# We Are Still Here: Restoring Language, Land, and Cultural Strength in the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

*In Collaboration with Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribal Members*

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# *Abstract*

This capstone explores how the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe enacts cultural revitalization as a form of sovereign governance. Through a community-centered case study grounded in Indigenous methodologies, the project examines how land, language, and intergenerational knowledge function as cultural policy systems: practiced, protected, and passed on across generations. The research centers the experiences and perspectives of four Port Gamble S'Klallam tribal members and knowledge holders who generously shared their reflections on identity, governance, revitalization, and cultural continuity.

The central research question guiding this project asks: How have the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's efforts to reclaim and preserve their culture, land, and language impacted their community, particularly in relation to women and youth? Rather than viewing cultural revitalization as a symbolic act or institutional initiative, this study treats it as a lived, ongoing form of governance expressed through practices such as beadwork, naming, early childhood education, language reclamation, and intergenerational teaching. These practices form the foundation of a policy system that is community-defined, relationally governed, and resistant to settler frameworks which have historically devalued Indigenous knowledge.

The methodology involved long-form, semi-structured interviews, thematic coding, and fieldnotes guided by a framework of relational accountability. Reflexivity and care were central to every stage of the research design. Interviewees reviewed their transcripts and retained full agency over how their words were represented. Conversations were treated as knowledge sharing rooted in trust, sovereignty, and respect. Each storyteller contributed unique insights based on their generational position, leadership roles, and experiences of cultural transmission.

What emerged from conversations was a powerful portrait of cultural resurgence that is led largely by women and sustained through daily acts of care, leadership, and teaching. Youth were consistently described as central to the future of this work, already singing in language, harvesting cedar, participating in Canoe Journeys, and influencing their families. The findings demonstrate how revitalization is a dynamic, forward-looking movement rooted in land, relational governance, and intergenerational love. Various acts of resurgence persist despite structural barriers such as housing scarcity, land restrictions, and chronic underfunding of Native language programs.

This project contributes to the field of policy studies by challenging dominant assumptions about where policy occurs and who creates it. It argues for a broader and more accurate understanding of governance, one which recognizes community-driven cultural systems as strategic, enduring forms of policy in their own right. A community-facing deliverable accompanies this report, illuminating the ethical foundation of the project and its commitment to relational research. What follows is not a study of policy from the outside, but a record of policy as it lives within a sovereign Nation: enacted through culture, led with care, and sustained by a community who never stopped protecting what matters most.

# *Acknowledgements*

*To The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribal Members* — This capstone is my love letter to your community. To those who sat with me and shared your stories, thank you for trusting me. You gave me time, honesty, clarity, and care. You did not owe me your time or stories, but you offered them anyway, and in doing so, you gave this project its shape, its weight, and its soul. Your leadership, your protection of what matters, and your willingness to speak shaped every aspect of this work. It would not, and could not, exist without you. Your community is beautiful in its strength, its generosity, its knowledge, and its refusal to be anything less than whole. I will carry this experience and your generosity with me always.

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***This project is for the Port Gamble S'Klallam community and for every Indigenous nation who was threatened with erasure but continues to lead, protect, create, and survive.***

***I offer this work back with humility and immense admiration.***

*Chapter One*

# Introduction & Purpose of the Study

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"We are still here." Those words, shared early by a tribal member in this process, were more than a reflection of survival. They became the heartbeat of this work, a truth to honor, a responsibility to carry, and a call to listen differently. For the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, cultural revitalization is not simply a return to tradition. It is a living, evolving movement rooted in sovereignty, kinship, and intergenerational strength. Through language restoration, land reclamation, and community-driven education, the tribe is reclaiming what was always theirs and creating new pathways for future generations.

Cultural revitalization is the pulse which keeps community, history, and identity alive against a backdrop of relentless erasure and disruption. It is a reclamation not only of language and ceremony but of self-determination itself — a daily, living act of sovereignty often carried forward through the leadership of women and the hope embodied in youth. This work matters because it challenges the enduring impacts of colonization and asserts the continued presence and power of a people who refuse to be erased. Cultural revitalization breathes life into memory, fuels resilience against erasure, and plants the seeds for generations yet to come which binds time, identity, and hope in a continuous, unfolding journey.

This research was conducted by a non-Native graduate student trained in policy analysis, gender studies, and cultural inquiry. As someone who does not belong to the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, the researcher does not speak from within or on behalf of the community, nor attempt to translate its knowledge through institutional frameworks. Her role throughout this project was to listen closely and remain accountable to what was shared without claiming

ownership, expertise, or final say. She writes not from a place of authority, but from proximity and responsibility. This capstone reflects a position of witnessing: to observe what community members chose to make visible, to remain conscious of what was withheld, and to represent the research encounter as a space shaped by care, permission, and limits. In honoring those terms, the analysis to follow resists abstraction and instead foregrounds the living, sovereign knowledge systems which continue to guide the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's future.

Cultural revitalization refers to the renewal of language, knowledge systems, and lifeways that were suppressed through colonization. These efforts are not merely cultural; they are deeply political. They represent the assertion of tribal sovereignty: the inherent authority of Indigenous nations to govern their communities, knowledge, and futures. Scholars such as Alfred and Corntassel (2005) and Corntassel (2012) have emphasized the political and relational dimensions of revitalization, framing it as central to Indigenous resurgence and self-determination. Yet even as recent scholarship acknowledges Indigenous resurgence, much of the existing literature continues to frame revitalization as symbolic, institutional, or complete (e.g., Simpson, 2011; Kirmayer et al., 2014). What is often missing is sustained attention to the everyday leadership behind this work, particularly by women, and to the ways in which youth are shaped by, and actively contribute to, ongoing cultural survival. This capstone addresses a persistent gap in how cultural revitalization is understood, particularly in academic and public discourse. Too often, revitalization is framed as symbolic, complete, or institutionally contained, rather than as an ongoing, community-led process grounded in everyday acts of leadership and care. What is frequently overlooked are the lived realities of those sustaining this work, especially the roles of women and youth. This project asks: How have the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's efforts to reclaim and preserve their culture, land, and language impacted their

community, particularly in relation to women and youth? Rather than approaching revitalization as an outcome, the project views it as a living process, held together by relationships, responsibility, and intergenerational vision.

To support this analysis, this project builds a framework of cultural policy rooted in the lived governance of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. While traditional cultural policy scholarship often focuses on state institutions and the management of creative sectors (McGuigan, 2004), and distinguishes between explicit and implicit cultural governance (Ahearne, 2009), this project reorients the concept through an Indigenous lens. In this framework, cultural policy is not limited to legislation, programming, or funding structures. It is understood as the full range of practices through which culture is protected, governed, and passed on. These include land and water stewardship, language continuity, food sovereignty, education, and youth mentorship, but also ceremonies, kinship roles, naming traditions, seasonal gatherings, and everyday decisions that sustain identity and belonging. These practices are not adjacent to governance; they are governance. By framing cultural revitalization in this way, the project highlights how policy is already being exercised at the community level in ways that are grounded, sovereign, and oriented toward long-term cultural survival.

Existing scholarship often treats land, language, and education as separate policy domains rather than interconnected dimensions of cultural governance. Studies on Indigenous language revitalization, for instance, tend to focus on classroom instruction or institutional programs, often overlooking how language is rooted in land-based practices and kinship systems (McCarty, 2003; Hermes & Bang, 2014). Likewise, research on land rights or environmental management frequently ignores the cultural and educational roles of territory, framing land as a resource rather than a site of learning and identity (Nadasdy, 2003). Few studies examine how

these domains operate in unison within a single community, and even fewer center Indigenous definitions of success or the everyday leadership, particularly by women, that sustains this work across generations. Conventional research models often prioritize data and outcomes over lived experience, relational accountability, and cultural logic.

This fragmented framing has tangible consequences. When land, language, and education are treated as discrete domains, policy interventions risk being misaligned with the holistic realities of Indigenous life. Programs may offer language classes without land-based immersion, or fund environmental protection without recognizing its role in cultural education. Such approaches can inadvertently reproduce colonial hierarchies of knowledge, where state-sanctioned metrics and institutions define what counts as legitimate, measurable progress. As a result, community-led efforts grounded in relationality, ceremony, and intergenerational teaching are often undervalued, underfunded, or overlooked entirely. The erasure of women's leadership and Indigenous-defined success further reinforces a limited view of revitalization, one that privileges outputs over meaning and overlooks the cultural labor required to sustain long-term renewal. Without a shift in how revitalization is conceptualized, research and policy will continue to fall short of supporting the full breadth of Indigenous governance and resurgence.

This project is rooted in relationship, shaped by sustained collaboration with the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, guided by their values, and subject to their review. Interviewees' insights are treated as co-authored knowledge, shared with intention and grounded in place, memory, and responsibility. Through recorded interviews, transcript review, and ongoing dialogue, what emerges here has been formed through conversation rather than extraction. While the stories and visions shared remain the community's own, the analysis presented reflects an

attempt to carry those truths into spaces where policy often falls short. The objectives of this report are twofold. First, to document and uplift the cultural reclamation work led by women in the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, much of which remains unrecognized in formal policy spaces. Second, to explore how community members, particularly women leaders, understand the ways in which youth are shaped by these efforts and positioned to carry them forward. While this project does not include direct research with youth, it engages with the reflections of adults who are actively shaping the cultural, educational, and relational conditions that youth will inherit. These aims reflect a broader understanding of resurgence as a living process: held in relationships, carried through generations, and expressed through community-defined forms of leadership, care, and continuity.

This project contributes to broader dialogues on Indigenous cultural governance by focusing on what often remains outside the frame: how knowledge is enacted through relationship, how leadership is expressed through care, and how sovereignty is lived every day. It builds on scholarship that foregrounds resurgence as a practice of presence, rooted in community-defined values and carried forward through continuity and choice (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Simpson, 2011; Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014). What unfolds in these pages was made possible through the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's guidance and generosity, a process shaped not by extraction, but by accountability. Their role in this work is not as participants, but as stewards of knowledge who chose when, how, and why to share. The result is not a detached analysis, but an effort to hold space for what is already underway: a living, breathing expression of tribal strength. The stories and insights within these pages were offered with intention, and they carry responsibilities which extend far beyond the boundaries of research. More than anything, this capstone is a gesture of deep respect. A mirror held up to

reflect what is already being done: the powerful, enduring work of a people who never stopped protecting what matters most. They are not only still here, they are leading the way forward, offering a blueprint for cultural resilience, justice, and sovereign futures.

*Chapter Two*

# Historical Context

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## Early Colonial Legal Foundations

Indigenous survival is etched into land, carried through song, and lived through generations who refused erasure, even as colonial laws and institutions tried to silence them. The history of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe unfolds against a broad and relentless backdrop of colonial encroachment, legal violence, and policy-driven dispossession that stretches back centuries. Long before treaties were negotiated along the shores of the Salish Sea, European imperial powers had established ideological frameworks that would later justify the erasure of Indigenous sovereignty. The Doctrine of Discovery, developed through papal bulls in the fifteenth century and later adopted into secular colonial law, asserted that non-Christian nations lacked legal rights to land ownership (Miller, 2005; Stagg, 2011). In the United States, this ideology was solidified through the landmark Supreme Court decision *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823), which enshrined the notion that Indigenous title to land could be extinguished by "discovery" and that only the federal government could negotiate land transfers (Wilkins, 2007; Deloria & Lytle, 1984). Although abstract in its legal framing, the consequences were concrete: Indigenous lands, lives, and governance structures were rendered invisible within settler legal systems before a single treaty was signed in the Pacific Northwest (Banner, 2005; Miller, 2005).

## 19th-Century Policies of Removal and Assimilation

By the early nineteenth century, federal Indian policy had taken on a dual mission of removal and assimilation. The Civilization Fund Act of 1819 allocated federal funds to

missionary organizations tasked with “civilizing” Indigenous communities through religious conversion and manual labor education (Prucha, 1984; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). The Act introduced a federal partnership with religious institutions that would later manifest most devastatingly in the boarding school system. Assimilation was not framed as a benevolent offer but as a violent intervention designed to sever Indigenous peoples from their land, languages, spiritual practices, and communal governance structures (Adams, 1995; Child, 1998).

