

Economic, cultural losses feared

Glacier threatens Yakutat resources

by Barbara Page
for the Tundra Times

The Mother Glacier is angry, and the people of Yakutat do not know why.

The Tlingit community of Yakutat have lived their lives much as generations of their ancestors did before them. They subsist on the bounty of seal that live near the mouth of Disenchantment Bay. They raise their children in fish camps along the banks of the Situk River in summer.

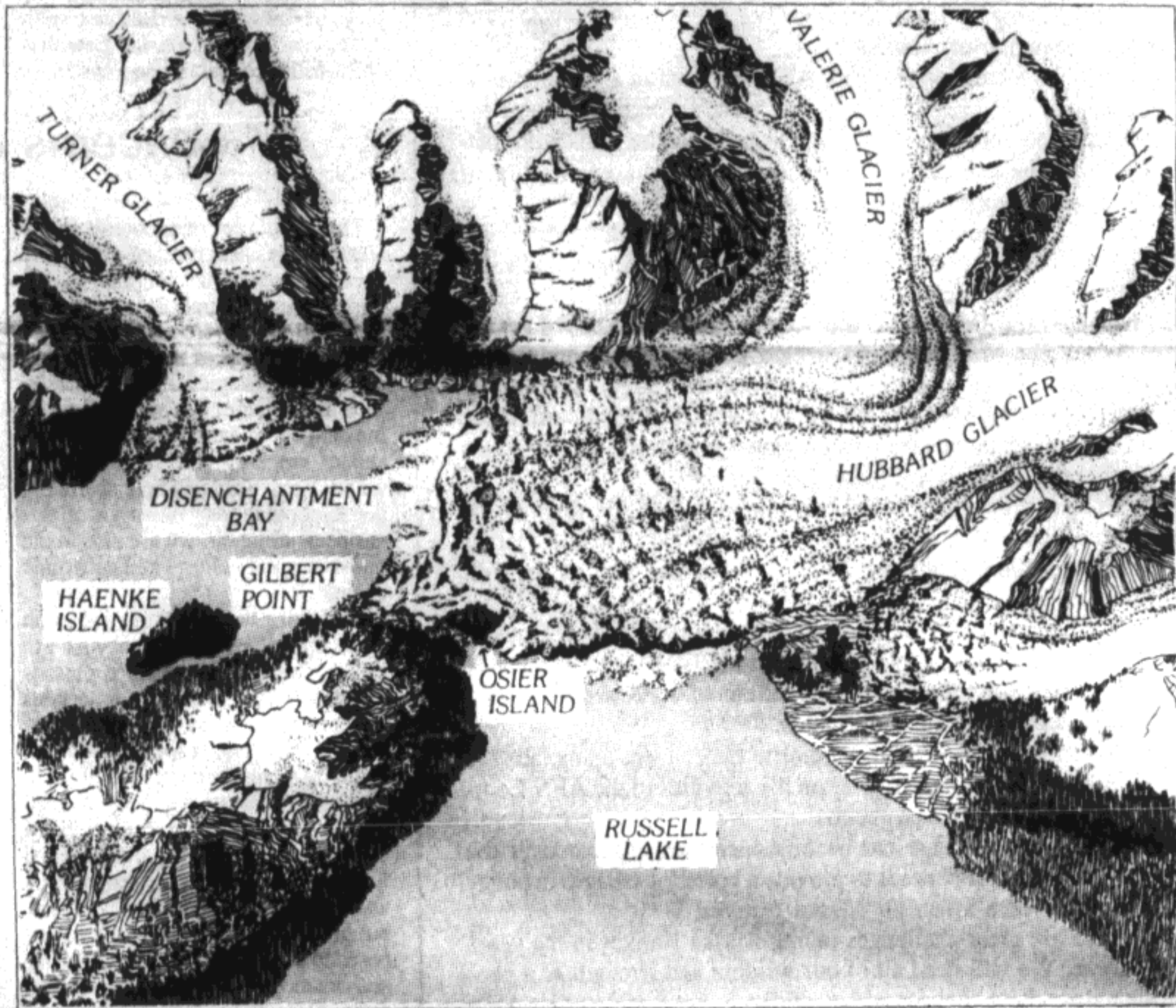
The people fish the salmon which have returned year after year for centuries. They dry them in the sun as they teach the younger ones, as their parents taught them — the legends and traditions that have kept their culture alive.

