

SEAM *of the* SEA

Story by BETHANY GOODRICH



In Southeast Alaska, we are isolated. All 32 communities spotted across the islands of the Inside Passage are accessible only by boat or plane. Sewn to one another and the lands that sustain us, the fabric of interdependence here is a rarity that breeds resilience. Whether Indigenous or newcomer; carpenter, fisherman, politician, land manager, artist, teacher or homeless; Southeast Alaskans share a common thread woven to the nuances of land and sea. For the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people, the depth of that relationship extends over 10,000 years.

IN PURSUIT OF SEALS

Though you wouldn't guess it at first glance, Robert Miller is a tailor. A literal giant — at 6'8" and nearly 300 lbs, he rivals the ancient spruce and hemlock trees that rise above our shore. In his day job as a fish biologist with the United States Forest Service, Rob helps to manage over 15,000 miles of salmon streams that pulse through the Tongass National Forest. He specializes in fish habitat enhancement, using dynamite and complex construction to stimulate wild salmon populations by increasing access to suitable spawning habitat.

Over the past eight years, I've watched Rob grow his side-hustle, Sea Fur Sewing, from humble beginnings into a prosperous business making hats, mittens, wallets and more out of Alaskan animal hides. What I've always loved about my enormous friend is the complexity of his character. He dons waders while working with the feds, camo on a moose hunt, and sweats while running his sewing machine. He's Kiks.ádi Tlingit, an entrepreneur, and arguably, a fashion designer. As a family man, he spoils his daughter with gifts of impossibly soft sea otter fur.

Rob is passionate about using his business to introduce Tlingit culture to a wider audience, and so he eagerly accepted this opportunity to share the full process of his passion, from harvest to hat. To start, we head out into Sitka Sound in pursuit of harbor seals.

The breeze moves across the aluminum skiff and lifts the grays of the covid beard Rob's been grooming since March. Both tragedy and promise swirl around the boat while we speak earnestly about the ways the pandemic has impacted our remote community, our colleagues, our families. We discuss lives lost and lives taken. Floating silently, we let the magnitude of the past seven months weigh heavy on us.

Eventually, Rob breaks the silence.

"The ocean is part of my soul. If I don't have the ocean, I feel depleted. Getting back to my roots, hunting is what I love. It's like therapy."

Honey-colored mist lifts off the ocean, crawls through the trees, and slips down the alpine spines of Baranof Island. We scan the water for the characteristic dark heads and deep eyes of harbor seals. There are endless pockets of possibility tucked into the corners, inlets, and bays of our islands. Southeast Alaska has more coastline than the rest of the United States combined.

The intricacies of the Tongass National Rainforest can keep you rapt for as long as you let them. At 17 million acres, this is America's largest national forest. These public lands are also the unceded territory of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian, who have honored this rainforest since time immemorial. Living as a Kiks.ádi Tlingit and working for the United States Forest Service, Rob understands the complexity of land 'ownership' deeply.

Rob proudly points out a river mouth where, years earlier, he installed a fish pass. The sun breaks above the contours of our mountains and the morning rain is soft.

Seals aren't easy to hunt. To take one demands absolute accuracy, because although harbor seals may weigh nearly 300 pounds, only the crown of their head teeters above the waterline. They rarely haul out, and are easily spooked. Arching their necks, our harbor seals sink silently in trepidation below the hinge of the horizon without making so much as a ripple. A careful headshot is necessary, ending life quickly and humanely.

We spot a pair of seals corralling coho salmon on their return to the river mouth before traveling upstream to spawn. This frenzied feast draws birds, bears, seals, eagles, maggots, and more — all sustained by the reciprocity of returning salmon. While deeply poetic, the season also reeks like death and decomposition.

Our wake startles the seals. They scatter. We move in this way for the early hours of the day, snacking, chatting, letting the angled autumn sun warm our faces.

Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, individuals who are one-quarter Coastal Alaskan Native by blood are permitted to harvest harbor seals and other marine mammals. Blood quantum is a contentious policy that defines a sharp boundary between 'Native' and 'Non-Native,' leaving Rob on one side and his children on another. Some fear that this arbitrary cutoff threatens the long-term sustainability of this culturally-revered practice.