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 forcibly displaced tens of thousands of Indigenous peoples from the southeastern United States to lands west of the Mississippi River, establishing a brutal precedent for future territorial dispossession (Perdue & Green, 2005). The passing of the Indian Appropriations Act in 1851 further cemented a reservation system which confined tribes to restricted lands, limiting their access to traditional territories and resources (Wilkins, 2007). In 1924, Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act, granting U.S. citizenship to all Native Americans. While celebrated as a civil rights milestone, it was also a tool of assimilation, often used to argue against tribal sovereignty and weaken treaty obligations (Nagel, 1996). Decades later, the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 incentivized Native people to leave reservations for urban areas, promising economic opportunity but delivering poverty, isolation, and cultural disconnection (Fixico, 2000; Iverson, 2002).

**Treaties and Territorial Loss**

As European settler expansion surged westward, these ideologies traveled with it. By the time settlers reached the northern Puget Sound region, they brought not only diseases and trade goods but a fully formed political agenda premised on Indigenous removal, containment, and eventual erasure. The Treaty of Point No Point (1855) emerged from this context, signed under

conditions of profound coercion and cultural miscommunication. The treaty required the S'Klallam people, alongside neighboring Skokomish and Chimakum peoples, to cede vast swaths of territory in exchange for small reservation lands and the nominal preservation of fishing, hunting, and gathering rights at usual and accustomed places. Yet the practical consequences of the treaty were immediate and devastating: lands that had sustained communities for millennia were carved up, sold, logged, and fenced off; traditional travel routes and gathering sites were restricted; and access to sacred sites and food sources was severely curtailed (Hoxie, 2001; Treaty of Point No Point, 1855; Robbins, 2004).

**Allotment, Cultural Suppression, and Resistance**

Treaty promises of continued subsistence rights were soon undermined by settler expansion and state regulations that criminalized Indigenous hunting and fishing practices. Meanwhile, the federal government embarked on an even more insidious strategy of cultural dispossession. The General Allotment Act of 1887 (Dawes Act) sought to dismantle communal landholding and governance by allotting parcels of land to individual Native families. Under the guise of promoting "responsible" land use, the Act shattered the relational stewardship systems that had anchored communities such as the S'Klallam for generations. So-called "surplus" lands – those not allotted to Native families – were sold to settlers, leading to catastrophic land loss across Indian Country (Prucha, 1984; Wilkins & Stark, 2017).

Cultural and spiritual life came under siege through legal mechanisms including the Religious Crimes Code of 1883, which criminalized traditional ceremonies, dances, and gatherings. These acts were targeted assaults on the political and spiritual foundations of Indigenous sovereignty. Ceremonial gatherings that renewed kinship bonds, transmitted

governance teachings, and affirmed responsibilities to land and ancestors were driven underground (Child, 1998; Adams, 1995).

The boarding school system, enabled by the Civilization Fund Act (1819), inflicted intergenerational trauma on families. Children were stripped of language, spiritual practices, and cultural identity. For the Port Gamble S'Klallam community, the boarding school era fractured kinship systems and governance practices. Yet despite the cultural violence, tribal members often resisted by secretly teaching language, passing down songs, and sustaining relational practices within the home (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Adams, 1995; LaDuke, 2005).

**20th-Century Policy Shifts and the Fight for Sovereignty**

Federal Indian policy shifted again with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (Wheeler-Howard Act), which encouraged tribes to reestablish self-governance and communal landholding. Yet it imposed Euro-American political models that clashed with traditional systems based on kinship and consensus. The Termination Era (1940s–60s) followed, where over 100 tribes lost federal recognition. Though the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe was not terminated, the climate of fear and erasure forced Indigenous nations to constantly defend their existence.

Meanwhile, environmental degradation devastated traditional lifeways. Clear-cutting, dam construction, and mill waste disrupted salmon habitats and polluted ancestral waters across Washington State (Nehlsen, Williams, & Lichatowich, 1991; Ruckelshaus et al., 2002). In response, Native fishers from multiple tribal nations engaged in acts of civil disobedience throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, asserting their treaty-protected rights to fish in traditional areas despite arrests, harassment, and state interference (Deal, 2007; Estes, 1992). These efforts became known as the Fish Wars. The movement culminated in the landmark Boldt Decision of

1974, in which the federal court reaffirmed tribes' rights to harvest salmon at their "usual and accustomed" fishing grounds, guaranteed under 19th-century treaties (Boldt, 1974; Wilkinson, 1989). The ruling recognized tribal nations as co-managers of the fisheries and marked a turning point in legal battles over treaty enforcement. For many tribal communities in the region, it was not only a legal victory but a reaffirmation of relational responsibility, a recognition of fishing as more than a right; it is a cultural and spiritual obligation tied to land, kinship, and the survival of future generations (Carroll, 2007; Olson, 2015).

**Child Welfare and the Struggle for Cultural Continuity**

By the 1960s, 25–35% of Native children were removed from their families and placed with non-Native foster or adoptive families. These removals aimed to sever cultural and governance ties. The Indian Child Welfare Act (1978) was passed in response, reaffirming the role of tribes in child custody proceedings and recognizing that children belong to extended kinship systems and communities. While ICWA remains a cornerstone of Indigenous child welfare, it has faced repeated challenges and inconsistent implementation across states. The law's original intent, to protect Native children, families, and tribal nations from ongoing dissolution, continues to be undermined by systemic underfunding, jurisdictional conflicts, and lingering bias within the child welfare system.

**Self-Determination and Contemporary Revitalization**

The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 granted tribes more control over programs, but required them to operate within settler frameworks. Still, it opened space for renewal. The Meriam Report (1928) had earlier exposed the failures of federal Indian

policy, influencing reforms that came decades later. In the Pacific Northwest, tribes revived salmon habitats, language programs, and cultural education. Women and elders led the way, restoring relational governance through ceremony, food, land, and language.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) and the Native American Languages Act (1990) further reflected a federal shift toward acknowledging cultural rights, even if implementation remains uneven. These laws provide legal grounds for protecting ancestral remains, sacred items, and traditional languages, reinforcing the centrality of cultural resurgence in tribal governance.

Today, the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, like many sovereign nations, leads cultural resurgence not through legislation alone, but through daily acts of love, responsibility, and community-rooted leadership. Resurgence lives in homes, on canoes, in waters and forests. This historical context grounds the capstone in the enduring arc of Indigenous resistance and survival, laying the foundation for understanding how revitalization today is lived, governed, and carried forward across generations.

*Chapter Three*

# A Profile of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

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Along the mist-covered shoreline of the Kitsap Peninsula, where forested hills lean into the sea and the tides carry more than salt – they carry memory – you will find the homeland of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. Known in their language as the nəxʷsƛ̓áyəm̓, or "Strong People," they have lived here for thousands of years in deep relationship with the land and water (Klallam Language Program, n.d.; Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). Much of what is shared here is drawn from their own published history, their official website, or the knowledge shared by tribal members who have generously contributed their voices (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022). This place is much more than a home, it is where their ancestors walked, where their stories rise with the morning fog, and where each cedar tree and shoreline has been shaped by care, presence, and knowledge passed through generations.

To speak of the S'Klallam people is to recognize they have never left. Their identity, sovereignty, and purpose continue to move forward with intention, clarity, and pride (Evergreen Strong, 2020). The language which carries their stories – Klallam (nəxʷsƛ̓əyəmúcən) – has, since time immemorial, been spoken along the north shore of the Olympic Peninsula and nearby islands; it is closely related to Northern Straits but distinct, and includes four dialects: Elwha Klallam, Becher Bay Klallam, Jamestown Klallam, and Little Boston (Port Gamble) Klallam (Klallam Language Website, n.d.).

Before roads cut through the forest or colonial maps divided the region, S'Klallam villages thrived across the Olympic Peninsula and the inland waters of the Salish Sea. Villages were alive with the sounds of children playing along the tideline, the steady rhythm of paddles

striking water, and the scent of smoke rising from longhouses where families gathered. Lives followed the rhythms of salmon and the seasons, a calendar set not by paper but by the return of the fish and the blossoming of certain plants. Families traveled by canoe across bays and inlets not just for transportation but as an expression of relationship. Waterways formed networks of commerce, connection, and ceremony, each route rich with its own stories and teachings (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.; Evergreen Strong, 2020). Land was not a resource to be claimed. Instead, it was a living relative, offering medicine, food, and spiritual grounding – a way of being which continues today (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022).

Colonial intrusion brought industry, environmental harm, and displacement. In 1853, Captain Josiah P. Keller arrived with partners W. C. Talbot, A. J. Pope, and Charles Foster to establish the Puget Sound Mill Company at Port Gamble. That October, Keller filed a Donation Land Claim covering Point Julia, the present-day town site, and Teekalet Bluff (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022; HistoryLink, 2003). S'Klallam families were pushed across the bay to Point Julia under promises of lumber, firewood, and a Christmas "treat" – a move elders remembered vividly (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022).

On January 26, 1855, representatives of the S'Klallam, Skokomish, and Chemakum signed the Treaty of Point No Point, ceding roughly 750,000 acres while reserving fishing, hunting, and gathering rights at "usual and accustomed" places. The treaty promised $60,000 over twenty years in federal expenditures (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022). Many S'Klallam refused relocation to Skokomish, over 100 miles away, and instead began purchasing land near Point Julia to remain close to home. In 1886, Charley Jones, John Soloman, and Cookhouse Charley each bought 11 acres; by the early 1900s, Joseph Anderson, George

Dan, Jacob Jones, and Ed Purser had acquired parcels ranging from 17 to 80 acres (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022; Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). Much of this land was later lost to county tax foreclosures during the 1930s (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022).

Seeking redress, the S'Klallam secured a 1925 congressional settlement of $400,000 – 533 members received $722 each, equivalent to about $12,000 in 2023 (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). Yet no permanent land base was established until 1938, when 1,234 acres near Point Julia were purchased for $15,000 under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. On June 16, 1938, the Secretary of the Interior proclaimed the Port Gamble S'Klallam Reservation "for the use and benefit of the Port Gamble Band of Clallam Indians" (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022). Houses soon rose on the bluff, and the old Point Julia village – long flooded and condemned – was burned, a moment remembered with grief by elders (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022). In 1977, the Indian Claims Commission awarded $327,237 for 438,430 acres of ceded lands, less than one dollar per acre, dividing the amount equally among the three S'Klallam tribes for community purposes (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022).

The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe is a sovereign Nation with an elected Tribal Council and a full governmental structure. Tribal departments oversee health care, housing, education, environmental protection, infrastructure, and more (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). These systems are grounded in cultural values and shaped by responsibility to land, people, and future generations, balancing expertise with memory and policy with values (Evergreen Strong, 2020). Today the reservation remains 100% tribal trust status with no individual or outside ownership (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). In

recent years, the tribe has expanded its land stewardship and services: in 2019, PGST finalized the purchase of 937 acres of timberland adjacent to the reservation; in August 2021, the 22,500-square-foot PGST Community Health Center opened, bringing medical, dental, and behavioral health under one roof; and in 2021 the tribe secured development rights on the former mill site to protect culturally important places (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). Decisions are often made with an eye on the faces of the next generation, guided by the principle that leadership is as much about stewardship as it is about governance (Evergreen Strong, 2020).

Economically, the tribe operates several tribally owned enterprises, including The Point Casino & Hotel, a major employer and revenue source, and manages ventures in natural resources and real estate through the Noo-Kayet Development Corporation (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). These enterprises reflect a model of sovereignty in action: strategic, future-focused, and rooted in community-defined priorities (Evergreen Strong, 2020). Each investment is evaluated not only for its profitability but for how it will serve the community's cultural, social, and environmental goals.