The Tlingit have buried their dead near the Situk: the chiefs of the Raven and Eagle clan, those who have lost their lives in the unpredictable weather of Prince William Sound.

Whether an ancient grave or more recent one, the dead are buried with Tlingit ceremony and respect. These people are the past. They are the future.

Today, just as in the past, the glacier is threatening the people of Yakutat. The recent damming of the Russell Fiord will cause economic and cultural losses to the people.

One of those people attempting to



The Hubbard Glacier is closing off Russell Lake near Yakutat.

U.S. Forest map

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Glacier threatens residents' lifestyle

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assess those losses is Judy Ramos, a Tlingit born and raised in Yakutat, who now works as a research specialist for Rural Alaska Community Action Program.

Ramos has been in close contact with her people and has been attending workshops and informational meetings in Yakutat as state agencies and the U.S. Forest Service strive to predict the outcome of what glaciologists are referring to as "the most exciting geological event in North America."

Ramos says the potential damage to rivers, wildlife and natural resources in this area due to the surge of the Hubbard Glacier is not just a scientific event.

"It's losing what you've had all your life. We want people to be aware of our concern," she said.

Topographical studies of the area are expected to be completed by the end of this month.

Should the lake flood as predicted between July 1987 and August 1988, the once salty waters of the Russell Fiord could flow over into the Situk, joining them into one torrid river flowing into the Gulf of Alaska.

The current of the Situk would then increase by 20 to 40 percent, washing out not only the salmon which have migrated up the Situk for centuries, but also the abundance of wildlife and fauna.

The moose and black bear survive on the blueberries and salmonberries as the Natives do.

The Father Glacier, the Tlingit name for the Hubbard, has formed the largest ice-dammed lake in the world. As scientists continue to study the phenomenon, meetings with the community to learn the anticipated actions of the glacier's movements also will continue.

"We would like to be able to hire a coordinator representing our people, the shareholders of Yak-tat Kwaan, to work with the agencies to uphold our interest," Ramos said.

Money is the problem. Lack of funding to ensure the community's concerns are met has been frustrating as the people watch what they feel the public's concern to be — the rescue of seal and porpoise from the dammed lake.

As people who have lived in harmony with the rugged topography of Yakutat and its animals, the Tlingit regard these things also with tradition and respect.

The animals are their livelihood. They are hunted to ensure the survival for future generations. The people take only what they can eat. The balance of nature works for them.

The old people also understand the land. The glaciers have surged and tossed huge chunks of ice into the bays for centuries.

Sue Abraham, Ramos' grandmother and Native elder stated in a recent article for Time magazine, "This place where we sit belongs to the great glacier."

According to legends, the nearby Valerie Glacier is referred to as the



Judy Ramos, left in background, and her mother Elaine Abraham, right in background, talk with two Yakutat elders.

Mother Glacier. The Tlingit say the Mother is angry at the Father and is pushing him farther out to sea.

The Mother, which calves into the sea in spring as the seal give birth, protects the newborn pups until maturity by allowing them to be protected from hunters behind the massive icebergs.

The people can no longer predict the migrating patterns of the seal or the salmon of the Situk, and they hope to have studies financed to enable them to do so.

The Division of Emergency services will meet with Yakutat residents Sept. 29 and 30.

Many factors enter into predicting the glacier's outcome. Heavy rainfall common to the area, the temperate weather of Southeast and the actual

makeup of the glacier's muds and snow are among them.

The intense interest by the media nationwide has caused this once unknown community to overflow its banks, too. The question in Yakutat these days is, "Where will we put them all?"

The rash of news teams, reporters and interest groups has raised the current population of this city greatly in recent months. The answer to impending problems in Yakutat will not be solved soon.

"Our people need to get together, like we always have in the past, to decide what we can do. And we need to do it our way — quietly and with privacy," said Elaine Abraham, Ramos' mother.