While Sitka is my home, I will always be a visitor on Lingít *Aani* (Tlingit land). The concept of stewardship stretching backward and forward over ten thousand years, anchored to this abundant shore, is a relationship I'll always admire but never fully understand. As I see it, one of my responsibilities as a white person on this land is to listen to my Indigenous friends, learn about the ways colonization continues to permeate across our society, and use whatever power I have as an ally to help dismantle systems of deep-seated oppression while cultivating community resiliency. Throughout this journey, I've learned countless lessons thanks to the generosity of many mentors and peers, including Rob. One of the earliest lessons of my Southeast Alaskan education came from a colleague, Adam Davis, who gently schooled me on John Muir. When Muir came to Alaska, he denigrated the Indigenous people and excised them from their homelands in Glacier Bay. He looked down upon the seal hunt and rocked the canoe right when his Tlingit guide was about to strike. "He literally took food from our mouths," Adam explained, counting the reasons why 'conservationists' and their revisionist history aren't always welcomed in these parts.



I accidentally rock the boat while shifting in my seat to take a photo. Rob misses his first shot and we move on. I still have a lot to learn.

“I don’t feel terrible about harvesting, because I think we are all predators,” Rob says. “Animals are predators, the animals I harvest are predators, you and I are predators. Humans are predators to other things — our own selves mainly,” he laughs. He’s right.

Rob may call himself a predator, but this morning he’s munching on a rice krispies treat while two seals circle around a rocky point. He pulls the skiff to shore, not taking any more chances with me on board. The shot echoes and the seal’s life is over in an instant. Rob motions to run back to the skiff. Unlike sea otters with their dense and buoyant carpet of fur, seals sometimes sink, so we rush to the mushrooming blood to ensure we don’t lose sight of it.

Despite our hurried efforts, the seal sinks. Rob throws anchor and grabs his fishing pole equipped with a grappling hook to hoist the animal from the sea.

Critics have many unwarranted opinions about the contemporary methods Rob and other Indigenous hunters use. No, Rob doesn’t use a harpoon or a club to take seals by canoe. Relegating Indigenous people to be static, judging the nobility of their pursuits based on the tools they use, banishing them not to adapt as if imprisoned as invariable wax sculptures in some drafty museum,

is just one of the many ways misconceptions of the past continue to poison the American psyche today. Rob is an Alaska Native. He uses a rifle. He uses Facebook too — not only to market his products to clients, but also to share his seal meat with eager elders across town.

Eventually the grappling hook catches into the sunken seal’s flesh and Rob carefully motions the enormity of the animal to the surface before hoisting it onboard by its flippers. The seal’s whiskered face leans over the edge, its blood returning to the sea. I become transfixed. The blood is intense in its brilliance — the shapes, the quantity, the vibrance, which is the very definition of red. Sealmeat is so dense with iron, pregnant women have locally coveted the meat to stave off anemia for thousands of years.

Harbor seals are variegated, ranging in shade from inky black to silver dappled in spots. This one shifts from a white belly to a black back in a ravishing, mercurial gradient. I imagine what beautiful hats Rob will one day craft from this hide. For now, he starts by honoring the meat. Carefully, Rob slices down the belly of the animal, revealing the thick sheath of blubber that insulates its violet flesh.

“Being Tlingit, for me, is just about the love for nature. You aren’t wasting anything. Everything has a use. You need to share your knowledge and share your wealth — like the meat you get from the seals, you are helping the elders every chance you get. That’s a core value. Do everything sustainably, because in our





culture, Mother Earth is your number one priority. If she's not there to take care of you, it's scary."

To date, he's shared over 1,500 pounds of seal meat with individuals and institutions like our community hospital, whose Traditional Foods Program recognizes the role cultural foods play in healing.

"I need the fur, and I can bring the material back to town and make one Facebook post and give away five whole seals in twenty minutes. People aren't just hungry for anything — it's a traditional food that nobody can get anymore."