Tribal services reflect a holistic view of community well-being. The Port Gamble S'Klallam Health Center provides care not only to tribal members but also to residents throughout the region. The housing department works to ensure access to safe, stable housing. Youth and elder programs support intergenerational relationships and knowledge transfer. The Port Gamble Tribe also operates one of the first tribally owned public libraries in the United States. Inside, woven baskets sit beside shelves of children's books. Posters in both English and S'Klallam decorate the walls, and the scent of cedar sometimes drifts in from nearby carving

workshops (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). It is a space shaped by intention, where Indigenous knowledge is not only preserved, but made accessible.

Culture is seen as foundational, not simply supplemental. The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe is widely recognized for its artistry, knowledge systems, and leadership in cultural continuity (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.). Beadwork, basketry, carving, and regalia-making are practiced with care and skill. Carvers shape cedar into paddles, masks, and story poles which honor both ancestors and contemporary stories, while weavers create intricate baskets and textiles, embodying traditional knowledge. The carving sheds are often lively with conversation and the sound of adzes meeting wood, while the weaving rooms carry the soft rustle of fibers being transformed into art.

Culinary traditions, such as preparing salmon or clams in earth ovens, remain central to gatherings, linking foodways to ceremony and community identity (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Culture, Art & Food, 2022). These art forms are living expressions of memory, identity, and belonging, each piece carrying the spirit of the maker and the weight of generations. Songs and dances are part of daily life and ceremonial expression, often taught from childhood so they become second nature. Canoe journeys are among the most powerful reflections of cultural strength. Annually, the tribe joins the Intertribal Canoe Journey, paddling ancestral routes and visiting other coastal Nations (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.; Evergreen Strong, 2020). At dawn, the shoreline hums with quiet preparation, paddles laid carefully beside hand-carved canoes, cedar regalia packed for the journey, and families gathered with intention (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022).

The relationship to salmon and shellfish reflects sacred responsibility. They are viewed as food but also relatives, central to both survival and ceremony (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe,

Cultural History, 2022). The tribe plays a leading role in regional efforts to protect salmon runs and restore damaged ecosystems, understanding the health of these species is inseparable from the health of the people. Along the shoreline, traditional clam bakes bring families together for seasonal harvests which are as much about memory as they are about sustenance. The process is as ceremonial as it is practical – digging the pit, layering hot stones, placing wrapped salmon and shellfish inside, covering with seaweed, and letting the earth and steam do their work. Shellfish beds, once threatened by industrial damage, are being restored with careful stewardship. These practices are cultural obligations, tied to ancestral teachings, ecological restoration, and the continuation of lifeways rooted in reciprocity (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022).

The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe shares kinship with the Jamestown S'Klallam and Lower Elwha Klallam Tribes. Though each community is distinct, their shared language and history remain strong (Klallam Language Program, n.d.; Evergreen Strong, 2020). These relationships are reflected in intertribal collaboration, governance partnerships, and cultural continuity. The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe also contributes to regional and national initiatives focused on Indigenous rights, environmental justice, and community wellness. Their leadership is steady, values-driven, and deeply engaged in shaping future outcomes (Evergreen Strong, 2020).

To spend time learning about the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe is to encounter a living continuum shaped by land, governance, and generations of care. Their presence is embedded in the daily rhythm of community life – in the sound of drums during a gathering, in the teachings offered by elders on the beach, in the laughter of children learning their first words in S'Klallam. Decisions are made with foresight, education reflects both tradition and innovation, and

ceremonies carry meaning far beyond words. Cultural practices are methods of transmitting knowledge, protecting identity, and sustaining collective responsibility. Sovereignty is lived in how the tribe governs, heals, builds, restores, and leads. The depth of this reality cannot be fully known from outside, but it can be acknowledged with respect (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, History & Culture, n.d.; Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022).

This profile can only ever capture a small part of a much larger story – one carried in leadership, legal autonomy, cultural continuity, and the ties to land and community which run through countless generations. To truly appreciate their story means turning to the tribe's own words and the spaces they have created, whether it is learning from their published histories, attending public cultural events, or supporting the art, language, and stewardship work they continue to lead. It is within these practices that the depth of their history and the strength of their sovereignty can be most fully understood. The following literature review builds upon this foundation, offering additional insight into the histories, frameworks, and policies which have shaped, and continue to shape, Indigenous governance, identity, and resistance across various contexts (Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Cultural History, 2022).

*Chapter Four*

# Literature Review

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**Cultural Revitalization as Relational Practice**

Cultural revitalization is a lived, relational practice embedded in the daily lives of Indigenous communities such as the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. For the S'Klallam people, land, language, and cultural traditions are not static artifacts of the past, but dynamic, evolving practices which are continuously protected, enacted, and transmitted across generations. Revitalization is not framed as a discrete project or policy initiative, but as an ongoing, everyday commitment – rooted in relationships to place, to kin, and to cultural knowledge systems – which sustain identity, belonging, and collective futures. Cultural survival is experienced through the continuity of relational practices which affirm Indigenous peoples' ongoing presence, sovereignty, and responsibility to their ancestors and future generations.

**Foundational Frameworks of Resurgence**

Foundational scholarship recognizes how land remains central to Indigenous resurgence efforts. Coulthard's (2014) theory of "grounded normativity" emphasizes ethical relationships with land as fundamental to Indigenous governance, resilience, and everyday life. These relationships are lived through everyday practices such as harvesting, ceremony, and caring for territory, which reflect deep responsibilities to place and community. Through these place-based ethics, Indigenous governance is rooted in reciprocal relationships which guide decision-making, social accountability, and collective wellbeing. Grounded normativity positions land not as property, but as a relative, making caretaking and cultural revitalization political acts of

resurgence. Corntassel's (2012) concept of "everyday acts of resurgence" similarly highlights that small, daily practices, often outside of formal political activism, are powerful forms of Indigenous survival and sovereignty maintenance. However, much of this literature remains conceptual, focusing on theoretical frameworks without grounding them in the specific, lived experiences of communities. These works often highlight the *why* of resurgence — its philosophical, political, or ethical importance — but leave out the *how*. As a result, they tend to overlook the everyday, relational actions that animate cultural survival: caregiving, language transmission, land-based practices, intergenerational teaching, and ceremony. These are not only cultural expressions but foundational modes of governance and resistance, and their absence from much of the existing literature creates a gap in understanding how resurgence is actually enacted at the local level.

**Gendered Dimensions of Resurgence**

Building on these broader frameworks of resurgence, several scholars emphasize the need to understand Indigenous revitalization through gendered and relational lenses. Goeman (2009) brings important attention to Indigenous feminist spatial practices, demonstrating that women's relationships to land are not merely cultural but politically generative, challenging settler colonial geographies through place-making, caregiving, and rematriation. Similarly, Kermoal and Altamirano-Jiménez (2016) argue that Indigenous women's relationships to land constitute acts of governance and cultural endurance, reinforcing how resurgence must be understood through gendered and relational lenses. These analyses remind us that land is not simply territory, it is kin, teacher, and relative,

and Indigenous stewardship is a continuation of governance practices embedded in specific relationships to place.

For example, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, an Indigenous women-led land trust in California, demonstrates how women are actively reclaiming and rematriating land, connecting cultural survival to environmental stewardship and future generations. The emphasis on rematriation highlights the distinct ways Indigenous women approach land stewardship—not simply as environmental conservation but as cultural, spiritual, and communal revitalization. These real-world actions mirror the relational leadership which sustains many Indigenous communities, including the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) frameworks further reinforce the necessity of relational governance. Scholars such as Whyte (2018) assert that TEK is not merely a collection of environmental data but a relational governance system linking knowledge, land, and community responsibilities. Revitalization efforts rooted in TEK practices affirm Indigenous sovereignty as lived relationships, demonstrating that resurgence cannot be separated from everyday stewardship, ceremony, and kinship.

**Cultural Survival and Policy Contexts**

The documentary *Fish War* offers another critical lens into land-based leadership, capturing the struggle of Pacific Northwest tribes to protect treaty-protected fishing rights. Although centered around legal battles, the film illustrates how relational leadership rooted in kinship, land, and collective memory upheld cultural survival for future generations—lessons which continue to resonate today in ongoing tribal efforts toward land stewardship and

sovereignty. Yet despite these acts of resilience, Indigenous communities continue to contend with federal policies that shape and limit cultural survival, land access, and governance.

While cultural revitalization efforts are deeply rooted in relational, community-based leadership, they also unfold within a broader policy environment often shaped by colonial assumptions about land, education, and authority. Federal policies relating to land, education, and language have had lasting impacts on Indigenous cultural systems, often undermining the very relationships to land, kin, and knowledge that communities including the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe are working to sustain. Wilkins and Lomawaima (2001) detail how federal Indian policy has been marked by inconsistency and contradiction, where acknowledgments of sovereignty often coexisted with acts of suppression and dispossession. These policies, while periodically shifting in tone, frequently sought to fracture Indigenous governance systems and restrict Indigenous access to land and resources, disrupting the relational governance practices foundational to Indigenous ways of life.

**Education Policy and Language Repression**

Educational policies, particularly during the boarding school era, deliberately targeted language and cultural transmission, viewing Indigenous knowledge systems as obstacles to assimilation. The 1819 Civilization Fund Act and the 1891 Compulsory Attendance Law laid the groundwork for federal funding and enforcement of off-reservation boarding schools, including institutions such as Carlisle, Chilocco, and Cushman Indian School in Washington State, where Indigenous children were prohibited from speaking their languages, removed from their families, and subjected to harsh assimilation regimes. Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) argue that such education policies did not merely suppress language but attempted to sever intergenerational

cultural relationships which underpin Indigenous governance and identity. The long-term effects of these efforts continue to shape present-day struggles around language loss, intergenerational trauma, and disrupted cultural knowledge systems. Even contemporary policies aimed at supporting language revitalization, such as the Native American Languages Act of 1990 or federal immersion school funding under Title VI of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, often operate within frameworks shaped by settler worldviews and Western models of education (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014), failing to address the broader relational systems in which Indigenous languages are embedded. In response, many tribes have developed their own immersion schools and community-led curricula, yet these efforts must still navigate policy environments that prioritize standardization over cultural relevance.

**Limitations of Contemporary Policy Efforts**

Contemporary Indigenous policy reports further illustrate these challenges. The National Congress of American Indians (2010) emphasizes that while federal initiatives such as the Native American Languages Act represent important symbolic support, they often fall short of providing sustained funding or structural change necessary for genuine language revitalization. Similarly, the Indian Law Resource Center (2015) highlights that land reclamation policies frequently prioritize legalistic frameworks over Indigenous relational governance models which center kinship, cultural continuity, and youth engagement.

Recent federal efforts, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (2024) *10-Year National Plan on Native Language Revitalization*, though promising in tone, risk embedding Indigenous knowledge systems into settler institutional categories, limiting their relational and sovereign character. The plan outlines a national strategy built around four pillars: awareness, recognition

and support, integration, and normalization, intended to elevate Native languages across tribal and public life. Among its key recommendations are increased interagency coordination, new investments in educator training and youth programming, and public campaigns aimed at reshaping how Native languages are perceived in the broader cultural landscape. These goals reflect a growing federal recognition that language revitalization is not just a cultural issue but one of sovereignty, identity, and resilience. Yet, despite this shift in discourse, the plan remains tied to institutional models of success that emphasize formal curriculum, credentialing, and accountability frameworks. These models often rely on Western definitions of effectiveness and standardization, sidelining the community-rooted, ceremonial, and intergenerational practices through which Indigenous languages are most powerfully sustained. By centering measurable outcomes over lived relationships, even supportive policies risk distorting the very systems they aim to strengthen. While the plan marks progress in visibility and investment, truly sustaining Indigenous languages requires approaches led by communities themselves, ones that keep language embedded in land, kinship, and everyday life rather than policy frameworks alone.

