



A delegation from Sealaska Corporation helps celebrate the launch of a traditional Hawaiian voyaging canoe carved from spruce logs donated by the corporation from its lands.

Photo by B.I. Mallott

# Indigenous Alaskans and Hawaiians voyaging together from past to future

by B. I. Mallott  
Special to the *Tundra Times*

In 1990, Sealaska Corp. received an inquiry in its Juneau office from the Polynesian Voyaging Society in Honolulu, Hawaii. The society wanted to purchase spruce logs from which to carve the double hulls of a 60-foot traditional Polynesian voyaging canoe.

The inquiry, although somewhat unusual, could easily have turned into just another log sale for Sealaska, which, after all, is in the business of selling logs from its Native lands to create profits for its shareholders, the Native peoples of Southeast Alaska. But, upon hearing what

the logs were to be used for, Sealaska's leadership recognized something compelling and familiar in the native Hawaiian request.

The Polynesian Voyaging Society, founded in the early 1970s, was bringing new life to the voyaging tradition who, more than 1,200 years before, had navigated large double-hulled sailing canoes more than 2,000 miles across the South Pacific Ocean to discover and settle the Hawaiian Islands. Though some writers have disparagingly suggested that the seafarers simply drifted with the winds and currents and only discovered the islands accidentally, the Polynesians are proud of the navigational heritage preserved in oral traditions. However, the last long

distance canoe voyage had occurred centuries ago, the navigating skills were gone and the canoes themselves but vivid images of the mind.

By the 1970s, pride was all that was left for a people struggling to find their place in modern Hawaii. Native Hawaiian children needed knowledge of their people's voyaging history to help strengthen cultural pride and build self-esteem. Their parents needed that knowledge, now more than ever, to maintain the values and traditions that had sustained them over the centuries.

By 1990, Native Hawaiians had once more sailed throughout Polynesia, from Hawaii to New Zealand in *Hokule'a*, a fiberglass

replica of a voyaging canoe constructed by the Polynesian Voyaging Society. Beginning in 1976, the voyages of *Hokule'a* had taught Native Hawaiians, once again, the navigation skills using only the timeless, recurring patterns of the stars and sea that had in ancient times given them mastery of their vast saltwater world. The reality of *Hokule'a* strengthened the resolve of the Native Hawaiian leadership at all levels to use their culture and heritage as the touchstone for building their future. The vision of *Hokule'a* rising on a long ocean swell, sails full with the wind and the brilliance of a sunset on the horizon ahead, became a power-

Page 3, please



# Voyaging together . . .

*Continued from page 1*

ful symbol of the dreams and aspirations of Hawaii's Native people to educate the young, rekindle knowledge of heritage and tradition and foster cooperation and support from local, state and federal institutions.

To build another voyaging canoe, this time using only traditional materials and methods, with hulls carved from huge logs, would take the symbolism to another level of inspiration and pride. This was the vision that brought Sealaska Corp. and the Polynesian Voyaging Society together. Native Hawaiian oral history held stories of voyaging canoes being built from huge logs that had drifted from the North Pacific. So, as they had centuries before, the Native Hawaiians looked north when they discovered that trees of needed size were not to be found on their own

lands.

Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians have long shared aspirations as indigenous people. Native Hawaiian dance has highlighted Sealaska Heritage Foundation Celebrations. Native Hawaiians has studied the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) and had visited ANCSA corporations before. For the Voyaging Society to turn to Sealaska to turn to Sealaska to buy their logs was not surprising. Sealaska was not in the business of giving logs away, although logs had occasionally been provided to local Native artists. The Native Hawaiians were surprised when, after hearing their story, Sealaska agreed to find, cut and prepare logs for shipment at its own expense.

Upon reflection, Sealaska's ability to quickly decide to donate

the logs was also a symbol: of the maturing of an ANCSA corporation. Sealaska's long effort to instill Native values in corporate decision-making was validated in this decision to reach far beyond its own Pacific Ocean shores to identify with the dreams and aspirations of another indigenous people. Sealaska has recognized that we all share a common destiny and at every opportunity we must work together. This recognition and the decision to donate the logs has made Sealaska more confident than ever that it can make the for-profit corporate structure imposed by ANCSA work for the benefit of its owners, the Native peoples of Southeast Alaska, not just as corporate shareholders, but as indigenous peoples in common cause with brothers and sisters wherever they may be located in this world we inhabit together.

*Byron Mallott is a former president of Sealaska Corp. and is currently Practitioner in Residence*

*at the School of Business and Public Administration, University of Alaska/Southeast in Juneau.*