

WE ARE OCEAN PEOPLE: INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN MARINE CONSERVATION  
CINDY BOYKO & 'AULANI WILHELM, GUEST EDITORS

I  
AM A  
SEA  
HUNTRESS

*Hope Napataq Roberts*  
*Ariadne Schablein*



**Mahsii Cho' (Thank you) for allowing me to share my personal story and my community story.** First, my name is Hope Napataq Roberts. I am mostly Tlingit-Gwich'in in culture and very little English. I was gifted the name Napataq from a Sugpiaq Elder from Port Graham just a few months ago. Napataq is Sug'cestun and means "heart"; she said that I had heart for the first people of the Southcentral region of Alaska. I waited forty-two years to see if I would ever be given a name. I have seen so many beautiful Native names as Alaska is filled with different Alaskan Native languages. For most of my life, I've lived in a gray area between Western society and wondering what my personal culture was.

In 2014, I began to realize who I was when my new Inupiaq husband brought me hunting on Kodiak Island. While there, I watched him harvest seals out of a pod of about twenty-five healthy harbor seals frolicking playfully in the sunny waters near Port Lions; this is on Kodiak Island. When I fully knew where I belonged, it was later that year in June, when we brought our four-year-old daughter out into the Prince William Sound seas between the towns of Whittier and Valdez (Suacit.) I knew that I was an Islander. My grandfather was from Klawock on Prince of Wales Island in the southeast panhandle of Alaska. He had gone to Wrangell Institute as a child because his family came down with tuberculosis

in the 1930s or '40s. As they say, but I think that he was a child prisoner. He and his three brothers were separated back then and remained so after their time in residential school. He didn't hand down his culture because of the horrid abuse that occurred; I knew that that's how I lost the centuries of knowledge that my family had when it came to marine mammal harvesting. So when I was out hunting with my husband I knew that I was learning the Inupiaq way

**HOPE NAPATAQ ROBERTS** (above) is Tlingit-Gwich'in-Koyokun, from Fairbanks, Alaska. **ARIADNE SCHABLEIN** is Aleut, from St. Paul Island, Alaska. PHOTO BY SAKARI AVILUQÜLU



CHERISE BEATUS / DENAA PHOTOGRAPHY

because I would learn anyway what I could just to get in touch with a cultural harvest that is federally protected, recognized, and also mine by ancestral right. I am eternally grateful for whoever taught Charles (my husband) to hunt in the ocean, as he has now taught my daughter and me. That morning in June, we harvested four fat gorgeous seals.

The first one was the one that changed my life. We were having a hard time getting close enough to the pod of seals that kept swimming around a spread of three islets that had just enough room for the seals to swim through when the tide allowed, but not for a small 20-foot boat. I jumped off of the stern, port side, on an islet. I half crouched, half climbed up to peek over the top as quietly as an Indian could. I laid

up top and saw two of the harbor seals come back. My heart was racing and pounding so loudly that I could not hold my rifle steady. I was scared, but of what? What was I scared of? One of the seals, looked in my direction, she was looking around because she could tell something was staring at her. I was quiet and lay still a little longer, then it was too late. She dove under the water as sleek as they all do, leaving no waves. She was gone. I thought, is this a man's job? Was this ancestrally not something I should do? I did not want to offend the Ancestors whose spirit I hold. But then, she came back up and when she did, I did not wait as long. I counted, three, two, one, I took the shot. At that moment when she stopped moving and floated in her own redness, rather than sink herself in one last attempt to flee a predator, she was waiting



for me to accept her as a gift, as a reconnection to the mighty waters which my mother's people came from. I was TLINGIT! In those moments of collecting her and bringing her to the beach one last time to pay my respect to her in the Inupiaq way that was taught that day, the colors of the seas, the trees, and even the rocks became ten times brighter! I was filled, my spirit felt like it had full armor on, like a jousting knight in medieval times. I felt like if I was left there with nothing more than my Seal, knife, and rifle, I would live! The Ancestor's memory in my DNA had woken up; it's as if I was led there by an unknown presence.