**The Vulnerability of Tribal Sovereignty**

Ongoing political and legal battles over laws such as the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) (1978) reveal how even hard-won policy protections remain vulnerable to retrenchment. Challenges to ICWA not only threaten Indigenous custody over children but also function as broader assaults on Indigenous relational governance—the kinship systems, community ties, and land-based responsibilities that sustain cultural survival (Wilkins & Lomawaima, 2001). A prominent example is *Haaland v. Brackeen* (2023), a U.S. Supreme Court case brought by several states and non-Native adoptive families who argued that ICWA's placement preferences

violated the Equal Protection Clause and the Tenth Amendment. Although the Court upheld ICWA in a 7–2 decision, reaffirming Congress's constitutional authority to enact legislation concerning tribal nations, the case reflects ongoing legal strategies aimed at undermining tribal sovereignty by reshaping Indigenous family structures through settler legal frameworks. The fact that such a foundational law required defense at the highest court highlights the precarious nature of even the most established protections for Indigenous communities.

**Governance and Women's Leadership**

Policy efforts, even when framed as supportive, often reflect settler assumptions about governance, individualism, and authority, sidelining Indigenous relational responsibilities to land, kin, and future generations. While formal policy changes have created some new opportunities for cultural revitalization, they remain limited by frameworks which often prioritize institutional recognition – such as state-sanctioned programs, formal credentialing, or measurable compliance – over relational governance rooted in ceremony, kinship, and community accountability. Indigenous resurgence is a lived process, not primarily driven by external policy shifts, but often sustained through the everyday leadership of Indigenous women who uphold land-based ethics, cultural transmission, and community care. Their work moves beyond the boundaries of formal institutions, sustaining cultural life through relational responsibilities to land, language, youth, and community. This project centers these everyday practices, recognizing how true resurgence emerges not from external validation but from the continuity of Indigenous knowledge systems often carried forward through the leadership, labor, and love of Indigenous women.

By foregrounding relational governance and women's leadership, this project challenges the narrow definitions of sovereignty and revitalization often embedded within federal policy frameworks. It reaffirms that resurgence is not only a political project but a cultural, relational, and spiritual one, a continuity of obligations to land, ancestors, and future generations which federal recognition cannot define or contain.

**Language Revitalization**

Language revitalization has emerged as a vital site of Indigenous resurgence, yet it is not simply the restoration of words or grammar, it is the restoration of relationships. Hinton (2011) and Hermes, Bang, and Marin (2012) emphasize that community-led, intergenerational language learning is crucial for sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems. Language is not merely a vehicle for communication but a carrier of ceremony, land-based knowledge, governance, kinship, and spirituality. As sociolinguist James Gee (1996) explains, language is always embedded in what he calls “Discourses” with a capital D — socially and culturally situated ways of being that encompass identity, values, and practices. From this perspective, Indigenous languages are not only linguistic tools, but embodied forms of knowledge that shape how people relate to each other, to place, and to broader systems of meaning. This framing helps reinforce why language revitalization cannot be separated from the cultural, ceremonial, and relational contexts in which it is lived. Revitalization efforts succeed most powerfully when they re-embed language within these relational networks rather than treating it as a discrete academic subject.

McCarty and Nicholas (2014) critique formal schooling models which often frame Indigenous languages within Western educational paradigms, reducing them to curricular content to be measured and standardized. Even immersion programs, while offering critical spaces for

language learning, risk reproducing settler-colonial schooling structures if they are not rooted in relational and ceremonial practices. Jones and McIvor (2022) reinforce that the most successful language revitalization efforts are those which reconnect language to everyday family life, land-based activities, ceremonies, and collective responsibilities.

Within the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, women play a central role in sustaining language through various leadership positions, ceremonies, storytelling, parenting, and daily interactions, embedding language learning into their daily lives, rather than isolating it within institutional frameworks. Storytelling, song and dance becomes not only an act of cultural transmission but a pedagogical method rooted in relational ethics, teaching not only language proficiency but values, history, governance, and identity.

Efforts including the Pūnana Leo Hawaiian-language preschools offer a powerful model of early childhood immersion that is embedded within community life, emphasizing familial participation and land-based learning. However, even successful programs such as Pūnana Leo must continually navigate pressures from state accreditation systems, funding models, and standardized assessments which can unintentionally pull them away from fully relational Indigenous frameworks (Hinton, 2011). Similarly, initiatives such as the Lakota AI Code Camp demonstrate innovative efforts to integrate language revitalization with contemporary tools, particularly technology, ensuring that language not only survives but evolves alongside younger generations' lived realities.

True language revitalization, therefore, is not simply linguistic. It is cultural, relational, and spiritual. It requires reweaving the networks of responsibility and care that sustain Indigenous life. Language, land, and governance are inseparable; teaching a language without land-based knowledge, ceremonial practices, and relational governance risks hollowing out its

meaning. Revitalization efforts grounded in women's everyday leadership sustain the living systems through which language and culture continue to thrive across generations.

**Education and Youth Resilience**

Cultural revitalization is not simply about the survival of traditions; it is about the flourishing of future generations. Research consistently links strong cultural identity with positive youth development. Studies by McCarty and Nicholas (2014) and Hermes, Bang, and Marin (2012) emphasize that culturally grounded education supports emotional wellbeing, educational engagement, leadership development, and resilience among Indigenous youth. Youth who are embedded in strong cultural networks—where language, land, and kinship responsibilities are practiced daily—report higher self-esteem, stronger community ties, and greater commitment to cultural continuation.

Jones and McIvor (2022) further confirm that culturally sustaining pedagogies, particularly those led by Indigenous women and elders, provide essential scaffolding for youth navigating the complexities of living between Indigenous and settler-colonial worlds. Culturally grounded education is not just about learning language or history; it is about developing relational accountability to one's community, ancestors, and future descendants. Through these relationships, youth are not only recipients of cultural knowledge but are actively brought into roles of responsibility, stewardship, and future leadership.

Despite the proliferation of formal cultural education programs, research consistently shows that it is the everyday, relational practices – those rooted in family, land, and ceremony – that most powerfully sustain Indigenous youth identity and belonging. Kirmayer et al. (2011) and Riecken, Scott, and Tanaka (2006) find that youth develop deeper resilience, wellbeing, and

cultural confidence when engaged in community-based, culturally grounded activities that extend beyond institutional settings. Practices such as participating in ceremony, listening to stories from grandparents, seasonal food gathering, and learning traditional ecological knowledge are acts of belonging and responsibility (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 1994). These activities anchor young people in intergenerational relationships, place-based teachings, and cultural continuity in ways that formal schooling alone cannot replicate. In this context, culture is not transmitted through curriculum, but through lived experience, held in relationship, and sustained through daily life.

Within the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, the leadership of women in cultural revitalization plays a critical role in shaping youth identity. Women not only transmit language and ceremonial knowledge but model relational governance, showing youth how leadership is rooted not in authority but in responsibility, service, and kinship care. Youth resilience, in this context, is not just emotional or educational success; it is the ability to live relationally, uphold responsibilities to community and land, and envision Indigenous futures.

Moreover, cultural revitalization supports not only individual youth resilience but collective community resurgence. As Simpson (2017) emphasizes, Indigenous resurgence must be cultivated through relationships, ceremony, and everyday acts that nourish collective life. Youth are not simply inheritors of tradition; they are active participants in its renewal and reimagining. They embody the living continuities between past, present, and future, carrying forward the relational obligations which sustain Indigenous sovereignty and cultural vitality. In honoring the leadership of Indigenous women and the relational practices that embed youth within community life, this project recognizes how cultural revitalization is an intergenerational,

collective undertaking. It is not simply about preserving knowledge, it is about ensuring relational responsibilities continue to live and evolve across generations.

**Gaps in the Literature**

Despite the richness of existing literature on Indigenous resurgence, cultural revitalization, and relational governance, critical gaps persist. Much of the scholarship remains conceptual, policy-driven, or broadly regional, shaped by academic norms that prioritize scalability, generalization, and institutional outcomes. These approaches often fail to account for the community-specific, relational dynamics through which resurgence actually unfolds. Meaningfully engaging with this work requires time, trust, and accountability, conditions which are frequently at odds with the pressures of academic timelines and settler research frameworks. As a result, many studies focus on legal battles, high-profile policy reforms, or formal education initiatives, while overlooking the everyday cultural labor of Indigenous women who lead resurgence through land stewardship, language transmission, kinship, and care. Few studies, for example, explore how cultural knowledge is sustained through matrilineal governance, informal mentorship, or intergenerational storytelling in tribal contexts. Evaluations of revitalization efforts often rely on metrics including fluency rates or enrollment data, rarely capturing how cultural continuity is enacted through ceremony, family relationships, and place-based practices that sustain identity and belonging over generations.

**Situating the Study**

The literature also tends to isolate cultural revitalization from policy analysis, missing how Indigenous women's leadership both responds to and transforms the structural conditions

imposed by external governance. While policy reports acknowledge issues such as the underfunding of language programs or the vulnerability of land reclamation efforts, they rarely center the relational governance frameworks that many communities rely on regardless of formal recognition. Without tribally specific, relationally grounded research, policy and funding decisions risk being shaped by incomplete or distorted understandings of how resurgence truly takes place. This capstone responds to these limitations by offering a tribally specific, community-centered study of cultural resurgence as it is lived within the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. Drawing on interviews with tribal members and grounded in Indigenous research frameworks, this project centers the leadership of women whose work, though often invisible to institutions, is vital to sustaining cultural life across generations. Rather than treating revitalization as an abstract political ideal or a policy goal to be achieved, this research understands it as an ongoing, relational practice rooted in land, language, kinship, and accountability to both ancestors and future generations.

While existing scholarship provides a valuable foundation for understanding Indigenous resurgence, many studies remain focused on large-scale political movements, institutional reforms, or theoretical models, often at the expense of documenting the place-based, everyday efforts that sustain culture through kinship, care, and relational governance. In particular, the leadership of Indigenous women in land stewardship, language transmission, and cultural revitalization is frequently underrepresented. Their work is rarely captured through conventional metrics or program evaluations, yet it is through these relational practices that resurgence is enacted and made durable across generations. This project seeks to engage directly with that gap by offering a tribally specific portrait of revitalization as it unfolds in the daily life of a community, not just in classrooms or courtrooms, but in ceremony, parenting, storytelling, and

the seasonal rhythms of land-based knowledge. Within the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, these practices are not peripheral to policy, they are policy, grounded in responsibility to land and the seventh generation.

By focusing on the lived leadership of women in the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, this study not only documents cultural revitalization but also engages the ethics of relational research. Rather than treating interviewees as subjects, this work follows Indigenous research frameworks grounded in accountability, mutual respect, and community sovereignty over knowledge. Interviews were collaboratively designed and reviewed by the tribe, with each participant invited to shape their own narrative. What emerges is not a conventional case study, but a record of how culture is preserved and adapted through love, labor, and leadership. The following methodology section outlines how the study was shaped by the values and priorities of the community, from participant selection to interview design and interview response sharing. In doing so, it aims to honor both qualitative rigor and the deeper responsibilities of documenting Indigenous futures.

*Chapter Five*

# Methodology

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This research employed a qualitative, community-centered case study approach to explore cultural revitalization efforts within the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. The goal was to engage with cultural resurgence as it is actively lived, protected, and guided by community members, rather than as something to be studied from a distance. Grounded in Indigenous methodologies, the project prioritized relational accountability, community oversight, and context-specific listening. This approach draws on scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Margaret Kovach (2009), and Shawn Wilson (2008), who emphasize that knowledge is not a commodity to be extracted, but something generated through relationships—rooted in land, language, ceremony, and kin. This methodological stance aligns with decolonial scholarship that insists on specificity, reciprocity, and responsibility in the research process (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Simpson, 2011).

The case study format was chosen out of a commitment to contextual depth rather than convenience. It allowed for a close and respectful exploration of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's unique history, governance, and revitalization efforts. Rather than defining revitalization as a policy or programmatic outcome, the study approached it as a lived, intergenerational process guided by community-defined priorities. Every phase of the research—recruitment, interviews, analysis, and writing—was shaped by the understanding that knowledge shared is not a resource to extract, but a teaching to be protected. This framing helped shape the interview design, the way interviewees were approached, and the ethics of engagement throughout the project. The following sections detail how each part of the research process from recruitment and

positionality to analysis, was built around relationships, trust, and respect for community knowledge.

