WCA provides social services, employment and educational opportunities to both the tribe and the Wrangell community. Of the 2,000 residents of Wrangell, approximately 800 are tribal members.