I spent thirty-six years of my life wondering who I was, and where do I belong. I was raised by a single alcoholic mother of four on welfare who suffered the second-worst effects of my grandfather's time at the Wrangell Institute. They lived in a time when signs were hung on the doors of cafés that read "No dogs and no Indians." I cannot imagine how this made them feel at the time, that the café owners even wrote "dogs" before "Indians." I made similar mistakes to my mother's; it took a lot of trial and error to realize that I had to break my own trail if I didn't want to self-medicate myself to death the same way my mother, her mother, her two sisters, her father, maybe even his brothers did. I have broken uncountable generational curses.

I did not do anything the way society taught me to; I was taught to finish high school, go to college, get a corporate job and climb the ladder. What a joke, no one tells you that traumatic lifestyles are not normal until you pay for therapy. I left my mom's house at sixteen because I felt she could not afford me; I did not know that I could be expelled from high school at eleventh grade for not showing up in fifty below weather. I had no way to get warm clothing, but I did do my homework and sent it in weekly. That did not help. I think the new principal was on a "follow the rules agenda" as she was new to her position that year. I found out that thriving and not surviving is an actual lifestyle. Long story short, I do thrive now, I will never forget what it is like to be a survivor on the streets, I will always be grateful for what I learned on the city streets. Out there it is like the seas; it is sink or swim. A person becomes quite clever when they are cold and hungry with nowhere to go. Those kinds of lessons stay with you for life. I have lost all of the genuine people who held me, dear to their hearts, to numerous types of addiction.

Reconnecting to my heritage through marine mammal stewardship has changed my life 100%. If I could have learned this earlier, I could have helped my family. But I have a new family now; there are so many people who live in the gray world that I once



▲ CHARLES UPICKSOUN

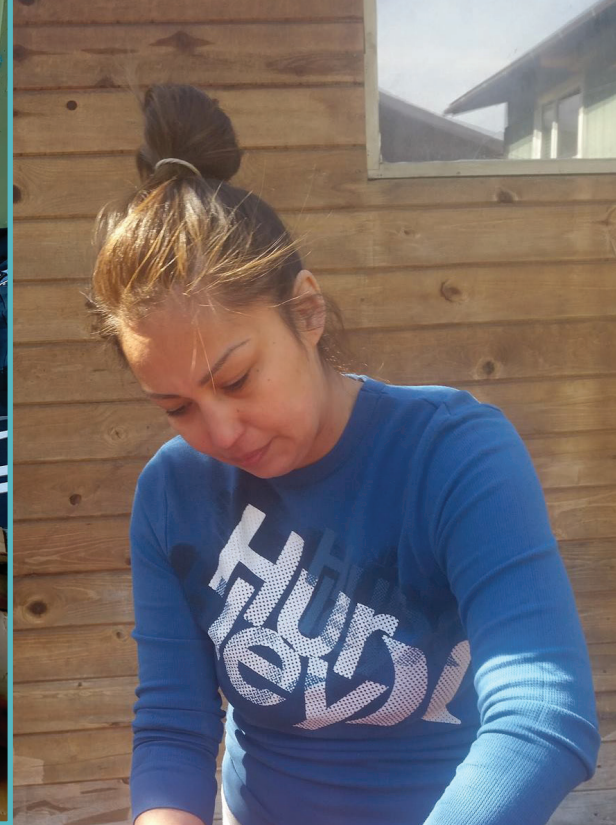


▲ COURTESY OF HOPE NAPATAQ ROBERTS





CHARLES UPICKSOUN



CHARLES UPICKSOUN

did, and most, they self-medicate daily. If I can help reconnect them to their heritage through harvesting sea animals, maybe they will overcome their obstacles as successfully as I have. Today, I hold several seats, as a leader. The most recent is the South Central Regional Advisory Committee (SCRAC.) These seats holders are Federal Advisors to the Federal Subsistence Board; this board decides on whether to pass proposals relating to hunting and fishing in Alaska's Federal lands and waters. I am also partner, owner, and Captain of Surreel Saltwaters deep-sea fishing charters, and the Chair of the Valdez Advisory Committee, a council that reports its opinions to the State of Alaska's Department of Fish and Game. I hold several subcommittee seats that all work for the advocacy of Alaska's First People. My favorite first seat was and still is Secretary of the Board of Directors at the Valdez Native Tribe. They call this Tribe a melting pot of tribes, and, although non-federally recognized, this tribe is made up of 734 individuals who all have Bureau of Indian Affairs cards. Most of these people are federally qualified to hunt marine mammals, yet a lot of people have stories about how they have been kept from learning the craft. Our neighbors in the Qutekcak Tribe have a similar story: every one of their non-federally recognized tribal members is qualified to hunt marine mammals, yet some have lost the culture in one way or another.

