

On Prince of Wales Island

Kuwòot Yas.èin: His Spirit is Looking out from the Cave. A film made by the Sealaska Heritage Institute in collaboration with the Tongass National Forest, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, and the US National Park Service, with support from the National Science Foundation Office of Polar Programs, 2005. DVD, color, 30 mins. Distributed by Sealaska Heritage Institute, One Sealaska Plaza, Suite 301, Juneau, AK 99801, USA; tel: (907) 463-4844; website: www.sealaskaheritage.org; e-mail: shisales@sealaska.com; sale \$25.

This film documents the discovery of 10,000-year-old human remains in a cave on Prince of Wales Island in southeast Alaska, and an unusual partnership between scientists and Alaskan Native groups to study the remains. Produced by the Sealaska Heritage Institute, the film shows one way that the Native Americans and archaeologists have found common ground in investigating the past. This case stands in stark contrast to many other recent cases of conflict between Native Americans and archaeologists, the most famous being over the similarly ancient “Kennewick Man” or “Ancient One” skeleton, where conflict over control of the remains is ongoing even after over ten years of court hearings. Through a series of straightforward documentary interviews, interspersed with shots of dramatic Alaskan scenery and Tlingit-Haida ceremonies, the film attempts to answer the question, “Why did this partnership work?”

The film opens with a description of the initial accidental discovery of the human bones by a paleontologist, and of how the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), the 1990 US federal law that regulates how Native American human remains are to be treated, guided the actions of the US Forest Service archaeologist Terry Fifield. In other cases (such as in the Kennewick one), it was these crucial first days after the initial discovery that set the tone for subsequent interactions. This film gives considerable credit to Fifield’s handling of the case. He clearly had already established a relationship of trust with local Alaskan Native groups, and he immediately included them in all decisions about the future disposition of the remains (as was mandated by NAGPRA). The film then documents some of the internal discussions in the Tlingit and Haida groups about whether to rebury the bones immediately or to study them and the site where they were found in more detail. In the end, it was decided to do further studies. Interviews with paleoanthropologists, archaeologists, and Native Alaskan political leaders provide the foundation for the

film's investigation. Two Native Alaskan women who joined the archaeological excavations at the site as interns provide some of the most insightful and interesting commentaries about the tension between the options of scientific study and reburial.

As a teacher of college classes on NAGPRA, archaeological research ethics and the history of archaeological practice, I have found film to be an effective means to give students a real sense of the depth and intensity of Native American resistance to much of contemporary archaeology. I frequently use the 2002 Jed Riffe film *Who Owns the Past?* in classes and hoped that *Kuwòot Yas.èin* would serve as an update. Unfortunately, it will not quite serve that purpose. *Kuwòot Yas.èin* does little to explain or contextualize NAGPRA to audiences without this background knowledge. Perhaps Rosita Worl, the executive producer of the film who has long been an important figure in the implementation of NAGPRA (and fully capable of providing this context in the film), decided that this ground was adequately covered elsewhere. The film also does not go into much depth about the scientific knowledge gained from the studies.

However, *Kuwòot Yas.èin* does give a tantalizing glimpse into internal debates between science and tradition in Native communities, and the ways in which people try to reconcile different ways of knowing the past, such as oral traditions and archaeological data. In a world where these debates are reduced to essentialized and polarized positions in the mass media and law courts, this film provides a refreshing and personalized view of the issues. To truly answer the question posed by the film, "Why did this partnership work?" we need to know how the partners (which are in reality bureaucratic institutions that mask considerable internal diversity) found or created common ground. Ultimately, though, *Kuwòot Yas.èin* keeps more hidden than it reveals about this process. We are not allowed into Tlingit and Haida community meetings where we are told these internal debates took place, nor are we allowed in US Forest Service meetings where similar discussions may have ensued. Hopefully this film will inspire a new generation to show us what really happens in such situations. It is there that we can really find a way to move beyond the current depressingly shallow conflict between different ways of knowing the past.

Peter V. Lape
*Department of Anthropology and
 Curator of Archaeology
 Burke Museum
 University of Washington
 Seattle, WA, USA
 E-mail: plape@u.washington.edu*