**Research Design and Philosophical Framework**

This study's qualitative case study design was selected in collaboration with the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe to honor the relational and place-based nature of cultural resurgence within their community. It was grounded in a relational epistemology, which is an understanding that knowledge emerges not from individual observation but from collective experience, historical continuity, and relationships to land, language, and community. Rather than using a method aimed at producing generalizable data, the case study format allowed for deep engagement with one community's lived experience, an approach that reflects the values of specificity, story, and sovereignty. Informed by the work of Indigenous scholars such as Wilson (2008), who centers relational accountability, and Smith (1999), who foregrounds Indigenous sovereignty and community-defined ethics, this research design was not merely an academic strategy but a philosophical alignment with non-extractive, reciprocal ways of knowing and being.

This methodology made space for the women to guide the direction of the project. It was designed not around extracting "data," but around being in relationship with knowledge holders, recognizing that teachings are carried through lived experiences, land, ceremony, and language. The framework reflects the belief that knowledge is something living, communal, and evolving. Interviewees were invited as co-creators, bringing their own timing, priorities, and presence to each conversation. They helped shape not only what was shared, but how it was shared, ensuring the process honored their voice, comfort, and cultural rhythm. While the project was created

primarily for the Port Gamble S'Klallam community and shaped by their priorities, it also speaks to broader audiences beyond the tribe. Educators, policymakers, and cultural workers invested in Indigenous self-determination may find this case instructive in how it models community-led research, relational accountability, and cultural governance. In that sense, the work is both deeply local and widely instructive.

This design also fostered methodological adaptability. It allowed for shifts in pacing, the rephrasing of questions, and the honoring of emotional and cultural cues as they emerged. When a participant needed more time to think, or when a topic evoked strong emotion, the structure allowed room to pause or pivot without pressure. This was not an incidental benefit of the method, it was essential to its ethical core. It affirmed that Indigenous knowledge cannot be constrained by rigid frameworks or artificial timelines. In this way, the case study design was also a methodological refusal: a refusal to universalize Indigenous experience, to collapse stories into themes which erase context, or to position academic interpretation above community voice. It was a refusal to perform research according to extractive logics where knowledge is mined, packaged, and circulated without reciprocal care. Methodological refusal, in this context, became a form of cultural protection and scholarly resistance: protection against misrepresentation, and resistance against the institutional pressures to simplify, decontextualize, or expedite findings for the sake of academic output.

While the university supported this project and posed no direct institutional barriers, the researcher remained attentive to the broader research culture in which graduate work is often situated. Many academic traditions, especially outside of community-based disciplines, continue to prioritize generalizability, efficiency, and standardized methods. This project intentionally aligned with a transformative worldview, one which values depth over breadth, relational

accountability over objectivity, and community relevance over universal application. Choosing to slow down, center participant agency, and honor cultural rhythm was not only a methodological choice but a political and ethical one. While meeting institutional requirements, the project refused to be shaped by extractive logics. Instead, it modeled how academic research can remain rigorous while being deeply rooted in care, reciprocity, and the priorities of the community it engages.

The research did not ask what knowledge the community could contribute to existing theories. Instead, it asked what role the research could play in standing beside that knowledge, centering it, protecting it, and learning from it on its own terms (as described through practices such as participant-led pacing, transcript review, and tribal oversight, detailed below). This orientation shaped every part of the research, from how interviewees were approached, to how interviews were conducted, to how findings were interpreted with care, humility, and responsibility. Ultimately, the case study framework offered more than a means of documentation, it became a structure for relational accountability. Its flexibility, specificity, and attention to context supported the project's goal of honoring knowledge not as content to be captured, but as a practice to be protected. The methodological design was not a neutral container; it was a reflection of the values the research aimed to uphold.

**Research Timeline and Relational Process**

The project began in Autumn 2024, with a literature review and initial conceptual framing developed in close alignment with the priorities of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. After an early meeting with the Tribal liaison, in hopes of building trust, and learning more about the community's context, the interview guide was designed based on that conversation and

tailored to reflect the values and themes that emerged. The liaison reviewed the questions to ensure cultural appropriateness, and they were then shared with other community members to determine whether they were interested in participating. Consultations with faculty mentors further refined the project's focus on women-led revitalization efforts. During Winter 2025, verbal consent protocols were created in accordance with community preferences – specifically, the women provided informed verbal consent rather than signing forms, reflecting respect for oral traditions and relational trust. Interviews were conducted throughout April and May 2025. Transcription, member-checking, and preliminary analysis also took place in May. Analysis and writing continued into Summer 2025, and final review and dissemination of findings occurred under tribal oversight, honoring the community's authority over how their stories and insights were represented.

The research relationship with the tribe began when the researcher, a non-Native graduate student, was connected to a community liaison through a personal friendship with a tribal member. This liaison, who was also interviewed as part of the study, helped initiate the project by introducing the researcher to other potential interviewees. While the study was independently conceptualized by the researcher, its focus on cultural revitalization and women-led leadership aligned closely and serendipitously with the community's ongoing efforts. The convergence of interests rooted in the researcher's own commitments and the tribe's active cultural work, formed the foundation for a respectful and relevant collaboration. From there, the researcher independently contacted all nine individuals referred and ultimately conducted four interviews, all with women. No formal meetings with tribal councils or governance representatives were required prior to interviews, however, the liaison provided essential guidance, cultural context, and expectations. Critically, the researcher committed to submitting all materials for tribal review

prior to any publication or presentation beyond the University of Washington Bothell. This agreement became a cornerstone of trust and ethical accountability throughout the project. Importantly, interviewees were never contacted through group messages or public announcements. Each invitation was extended individually and privately by the researcher, with clear assurances that participation was voluntary, confidential, and not reported back to the referring liaison. This approach was designed to minimize pressure and reinforce the autonomy of the womens' decisions to share their experiences.

Although nine individuals were invited to participate, four women ultimately agreed to be interviewed. This number reflects not a lack of interest, but the complex realities community members navigate every day: full schedules, caregiving responsibilities, and the emotional labor of speaking about colonization, cultural loss, and cultural resurgence. These dynamics were shared through informal conversations with the liaison and a trusted community member, and affirmed during the interviews themselves. That any time was offered at all was received with deep gratitude. The four women who chose to share their stories represented a powerful intergenerational range – one young adult, two midlife adults, and one elder – offering rich perspectives shaped by different life stages and roles within the community. Each conversation lasted over an hour and carried immense emotional and cultural weight. Within a relational methodology, this depth, rather than quantity, was the guiding measure and these four voices offered more than enough to sustain a meaningful, grounded case study.

The researcher hopes that this initial partnership will serve as the foundation for a longer-term relationship with the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. The primary goal of this first collaboration was to listen closely to community perspectives on cultural revitalization, particularly those of women whose leadership often goes unrecognized in formal policy

discourse, and to honor those insights through careful, respectful documentation. The interviews were central to this purpose: they provided space for interviewees to reflect on intergenerational knowledge, land-based practices, and the everyday work of cultural survival. It is the researcher's deep hope and intention that, if the community desires, this project might be expanded into future collaborative work that supports the tribe's self-determined goals. Whether through additional research, policy development, or other forms of support, the researcher remains committed to showing up in ways which honor the relationships built through this capstone and to being guided by the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's evolving priorities and needs.

**Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**

As a white, non-Native graduate student, the researcher acknowledges a position of both privilege and outsidership to the Port Gamble S'Klallam community. This identity brought with it an acute awareness of the power dynamics embedded in cross-cultural research and a deep responsibility to act in ways that are humble, ethical, and accountable. While the researcher has long been surrounded by Indigenous communities, growing up in Arizona among both tribal nations and ancestral Mexican Indigenous heritage, she does not claim to understand the lived experiences of the tribe. Instead, her approach has been one of careful listening, relationship-building, and deference to community-defined meanings and boundaries.

The researcher also recognizes that being affiliated with a university brings another layer of power and visibility. Even with the most respectful intentions, institutional backing can shape access and perception. Throughout this project, the researcher actively worked against the pressure to produce something extractive or overly packaged for academic consumption. Instead,

the focus remained on earning trust, flexibility, and continual consultation with those whose stories and perspectives were being shared.

This project is rooted in a commitment to cultural respect, justice, and long-term responsibility. Working in Washington State on lands shaped by different histories and governance structures, offered a profound expansion in learning. The diversity, strength, and sovereignty of Washington tribes deepened the researcher's understanding of Indigenous political and cultural resilience in ways that reshaped not only her academic work but her worldview.

This project has meant everything to the researcher. It is not only a capstone or academic obligation, it is a form of service, gratitude, and return. Listening to the stories, bearing witness to the teachings, and being trusted with knowledge that is sacred, painful, and hopeful has been transformative. It has grounded the researcher in ways that defy academic categories. Each interview held emotional weight, and each field note served as a form of witnessing: a way for the researcher to stay present, to reflect carefully, and to remain attentive to the responsibilities which came with being trusted with important community knowledge. The stakes were rooted in trust, in histories that are still felt, and in the duty to protect what was shared with care.

The researcher also remained in regular conversation with the tribal friend who first helped initiate this project, someone whose perspective offered clarity, cultural insight, and care throughout. These exchanges became an informal but invaluable sounding board for understanding the responsibilities embedded in this work. The researcher spoke openly about fears of misrepresentation, concerns about unintentionally centering herself, and the hope to earn trust with every step. These conversations were part of the work, not tangential, but central to how the project evolved.

Engaging with stories of colonization, cultural loss, and resilience required careful emotional and mental preparation. Grounding practices such as quiet reflection and breathwork were used before and after each interview, not as a form of self-protection, but to help the researcher arrive with steadiness, humility, and care. These practices supported the creation of a space where the women could feel safe, unhurried, and in control of their narratives. While the labor of listening cannot be compared to the lived experiences shared, the researcher felt it was essential to show up grounded and fully present. This was not merely a methodological choice, it was an ethical responsibility to ensure that stories were received with the care, attention, and reverence they deserve.

This experience has also led the researcher to reflect on the practice of allyship. She does not claim to be an expert, but rather someone who is learning to move with accountability, transparency, and humility. Allyship, in this context, has meant listening more than speaking, stepping back when needed, and respecting that some knowledge is not hers to carry forward. It has meant showing up without expecting recognition, and knowing that being entrusted with someone's story is not a right, but a deep responsibility.

The researcher frequently reflected on the responsibility of holding stories that were not hers to own. This meant regularly returning to the questions: Who does this knowledge serve? How can this project be accountable long after the writing ends? These reflections shaped the researcher's commitment to approach any future opportunities for publication or presentation with caution and care, and to ensure that community review and approval remain a central requirement before any form of external dissemination. They also shaped a long-term commitment to continuing the relationship with the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, should the community be open to it, and to finding future opportunities to support the tribe's goals through

expanded research, advocacy, or service. The project may end on paper, but the responsibilities it has created are enduring.

**Participant Recruitment and Community Collaboration**

Participant recruitment was conducted through purposive sampling, guided by tribal representatives and cultural practitioners who had direct knowledge of ongoing cultural revitalization efforts and the individuals most engaged in them. This was a matter of an intentional, values-driven approach grounded in community expertise and relational trust. The individuals ultimately interviewed—one young woman, two midlife women, and one elder woman – are recognized as cultural leaders actively involved in language revitalization, land stewardship, intergenerational education, and ceremonial life. Their selection reflected their relational standing within the community as knowledge holders and teachers. At the same time, the study acknowledges that some voices remain absent, particularly those of youth themselves, male leaders, or individuals whose work may be deeply rooted in cultural practice but less publicly visible. These absences are not oversights, but a reflection of timing, capacity, and the emotional labor involved in sharing. Their stories matter too, and any future work would ideally create additional space for their perspectives, if and when they wish to share.

Rather than relying on random selection or broad recruitment calls, the sampling approach was rooted in purposeful, relationship-based engagement. After initial introductions were made by a trusted liaison, the researcher followed up personally with each potential participant. Invitations were extended individually and with full transparency about the project's aims, methods, and ethical commitments. This approach helped reinforce that participation was not an obligation or expectation, but a voluntary act of leadership and generosity. Each

individual's decision to participate was treated with deep respect as a contribution to the community's collective story, not merely consent to be studied. The result was a sample defined not by demographic quotas, but by relational significance and thematic richness.