Now at this point in the story I would like to turn it over to Ariadne Schablein. Like me, Ari holds several tribal seats: she is a board member for her home tribe of Qutekcak in Seward, a board member at Chugachmiut, and an alternative Board member at Chugach Regional Resources Commission, who lives in Seward, Alaska. She serves the Qutekcak people, and she shares with us her thoughts:



**AANG.(Hello). My name is Ariadne Schablein, I am Aleut.** My birth family comes from St. Paul Island. I was adopted (a tribal adoption) as a toddler and



raised by my mother Carol in Anchorage. She is also Aleut, born and raised in Seward, Alaska. My grandfather, her father, was born in Unalaska. My great-grandma and great-grandpa were also from the Aleutian Chain and were both raised in the Jesse Lee Home in Unalaska.

My great-grandma and great-grandpa came from families of hunters and fishing people. Their parents had to make the choice of staying at home and not providing subsistence food, or to have their children at the orphanage and go out fishing and hunting to trade to the settlers for an income. My grandpa Ralph was born in 1924, in Unalaska, son of Peter K. and Annie Hatch who met and later worked at the Jesse Lee Home after it moved to Seward. He grew up in Seward from the age of seven, where he and his siblings attended school at the Jesse Lee Home. My grandpa was one of five children; all his siblings grew up and attended school at the Jesse Lee Home.

After working at the Jesse Lee Home, my great-grandparents also had a log cabin in Hope, Alaska, and in the winter times they trapped animals for their fur and then sold them for income during the Depression. They hunted and trapped moose, beaver, fox, rabbits, birds, and other animals during the winter. In the summers after the Depression, they spent their time in Coho where they had a fish setnet site. My mother remembers going to visit them in the summers and helping at their fish camp site. They also looked for agates on the beach and played card games. My grandfather grew up eating salmon, moose, deer, clams, berries, homegrown vegetables, and wild birds, once his family left living at the Jesse Lee Home.

My grandfather met my grandma in Seward, where she came by boat in the mid-'40s to teach. After they were married my grandpa would follow in his father's footsteps of commercial fishing for Alaska wild salmon, moose hunting, bear hunting, crabbing, clam digging, hooligan fishing, deer hunting, and mushroom hunting. My grandparents had five children, with my mom the oldest.

My great-grandfather, grandfather, and grandfather's brother Jesse owned many boats together. Uncle Jesse went out a few times seal hunting, and my uncle can remember him having some meat hanging in their kitchen.

My mother remembers after a moose hunt my grandpa would use the garage to hang their meat. She recalls that if the meat had some spoiled spots on it my grandpa would cut them out and continue to let it hang and cure itself. It was wrapped in cheesecloth to keep flies and other bugs from laying eggs in it. I've asked my mother a few times what kind of meat they grew up eating. She says, "He always got a moose but also went hunting for grouse and ptarmigan, rabbits, but I don't think caribou as that was so far away."

During the 1964 earthquake, my grandpa's brother Jesse was out seal hunting in Resurrection Bay with another local man, they were caught in the tsunami and both lives were lost. When the 1964 earthquake happened, Seward and many other communities and villages on the coast were damaged as well. The knowledge of seal hunting was lost with my grandpa's brother Jesse. After that my grandpa took on herring fishing in the spring, along with my uncles' crab potting across Resurrection Bay and clam digging.

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The earthquake really devastated the town of Seward and a lot of these lifestyles changed. It was easier to find clams and do herring fishing before the earthquake, and after that people rebuilt with modern-day homes and land was bought up by non-Natives to build cabins on. All that has really changed the way the Alaskan Native People of Seward practice subsistence living near and off of the ocean. When the knowledge of seal hunting was lost, my grandpa did not look toward seal hunting for his family, he turned to the commercial fishing industry and went out fishing for salmon and herring. The herring have declined due to the water becoming warmer with global warming, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, and more traffic on the seas.

My history with marine mammals and subsistence is that I grew up and attended Nuuciq Spirit Camp held on Nuchek Island. There they taught us seal hunting, harvesting, and how to skin a seal. This was back in the '90s when the camp first started. Since then I've attended some gatherings and summer camps in Anchorage, Alaska. There they have shown sealskin, how to use seal intestines, and how to skin an octopus. My daughter attend an Alutiiq APIA (Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association) camp where she learned how to enjoy seal meat, octopus, seagulls, puffins, and whale blubber.