SHARING SUSTENANCE

Rob's physical opposite, Joni J. Elisoff, is waiting for us in town. She's five feet tall with small, sharp hands and she has been eagerly waiting to get them on a seal. Rob hangs the corpulent body from the rafters of his carport; Joni and I help heave the animal right below the stars and stripes of our nation's flag. The American dream takes many shapes. Rob skins the seal carefully with the rocker of an ulu knife. His neighbors cruise past slowly.

Joni hides behind a hat and hood. She's a bit bashful before the camera but also grateful for the opportunity to share something sacred to her with the world. I've never met a happier stranger. She's giddy and vivacious, floating from task to task with a fierce dedication to the process. "My Tlingit name is Kaayistann; it means friendly person." She looks up to me with a grin.

I ask her to describe the happiness she is so clearly experiencing. She pauses. "The only thing I can equate it to is the joy of holding a new baby grandchild." I believe her.

The skin of Joni's hands, gleaming in oil, is so impossibly thin that I watch the bones of her fingers dance across the hills of blubber she prepares to render into oil and cracklings. We talk about health, the pandemic, and the ways she's increasingly leaning on traditional foods and remedies to cultivate vitality. A few years back, Joni started keeping the bones in her packed salmon to increase her calcium levels and mitigate the aches of osteoporosis. She sips seal oil to quell heartburn and proudly announces the positive lab results she received this week that corroborate what she already feels to be true. "It's working. I equate it all to the seal oil, to our Native foods."

Processing takes days. I visit Joni's home and gift a jar of my wild blueberry jam. Sharing food is the foundation for friendship. With each hour, Joni warms and softens like the seal blubber she stirs in an enormous pot over her stove. She shares more thoughts and more stories, including her first memories of seal. As a little girl, she and her siblings kept a seal pup they pulled from the belly of an animal her father hunted for meat. They kept it alive for days in the bathtub. She describes summers spent in her childhood cabin, putting up food, taking baths in the tidepools, preparing 'stinkheads' at low tide. Stinkheads are a wild fermentation of salmon. "We buried the heads in gunny sacks at low tide and let them go for a week and then dug them up and ate them right there on the beach. My mouth is starting to water just thinking about it. Once you get it past your nose, it tastes so good."

The seal oil is surprisingly delicate. Over low, careful heat, Joni stirs the browning bits of blubber with a loving and discerning commitment. Ladle by ladle, she spoons the golden ambrosia into mason jars throughout the day. In her little kitchen, this little lady works with every detail laid out just right for long days of processing. Autumnal gales slip inside her cracked window, lifting the embroidered butterflies of her curtains. The wind settles across the braided seal intestines she has staged for the smokehouse.

I scrub the steel smokehouse racks and Joni stokes the alder chips until steady swirls of smoke slip through cracks in the old wood walls. Into the smoker goes the meat, the ribs, and the braids of seal intestines that hang like garlands. "I know my mom is smiling," she says.

It becomes clear that Joni has poured over my informal questions with the diligence of a school student. She cares earnestly about sharing the significance of this act and sits me down with a mug of tea after another night of inward thinking. She wants another chance to articulate her joy and the reasons why processing seal matters so much to her. "The reason why it makes me so happy is it reminds me of my mother," she says. In near tears, Joni describes the smell of her childhood home and the busyness of a big family. "My mom was always putting up food."

She continues, "The other reason why it makes me so happy is I'll be able to share with my friends and family." Sharing is a foundational value in Tlingit culture. Power, unlike in a capitalist society, is not attained by how much wealth you accumulate, nor what you can claim as your own. Joni explains how power and worth is determined by how much you give away.

"My really good friend and cousin was just diagnosed with breast cancer, and all she wants is Native food as she goes through chemo. So I just sent a package off to her; that's what it's all about. It's about sharing."

By the final day, the hat and hood come off. Joni shows me the sealskin earrings she put on this morning for the pictures with pride and swings open the smokehouse door. The alder smoke pierces our eyes and contorts our smiles. My new friend beams so unabashedly, so proudly, so damn happily, all the woes of 2020 lift away with the ribbons of smoke.

LEARNING HOW TO SEW A SKIN

For some, traditions of hunting, processing and craft pass naturally, effortlessly, as an inheritance between generations.