**Interview Guide and Question Design**

The interview process was guided by a structured yet flexible script designed to support a relational and respectful space for dialogue. Prior to each interview, interviewees were presented with a detailed verbal introduction outlining the purpose of the project, the voluntary nature of participation, consent and anonymity protections, and the process for community review of all materials. The women were informed that interviews would be audio-recorded, with consent, for accuracy, and all recordings would be deleted after transcription and participant review. Fieldnotes were taken by hand and, along with the transcripts, will be destroyed upon project completion.

The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions shaped around five thematic domains: cultural preservation, women's leadership, language reclamation, land connection, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Themes emerged from early conversations with the community liaison, whose insights helped shape the project's priorities, as well as ongoing dialogue with faculty mentors. After a first meeting with the liaison, where the researcher listened and learned about the community's cultural work and values, an initial interview guide was drafted. This guide was then reviewed by the liaison and shared with other potential interviewees to ensure cultural appropriateness and resonance. The goal was to reflect themes which were already alive in the community while making space for interviewees to steer the conversation toward what mattered most to them. The questions were designed to elicit

storytelling, reflection, and teaching, encouraging interviewees to share in ways that felt meaningful and grounded in their own experiences. For example, the women were asked questions such as:

A) “What does cultural preservation mean to you personally?”

B) “In what ways have women shaped or led efforts around cultural preservation, language, or land?”

C) “How is cultural knowledge passed across generations within the Tribe?”

Follow-up questions were adapted depending on each participant’s generational perspective. For elders, questions emphasized intergenerational teaching and community change over time. For midlife adults, questions focused on parenting, leadership, and cultural continuity. For younger adults, prompts explored personal experiences of connecting with culture and future hopes. This age-sensitive structure honored the diversity of perspectives across generations while maintaining a consistent framework for thematic analysis. The script and questions were reviewed and revised prior to interview response collection, in consultation with faculty advisors and with cultural sensitivity in mind. The language avoided academic jargon and instead prioritized warmth, clarity, and accessibility. The interview script also emphasized that interviewees could skip any question or redirect the conversation as needed, reinforcing their full agency and comfort throughout the process.

This structured yet open-ended approach reflects Indigenous methodological principles: the women were not treated as passive subjects but as knowledge holders and teachers. The interviews functioned as relational exchanges, co-constructed through trust and mutual respect rather than one-way extraction. As such, the interview guide was not merely a collection tool, it

was a cultural bridge that upheld the integrity of both the research and the community's knowledge systems (See Appendix A).

**Collection Procedures**

Interviews served as the primary mode of collection, chosen for their alignment with narrative depth, relational engagement, and cultural respect. This approach supported the project's commitment to creating space for the women to speak on their own terms, share teachings in the way they wished, and guide the pace and rhythm of each conversation. One-on-one interviews were prioritized over group formats or surveys, as they provided a sense of privacy and care that was especially important given the emotional weight of the topics discussed. Four interviews were conducted in total. Three took place via Zoom and one in person at the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribal Headquarters, where the researcher was invited to conduct the interview by a community member. This invitation reflected the trust that had been cultivated throughout the process and the mutual respect between researcher and interviewees. Zoom was used with participant consent and offered flexibility which respected schedules and availability. Despite being virtual, the interviews remained grounded in mutual trust and maintained the depth of connection necessary for the subject matter. Interviewees selected the timing and format which worked best for them. Conversations lasted over an hour, and the women were informed at each stage that they could pause, skip questions, or reschedule at any time.

During each interview, the researcher took handwritten fieldnotes. These notes captured key moments, relational cues, emotional tone, and points of connection that might not be apparent in transcripts alone. Note-taking was balanced with active listening and allowed the researcher to track insights and relational dynamics as they unfolded. After each session, these

notes were expanded into fuller reflections to preserve the energy and contextual elements of the conversation. Fieldnotes later supported the analytic process by helping reconnect the researcher to the relational environments in which knowledge was shared.

All interviews were audio-recorded with verbal consent and transcribed using Descript, a secure platform with built-in encryption and speaker-labeling features. Descript enabled the researcher to review tone, cadence, and emphasis during transcription, ensuring the subtleties of participant voice were preserved. The four women were provided with their transcripts for review and invited to make any additions, edits, or clarifications. They had full agency to change or withhold any part of their contributions, and several women exercised this agency by refining their language or adding clarifying remarks.

During transcription, identifying details such as names, locations, affiliations, or unique accomplishments, were redacted or carefully generalized in consultation with the women to preserve anonymity. This included removing specific titles, program names, or references that could reasonably be traced back to an individual, particularly within a small and close-knit community. For example, when interviewees spoke about major personal or community milestones, these were collaboratively reframed to preserve their significance without exposing individual identity. Anonymity considerations also influenced quote selection for the findings. The researcher prioritized excerpts that conveyed thematic insight without including details which could inadvertently identify a speaker, especially for interviewees who hold public or leadership roles in their community. Particular attention was given to narrative cadence, tone, and distinct phrasing which might make a voice recognizable. The researcher avoided long or emotionally unique excerpts unless the interviewee gave explicit permission to include them.

In Indigenous research contexts, anonymity carries layered significance. Beyond the expectations of academic ethics, it reflects a deeper responsibility to protect stories from misrepresentation, appropriation, and potential misuse. Knowledge shared in trust, particularly when connected to land, spirituality, or cultural leadership, is not simply private; it is communal and often sacred. In many cases, the stories shared were not only personal reflections but expressions of collective memory and intergenerational responsibility. Protecting that knowledge from exposure, misinterpretation, or surveillance is essential.

There are also real-world risks associated with being publicly identified in research. Historically, Indigenous communities have been subject to surveillance, federal scrutiny, and punitive policies when information, especially related to sovereignty, environmental protection, or internal governance, was misused by outsiders. Public identification can also expose individuals to intra-community tensions if their words are perceived as representing collective stances. Even when research is conducted with care, knowledge taken out of context can be misunderstood, repackaged, or weaponized. Anonymity is therefore a protective measure rooted in community safety, cultural integrity, and political sovereignty.

The researcher recognized that confidentiality was not merely a procedural concern, it was a political and cultural imperative. Anonymity shaped not only transcription practices, but also the broader storytelling structure of the findings. Quotations were selected and framed in ways that prioritized community safety, narrative integrity, and cultural responsibility. When especially sensitive insights were shared, the researcher relied on both participant guidance and reflective judgment to decide whether and how to include them. In some cases, interviewees chose to remove powerful stories to ensure they would not be misinterpreted, and the researcher honored those decisions fully.

Once the member-checking process was completed and transcripts were approved, all audio files and digital transcripts were permanently deleted. At the conclusion of the project, all direct quotes will also be removed from the researcher's archive, and handwritten notes will be securely shredded in accordance with the ethical commitments made to the tribe. These measures reflect a long-term obligation to care for knowledge responsibly and to ensure the trust extended to the researcher remains intact far beyond the project's conclusion.

**Use of Fieldnotes and Reflexive Journaling**

Fieldnotes were essential for capturing the relational and emotional contexts that surrounded each interview. They served as a relational log, documenting how each conversation unfolded and how it was shaped by space, mood, and timing. Rather than focusing solely on the content of what was said, the researcher used fieldnotes to track recurring themes, emotional tone, and shifts in focus across interviews. These notes helped identify key moments where stories echoed or diverged, and they captured elements that would not necessarily be apparent from transcripts alone, such as which topics prompted long pauses, quiet laughter, or emotional hesitation. Fieldnotes also served as a record of the relational pacing and tone of each exchange, preserving the energy and cadence of conversations in ways which helped guide the analytic process with greater care and contextual grounding.

The researcher also maintained a reflexive journal throughout the project. Entries often served as emotional and ethical checkpoints. One early entry captured the anxiety and gratitude before the first interview: "I'm being invited into someone else’s sacred space, not just physically, but spiritually. I need to tread lightly and respectfully… and listen deeply." Another entry, written after a conversation about land loss and recovery, read: "I’m shaken. How do I

write about this without making it sound like a story with a beginning, middle, and end? It's not. It's ongoing, all of the time." The journal was a space to explore moments of doubt, realization, and transformation. It tracked the researcher's learning process, not only about the community, but about their own responsibilities as a listener, writer, and future policymaker. Questions such as "Am I upholding the trust and information I was given today?" or "Is my analysis honoring the weight of what was shared?" were central to this process. The interplay between fieldnotes and journal entries supported the project's broader goals: to stay grounded, to remain relational, and to be continuously accountable. Together, they offered a parallel narrative to the formal data, a narrative about becoming, about listening, and about the quiet work of building trust one conversation at a time.

**Analysis**

Interviews were analyzed using relational thematic analysis, a process chosen for its flexibility and its alignment with the project's core commitments: relationships, context, and participant sovereignty. Thematic analysis here was a tool for the process of listening deeply, repeatedly, and relationally to teachings shared across generations. Each transcript was read several times before any codes were applied. During these initial readings, the goal was to absorb the fullness of each participant's story as a whole, allowing the pacing, emotion, and internal logic of their words to settle into memory. Only after this immersion were color-coded note cards introduced to help mark themes and resonances. This approach draws from the work of Wilson (2008), Kovach (2009), and Chilisa (2012), who emphasize that Indigenous research must be rooted in relational accountability, respect for storytelling as knowledge, and community-defined

meaning-making. The aim was to remain in relationship with the stories as teachings, honoring what was shared with care, responsibility, and humility.

Initial codes were grounded in the five guiding themes of the project: cultural preservation, women's leadership, language reclamation, land connection, and intergenerational knowledge. However, the analysis remained open to emergent teachings that extended across or beyond these areas. For instance, the theme of grief—grief for lost language, for elders who had passed, for traditions interrupted by colonialism—emerged unprompted in every interview. Similarly, joy and ceremony surfaced not as separate themes but as relational counterweights to grief, reminders of how resurgence holds complexity rather than resolution.

Analytic memos were maintained throughout the process, capturing thematic developments, emotional and spiritual insights, and questions that arose while reviewing fieldnotes or listening again to voice recordings. The memos were not just for tracking ideas, they were where the researcher engaged in conversation with the interview responses. Sometimes, memos included entries such as: "Why does this phrase about land feel so familiar?" or "This echoes what Interviewee One said, but through a different generation's lens."

A central practice in the analysis was tracing how themes emerged through points of intersection, where distinct experiences and generational perspectives converged around shared teachings, values, or memories. The emphasis was on honoring how these stories related to one another while still preserving each participant's individual voice, shaped by their own relationships, roles, and timelines. Intergenerational continuity was recognized without blending or flattening the unique insights each person offered. The four women were invited to review a curated list of quotes and early interpretations. This step extended the collaborative spirit of the project into the analysis phase, reinforcing that interviewees retained full agency over how their

words were represented. Several chose to revise, expand, or clarify their contributions, adding new layers of meaning that deepened the study's insight. When interpretations differed, the participant's perspective guided the final framing. This ensured the research process remained grounded in respect, reciprocity, and participant sovereignty.

Fieldnotes were used to revisit the settings, body language, and emotional tones of each conversation. These notes often confirmed that what was left unsaid in a transcript, carried just as much meaning as what was spoken, while also serving as a layered form of communication. When cross-referenced with analytic memos, they helped ensure the analysis stayed as close as possible to the way knowledge was lived and shared.

Descript was selected as the transcription tool for its ease of use, built-in security features, and its ability to preserve speech patterns and conversational tone. The platform also made it easy to distinguish between multiple speakers, label women clearly, and organize transcripts in a way that supported relational and thematic analysis. The researcher found its editing capabilities particularly helpful for revisiting specific moments and phrases multiple times. This allowed for more accurate memoing, closer attention to emotional nuance, and greater care in preserving the integrity of interviewees' voices throughout the review process. Finally, multiple forms of verification, triangulation, were used to support the integrity of findings. The convergence of transcripts, fieldnotes, participant feedback, and analytic memos helped build a composite picture of each theme. This approach did not seek to universalize experiences but to reflect the richness and variation within them. The goal was not to distill, but to honor: to hold complexity, contradiction, and relational depth within a frame of trust and ongoing accountability.