I've been learning how to tan fish skin and make jewelry with it. With global warming, Alaskans have noticed a fluctuation in the marine mammals' cycles, and some summers we have really low salmon runs, which means a lower seal pup population and less food for whales to come back to on their summer feeding grounds. It plays a whole circle of life for subsistence hunting and gathering on the land game and ocean mammals.

There are fewer and fewer Elders who remember how to hunt for marine mammals and other ocean

delicacies. We don't have accessibility to boats and harvesting tools and utensils. So that puts us all at a lower success rate to bring back our heritage.

I feel it's in my roots to share my family's history and our people's history. A lot of our history has been lost and has been replaced with more modern-day food such as chicken, beef, bison, and much more. I am trying to go back to my roots, and my people's roots to bring back our culture and to stand up and speak for my people and all Alaska Natives. More water traffic, global warming due to pollution, and destroying forests have brought me to this point to write my family story and our history to let our voices be heard, not only by Alaskans but people all over. I feel it's my duty and a calling for me to speak up now and to teach the younger generation our ways.



**Together, we—Hope and Ari—believe that Coastal Natives and Islanders by ancestry should be stewards of the waters.** We have since found an Elder in the village of Tatitlek who does not have anyone to teach his marine hunting skills to, Ari and I will be taking him out hunting this spring in the Prince William Sound to learn the old ways of the first people who stewarded these mammals in this area. We, members of the Qutekcak Native Tribe, and the Valdez Native Tribe, and the Tatitlek Elder, will be carrying on traditional practices as soon as the seals have pupped.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Since writing this I have taken Ari and four other Alaskan Natives on a weekend-long hunting trip. It was not a Tatitlek Elder, it was a Tlingit Elder who lives in Valdez who came with us as our esteemed leader. I successfully reconnected two people to the marine mammal harvest.





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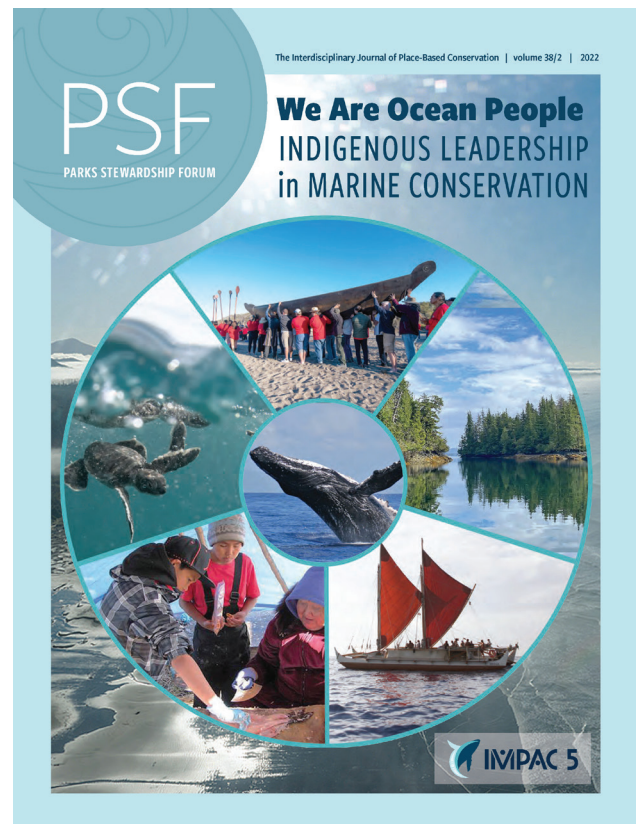
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**On the cover of this issue**

- CIRCLE DESIGN, clockwise from top:
- Northern Chumash ceremony | **ROBERT SCHWEMMER**
  - Haida Gwaii | **CINDY BOYKO**
  - The Polynesian Voyaging Society's voyaging canoe Hōkūle'a | **NOAA**
  - Elder teaching youths, northern Alaska | **US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE**
  - Baby Honu (sea turtles), Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | **NOAA**
  - Center: Humpback whale, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | **NOAA**

Background: Pacific Rim National Park Reserve | **PARKS CANADA**