For others, the process can be a bit more messy. Brains, bravado and a healthy dose of humility were quite literally blended together in Rob's case. "Best not to use the family blender though." His laugh fills the humble basement shop where he sews his products. Each animal has enough brains to tan its own hide. When Rob was first starting to hunt marine mammals, he wanted to try the traditional brain-tanning process too. After an argument at home, he headed out to the ocean for therapy. He took his first two otters that day, and a hunter in town showed him how to properly skin the hides.



Next, it was time to tan them, so he removed the brains and into the family blender they went. His wife was horrified, catching him quite literally red-handed. “She ended up with a much nicer replacement blender,” he assures me with a little grin.

Rob believes he was compelled to first start on this journey by his great grandmother’s spirit. She was a seamstress and entrepreneur herself, selling seal skin moccasins to Russians and visitors in Sitka. I ask if he feels the skills and talents came naturally. He laughs again.

“I think there is a muscle memory through generations and families. There may be a little in there in my case; I think my great-grandmother is smiling. But none of it is easy if you want to be a professional and sew stuff like this — I’m exhausted every single day. Every single day I learn something. Sewing these skins together, it’s a nightmare with dander flying everywhere. But it’s a labor of love.”

The classic Bonis fur sewing machine loops confidently through the seal hide. It’s truly a stunning piece of machinery, built like a tank for delicate operations. Over years of careful diligence, Rob has mastered the idiosyncrasies of this machine. Trial and error are his predominant method. Fur sewing across the world, Rob discovered, is a secretive craft of knowledge hoarding which is so drastically unlike the culture of compassion he shares with the local Tlingit artist community.

“You’re going to pay a hundred thousand dollars for some college course in Europe to learn how to sew fur.” That was never an option for Rob. “So I don’t even know if I’m doing it right, because I’ve never been taught. I am just doing it how I know. But it seems to be working. It’s been a challenge every single day, but I enjoy challenges. I get bored if I am not challenged.”

He lays out the templates he’s designed for hats of all shapes, gloves, headbands and more. His seal and otter hats are now celebrated by people like four-time Iditorod champion Lance Mackey. They’ve been featured with friend Jesse Holms on shows like *Life Below Zero*, and importantly, they are most cherished locally.



“Nine years ago, I wouldn’t even imagine sewing anything. Now it’s become a big part of my life. I didn’t even know how to thread a needle.”

Unlike the uppity, knowledge-hoarding fur sewers that frustrated Rob when he began to learn this craft, he prioritizes sharing. “I’ve come a long way from my very first sea otter. Now I can teach others, and that’s my way of giving back to my culture: by helping people learn and understand they can make money doing this too. Natives help other Natives to succeed, even as entrepreneurs.”

Economic self-reliance breeds confidence and pride. “The Tlingit are proud people. Teaching people makes me feel like I’m furthering that pride. When you are able to do your art and make money at it and help your family and friends, it boosts your confidence, and that’s contagious. That’s where I see that going. If you can help 10 people in a community learn how to do something that they love to do, then they are going to be passionate about it and they are going to teach 10 people. It’s contagious, and that’s what I like. I want to see people succeed.”

A COMMUNITY HUNT

This one seal stitched together a community, manifesting as food, art and economy — Joni, Rob, myself, all the people receiving shipments of oil, the people who will buy the hats, the readers of this story, Joni and Rob’s ancestors. Very few places on the planet are capable of such vast and useful transcendence.

We live on the seam of the sea, where the mountains shatter as islands into the Pacific. We test the integrity of this tapestry by the strength of our returns, the character of our community and our ability to share. It’s the resilience of this tapestry that shields us from the endless rain that defines our forest, the darkness of a Northern winter, or the global pandemic and economic hardship lapping at our shores. It’s the resilience of this tapestry that allows us to not only survive on the islands of the Inside Passage, but to thrive. ♫

Bethany is also Ecotrust’s 2020 Rural Reporting Fellow, which is a fellowship that supports rural journalists in the West and Alaska. For more info, or to apply yourself, visit: ecotrust.org/project/rural-reporting-fellowship