The analysis process prioritized presence and care over definitive conclusions. Each step, from reading transcripts to writing memos, was approached as an extension of the ethical relationship between researcher and participant. Rather than offering final truths, the goal was to reflect a constellation of insights shaped through care, attentiveness, and shared meaning-making. This process was not linear or rigid, but iterative and intuitive. Some insights emerged gradually, returning again in different forms across interviews and journal entries. Others came sharply, in moments of recognition sparked by emotional tone or silence. Rather than reducing these moments to static codes, the researcher worked to preserve their complexity and relational depth. In this way, analysis became a practice of honoring the rich knowledge that had been shared.

**Ethics and Interview Response Security**

This project received IRB approval through the University of Washington but was guided more significantly by Indigenous research ethics. Consent was verbal rather than written, to respect cultural preferences and minimize institutional barriers. The four women were informed of their rights throughout the process, including the ability to withdraw, revise, or restrict how their words were used.

Interview response security was prioritized. Audio files were stored on an encrypted flash drive, which the researcher carried with them at all times to prevent unauthorized access. Transcripts were kept on a password-protected computer and deleted after participant review. No files were uploaded to cloud storage. Handwritten fieldnotes and journal entries were stored securely and will be shredded after project completion. No personally identifying information was shared at any stage of the research, including peer reviews or class-based check-ins.

Triangulation was achieved through the combined use of interview transcripts, analytic memos, participant feedback, and fieldnotes. These methods ensured a layered understanding of participant contributions while safeguarding the integrity of each story. The researcher also kept an audit trail of analytic decisions in handwritten memos and digital reflections, reinforcing the trustworthiness of interpretation. While participant voices were centered, the researcher regularly met with a capstone advisor to reflect on findings, question assumptions, and ensure the research maintained coherence with ethical and methodological expectations.

Community oversight was continuous. The researcher was in regular communication with the tribal liaison and committed to submitting all drafts of findings, including the final capstone and a separate deliverable summary, to the tribe before any external presentation or publication. Interviewees will also receive copies of the final project and will be invited to provide final edits or request removal of any content they no longer wish to share. These post-project commitments are not symbolic, they are active and central to the ethos of this work. As of this writing, the final reflection and gratitude report are being prepared as a closing gesture of thanks and reciprocity.

**Limitations and Strengths**

This project was intentionally designed around depth rather than breadth, prioritizing a small number of interviews in order to build meaningful relationships and allow space for detailed, co-created narratives. The resulting limitation in sample size is acknowledged, but also defended, as necessary for the ethical and relational integrity of the research. The four women, though few, represent a range of generational perspectives and leadership roles that brought layered, complementary insights into the story of cultural resurgence. While traditional saturation

was not the goal of this study, the four interviews yielded extensive, thematically rich narratives which allowed for meaningful comparison and thematic coherence across generations.

One of the most significant limitations is the absence of direct youth voices. This decision was made deliberately and in alignment with community guidance, in recognition of the unique ethical considerations surrounding youth participation. While this choice may restrict direct insight into how youth themselves articulate their experiences, their presence is still deeply felt through the reflections of the women who nurture, teach, and lead them. In many ways, youth are centered in this work not through direct interviews, but through the intentions of those who speak on their behalf and in their protection.

Another limitation lies in the inherent tensions between academic timelines and relational processes. The pace of this project was set not by deadlines, but by participant availability, cultural rhythms, and the emotional weight of the stories shared. As a result, not every conversation unfolded on a predictable timeline. Some interviewees needed more time to review transcripts or revisit their thoughts. Others shared material which ultimately could not be included due to its sensitivity. These relational slowdowns were not barriers, they were necessary pauses in a process rooted in respect. Balancing academic expectations with the ethical demands of community accountability also presented tensions. The need to meet university deadlines occasionally conflicted with the slower, more cyclical pace of relationship-based work. In these moments, the researcher deferred to community needs, even if it meant delaying analysis or revising writing schedules.

Positionality is another unavoidable limitation. As a non-Native researcher entering an Indigenous space, there is no amount of reflection or humility that can fully erase the asymmetries of power and perspective. What was shared with the researcher was shared with

trust, but that trust does not confer expertise. Interpretation remains partial, and accountability extends far beyond this written document. The researcher's role is not to speak for, but to reflect carefully what was offered and to carry forward the responsibility of doing so with respect. While limitations of perspective are acknowledged, the researcher's learning process, shaped by trust, correction, and humility, also became a strength, guiding the project with deepened awareness and long-term ethical commitments.

A central strength of this capstone lies in its place-based design, grounded specifically in the experiences and perspectives of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. This approach does not aim to produce generalized claims or speak across Indigenous contexts. It remains focused on the distinct cultural, political, and historical conditions shaping one community's efforts to revitalize and protect what has long been threatened. By staying close to this context, the research gains clarity, not in universality, but in depth, precision, and relevance to the community who shaped it.

Finally, the project's strongest ethical commitment to protect sacred, sensitive, or communal knowledge, also shapes what can be shared in public-facing work. Some of the most powerful moments in the interviews are absent from the final findings, not because they were unimportant, but because they were not meant for an academic audience. The omission of these teachings is not a gap; it is an act of care. The project's strength, therefore, lies not in what it reveals, but in what it chooses to protect. In sum, the limitations of this project are entangled with its most important strengths. Its small scale allows for intimacy. Its specificity allows for depth. Its ethical constraints allow for trust. Lastly, its relational framework, while complex and sometimes slow, is what made the work possible in the first place.

The methodology, in its entirety, was a living commitment to care, trust, and humility. It shaped every layer of this research, not only in process, but in purpose. This approach was not a constraint, but a strength: it made space for depth over breadth, story over summary, and trust over extractive precision. The ethical relationships built throughout the project offered more than a framework for doing research, they became the lens through which knowledge was interpreted, and the boundary that determined what could and could not be shared.

One of the most significant strengths of this methodology was its capacity to generate relational knowledge which honored the fullness of interviewees' teachings. Because the four women were engaged as co-creators rather than subjects, conversations yielded stories layered with reflection, emotion, and intergenerational wisdom. These narratives were shared as acts of teaching, remembrance, and vision. The insights that emerged were embedded in lived experience and tied to place, ceremony, and kinship systems, not abstracted into distant categories.

The small number of women further enabled this depth. It created room for conversations to unfold slowly and organically, without the pressure of fixed timelines or standardized outcomes. It allowed for multiple rounds of review, space for interviewees to shape how their words would be included, and flexibility in how stories were honored and protected. This intimacy helped foster trust, which in turn allowed the women to speak with clarity, emotion, and purpose. As a result, the findings reflect not just themes, but relationships between people, across generations, and with the land.

A core strength of this work also lies in its refusal to separate ethics from method. The collaborative and iterative nature of the project from early consultation to final transcript approval, meant that interpretation was always checked against community priorities and

relational accountability. The project did not rely on extraction and then repair; it was designed to avoid harm in the first place. That preventative care is what makes the findings trustworthy. Finally, this methodology allowed for the honoring of knowledge not meant to be shared. It created the conditions in which stories could be told and protected at the same time. The women decided what stayed in, what came out, and how meaning was framed. That level of agency and control is often missing from research involving Indigenous communities. In this case, it was foundational.

The findings that follow are not separate from this approach; they are rooted in it. They represent a culmination of care, listening, and co-creation, an offering shaped through long conversations, shared silences, laughter, and trust. Rather than claiming objectivity, what comes next reflects the relationships that made this work possible, and the collective wisdom entrusted to the project through those who chose to speak.

*Chapter Six*

# Findings and Analysis: Cultural Systems in Motion

The voices gathered here belong to four women of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe who are keepers of culture, bearers of wisdom, and architects of survival. Spanning generations, their perspectives flow through the currents of leadership, knowledge, and lived experience, weaving a tapestry of cultural renewal which refuses erasure. Their identities remain protected not as a limitation, but as a shield, because their words carry power which transcends labels or roles. These conversations embody resistance, ancestral knowledge, and living teachings. This chapter does not separate their voices into neat categories or titles because their strength lies in collective harmony as much as individual insight. To diminish their stories by over-identifying would risk breaking the trust safeguarding this trusted exchange. Instead, what emerges here is a constellation of understandings originating from a specific community – bearing witness to ongoing resistance, continuity, and the persistent, often quiet labor of cultural resurgence.

Readers are invited to step into this living dialogue with open minds and attentive hearts, to receive these women's wisdom without the need to box it in. Their words pulse with the weight of history, the urgency of the present, and the hope which fuels the work of rebuilding and remembering. This is knowledge alive – rooted in deep place, hard-won survival, and the unyielding strength of community.

**Culture: A Living Web of Connection and Care**

When asked what culture means to them, women from the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe described it as far more than just customs or ceremonies. It is the living fabric of relationships, values, and responsibilities which shape daily life and communal identity. They spoke of culture flowing through how people treat one another, how knowledge passes across generations, and how the past, present, and future are intertwined in shared stories, language, and practice. For them, culture is a dynamic, evolving force rooted in ancestral teachings but responsive to today's realities – governing social interactions, political authority, spiritual connection, and stewardship of the land. It is inseparable from survival, sovereignty, and a vision for the future, where care, belonging, and resilience are woven into every act and encounter.

Many described culture as a living, intricate ethic deeply woven into everyday life. One elder said, "Culture is a complex word… it's the way we behave amongst one another and the way we interact and treat each other." This expansive understanding moves beyond ceremony or heritage to see culture as an ongoing relational practice, manifested in shared meals, morning greetings, storytelling in classrooms, and the steady presence of elders and peers modeling what belonging and responsibility truly mean. For many, culture is adaptive and dynamic, carried forward through embodied practices sustained by collective accountability and love.

The resilience of this culture must be understood within a context of systemic attempts to erase it. Federal policies such as the Indian Act, the banning of ceremonies, and the implementation of boarding schools worked in concert to disrupt the transmission of language, ceremony, governance, and spiritual life. The criminalization of ceremony targeted Indigenous systems of kinship and political power, attempting to replace them with settler constructs based on private property and nuclear family structures. One woman recalled, "They buried the

ceremonies. But they didn't forget. They just did them in private, in their living rooms," illustrating how cultural practice was forced underground as a form of resistance. This clandestine continuation was a strategic act of survivance, asserting life and identity in the face of erasure (Simpson, 2014). Despite ongoing surveillance and threat of legal punishment, the Port Gamble S'Klallam people maintained cultural continuity, carrying forth knowledge and relational governance, resisting settler colonial imposition.

The scars of this history are fresh and vivid in collective memory. Elders remembered that "We did have ceremonies, but we had to keep them secret. You'd go to jail for them." One added, "You couldn't even do potlucks anymore—it was illegal." These accounts confirm how cultural suppression is not distant history but a living trauma shaping present realities. Many community members described the emotional and intergenerational work of reclaiming and relearning lost cultural teachings: "I used to carry guilt, but now I don't… because I know I'm pushing things forward for my daughter." The woman reflected, "What I can do is encourage my daughter to go to those language classes." This ongoing emotional labor illustrates the intertwined processes of healing and revitalization which sustain the community's future.

Culture's presence today emerges both through grand ceremonial events or in the quiet dignity of everyday gestures. "Sometimes we honor people quietly. A lunch. A blanket. A song," shared one cultural leader. She described, "My mom is doing an honoring ceremony today… wrapping them in blankets, hosting a mini lunch, and having the canoe family sing." These modest yet profound acts constitute vital cultural infrastructure. They reaffirm relationships, communal values, and shared history, and exemplify what can be understood as cultural policy in practice – a web of embodied actions governing social relations and identity beyond formal

institutions. Culture in the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe is an ongoing, lived assertion of Indigenous presence and vitality.

Governance itself is infused with cultural protocols and values. One interviewee explained, "We start our tribal government meetings with a prayer or a song… That's culture. It sets the tone that we can disagree and still honor." The elder leader recalled a special memory, "An elder walked in… and hugged every elected official. That love… that acknowledgment… that's culture." Gestures of this kind disrupt hierarchical bureaucratic norms, re-centering governance around relational accountability, care, and kinship ties. Such governance aligns with Indigenous theories emphasizing reciprocity and collective responsibility as foundational political principles (Corntassel, 2012). Culture, in this context, functions as ethical infrastructure guiding the community's decision-making and political life.

Women and elders are often central stewards of cultural care and transmission. "She raised everybody's kids. People went to her if they were hungry," one cultural leader said, illustrating a system of shared caregiving which transcends the nuclear family. Another highlighted, "A lot of the old teachings were passed down by aunties and grandmas. That's how we kept going." Various narratives reveal a powerful network of cultural leadership rooted in everyday nurture and relational teaching. Youth are also active participants in this ongoing process. This intergenerational pedagogy represents a reclamation and renewal of cultural life. All women described a reversal of colonial disruptions, noting, "You see a kid teaching their parents a song… and you know it's working," which attests to the vitality of living culture.

Youth engagement in cultural revitalization inspires profound pride across the Port Gamble S'Klallam community, marking a powerful reclamation of language, tradition, and identity. As one young woman enthusiastically shared, "The kids are singing in the language.

They're doing traditional dances. That didn't happen before." This statement reflects more than the presence of youthful participation, it signals a dynamic resurgence of cultural transmission that was once severely disrupted by colonial policies such as the boarding school era, which aimed to erase Indigenous languages and customs. The revival of language and dance among youth not only counters historical attempts at cultural erasure but also actively reconstructs a living cultural fabric. Another mid-life age woman emphasized how these revitalized practices extend beyond formal spaces, noting, "They go back home and they share with their families," emphasizing how culture is not confined to institutional or ceremonial contexts but permeates daily life and kinship networks. This intergenerational flow situates culture as a relational, lived experience, embedded in the very fabric of family and community life. The informal transmission of language and tradition within homes is vital for sustaining cultural identity, reinforcing resilience, and fostering a sense of belonging among younger generations.

Humor emerges as a vital thread which binds community members across generations, functioning as a mechanism of social cohesion and emotional resilience. One elder woman reflected, "Humor is a big part of our culture… the ability to tease and play," highlighting the role of playful interaction in sustaining relational ties and cultural vitality. They noted, "It's how we stay close," pointing to humor's capacity to bridge emotional divides and foster intimacy, even amidst hardship. This interplay of humor with grief and joy echoes Indigenous conceptualizations of emotional complexity, wherein laughter and sorrow coexist as integral elements of communal life and healing. Humor, therefore, is not merely entertainment but a cultural strategy for navigating pain, conflict, and loss, allowing the community to carry its collective burdens while maintaining connection and solidarity. It serves as a soft space where

vulnerability is managed and relationships are nurtured, reinforcing a shared cultural ethos of mutual care.

The distribution of responsibilities across age groups reflects a deeply embedded cultural pedagogy which honors experience and promotes continuity. “Each age group has responsibilities,” a knowledge holder explained, framing cultural participation as a generational covenant rather than individual obligation. This system of distributed mentorship ensures elders and more experienced community members actively guide and support youth, transmitting knowledge and values in a manner consistent with Indigenous models of communal governance and education (Battiste, 2002). The mentorship is not hierarchical in a Western sense but relational and reciprocal, recognizing the interconnectedness of all ages within the social body. One woman leader further emphasized the empowerment of youth, stating, “Even the little ones get to lead a song. That’s their responsibility.” Early inclusion nurtures confidence, agency, and belonging, countering the historical colonial narratives which marginalized Indigenous children and silenced their voices (Duran, 2006). By entrusting children with roles of cultural leadership, the community cultivates a vibrant, living tradition which affirms identity and procures resilience from an early age.

Culture functions as a profound healing force within the community, resisting narratives that position Indigenous traditions as relics of the past. “We’re not reviving something dead. It was always there. We’re just giving it room to breathe again,” expressed one cultural leader, articulating a vital epistemological stance framing cultural continuity as ongoing and dynamic rather than restorationist. This perspective aligns with Indigenous frameworks that view culture as a living organism – responsive, evolving, and deeply intertwined with health and wellbeing. The ethic of shared care permeates this worldview, encapsulated in the sentiment, “You don’t just

raise your own kids, you help raise everybody's. That's village life." The collective approach to caregiving embodies relational accountability and mutual responsibility. Such communal nurturing is not only a social imperative but also a political act of resistance and sovereignty, affirming Indigenous self-determination through intergenerational solidarity and cultural stewardship. It provides the bedrock upon which governance, education, and identity are constructed and sustained, challenging colonial legacies of fragmentation and displacement.

Artistic expression within the Port Gamble S'Klallam community is not only a profound cultural practice but also a politically charged form of resistance and identity assertion. As one woman shared, "I'm a bead artist… and I do other things too, but primarily bead work," highlighting the centrality of traditional crafts in embodying and transmitting cultural knowledge. Beadwork, weaving, carving, and other art forms serve as living archives of memory and intention, embedding stories, histories, and relational values within their intricate patterns and materials. This same individual noted, "They ask tribal artists to contribute work toward tenure awards… I've been looking to contribute myself," indicating the recognition and valorization of Indigenous art within formal institutional settings, and the aspiration among artists to elevate their cultural labor within academic and professional spheres.

Artistic labor operates as both pedagogy and political assertion. It teaches younger generations the skills, symbols, and stories essential to cultural continuity, while simultaneously challenging dominant narratives that have historically marginalized Indigenous aesthetics. One woman explained, "There is a value system placed on the pieces… the longer you're here, the more valued the art is," showcasing how artistic creation is intertwined with community tenure and trust. This value system resists commodification by affirming art as relational and reciprocal, a living dialogue between artist, community, and ancestors. The circulation of art through trade,

gifting, and ceremonial exchange further embeds it within complex social networks that reinforce kinship and sovereignty. Historically, Coast Salish art and craft traditions have been integral to intertribal trade and alliance-building, extending cultural influence across the region and curating resilience through exchange.

Institutional policies within the tribe have begun to formalize support for these cultural expressions, embedding revitalization into everyday governance and labor practices. “We now have a cultural leave policy, 40 hours a year for cultural activities,” noted one interviewee, marking a concrete step toward recognizing culture as an essential component of wellbeing and professional life. She explained, “We are provided the opportunity to step outside of our roles for periods of time to do cultural activities,” reflecting a workplace ethos which honors cultural obligations as integral, not peripheral. The leader further emphasized inclusivity in this approach: “My staff are non-tribal, but I encourage them to get involved in everything. They know who they’re working for.” Such policies embody a form of structural respect which goes beyond individual accommodation to the institutional embedding of cultural life, ensuring cultural governance is intertwined with administrative practice. This integration signals a reclamation of sovereignty in all domains of life, resisting colonial compartmentalization of culture and labor.

Food sovereignty stands as another foundational pillar of cultural vitality and political resistance. “Our food practices have always been strong – clam bakes, smoking fish, traditional cooking,” shared one mid-life age woman, invoking a deep connection to traditional ecological knowledge and stewardship which sustains not only physical nourishment but also spiritual and cultural wellbeing. The protection and transmission of traditional foodways represent acts of resilience against centuries of settler colonial disruption, environmental degradation, and legal repression. The emotional weight of this struggle was starkly illustrated when one woman

recounted, “The FBI came into my *[redacted]* house and took her freezer because she had deer meat. She was willing to go to court and fight for that. That was food sovereignty.” This story exemplifies the endless immense risks Indigenous peoples have faced in maintaining their subsistence practices, facing criminalization even within their own territories, and highlights food sovereignty as an assertion of both cultural identity and legal-political rights.

Food sovereignty, in this context, is not merely about access to traditional foods but embodies a holistic relationship with land, water, and community which sustains Indigenous lifeways. Traditional food systems carry embedded ecological knowledge and are crucial forms of resistance to settler colonial power. In the Port Gamble S’Klallam community, food practices are acts of relational governance, nurturing reciprocal relationships with the environment and with one another, anchoring sovereignty in the stewardship of natural resources and the transmission of cultural values. Protecting and practicing foodways thus emerges as a political act, safeguarding not only physical survival but also cultural and spiritual integrity in the face of ongoing colonial pressures.

Sacred naming and ceremony are vital sites of cultural reclamation within the Port Gamble S’Klallam community. “We’re just starting to see naming ceremonies come back. That was lost for a long time,” one woman shared, highlighting how colonial bans and assimilation policies deeply disrupted spiritual practices. Naming is understood not as a simple label but as a profound responsibility: “A name isn’t just something you’re given. It’s a responsibility.” Names carry intergenerational weight, connecting individuals to ancestors and community in a living lineage. “Everyone who ever carried that name leaves a piece of themselves in it,” the cultural leader explained, emphasizing how carrying a name means embodying the spirit and history of those who came before. “Carrying a name means you carry a piece of that person’s soul. That’s

why it's serious," highlighting the sacred and enduring nature of naming as a form of cultural continuity and relational accountability.

Mentorship also remains a cornerstone of cultural vitality and healing. "When I am holding classes, there's storytelling happening… it is an honor because I've created a safe space where people share," said one woman, illustrating how learning environments become sites of trust and transformation. Stories shared in communal spaces often touch on healing journeys: "Some are about personal struggles, or healing, or how we were raised and want to do better." This reflects how culture is not only preserved but also lived as a practice of resilience and renewal. Mentorship and storytelling act as living threads that nurture individual and collective wellbeing, embodying culture as an active, healing force passed through generations.

One knowledge holder summed it up succinctly: "Cultural preservation to me personally is about sharing and pushing knowledge forward." This statement captures the essence of culture as an active and generative force, thriving not only in formal ceremonies but also through mentorship, shared meals, beadwork, laughter, or storytelling. Culture is deeply rooted in history and memory yet remains continuously evolving, lived intimately in homes, classrooms, workplaces, and the collective consciousness of the community. It resists ossification, embodying a living continuity that adapts while maintaining connection to ancestral knowledge.

With a smile, one woman reflected, "Culture is everything—how we raise our kids, how we gather, how we honor one another. It's not just the big ceremonies, it's how we live." This holistic perspective highlights culture as a web of relationships and practices embedded in everyday life. Understated gestures encapsulate a cultural ethic centered on presence, attentiveness, and relational care, sustaining community bonds beyond spectacle or ritual.

Yet, tensions persist within and around the community. “There are still people who say our ways are wrong. I don’t believe that, but I hear it,” a cultural leader acknowledged, revealing the ongoing impact of colonial attitudes and internalized pressures challenging Indigenous practices. Despite challenges, the community actively resists through food, ceremony, and storytelling: “We’ve always had a strong food culture. That’s one thing we never lost.” The power of cultural memory is profound: “Even a drumbeat can bring back memories. It connects people to something bigger than themselves.” Such reflections emphasize the enduring capacity of cultural practices to anchor identity and foster collective resilience in the face of adversity.

The emotional landscape accompanying this resurgence is complex, marked by both pride and pain. “We had to survive. We did what we had to do to raise strong kids in a hard time,” one person shared, acknowledging sacrifices and struggles of previous generations. “That generation didn’t talk about their trauma. They just kept going. That was survival too.” Testimonies reveal how silence and perseverance are woven into the fabric of cultural survival. Alongside this endurance, hope shines brightly: “I think people are finally understanding how important it is to pay attention to what’s around us and pass it down.” Their hope reflects a renewed commitment to cultural stewardship and intergenerational care. “We don’t just teach culture, we live it. Every day, every meal, every word we choose matters.” Powerful statements capture culture as an embodied practice, one which shapes identity, governance, and community in every moment.

The vast cultural resurgence taking place reveals a form of governance deeply rooted in intergenerational responsibility and sustained through countless acts of care. From elders mentoring youth to culture embedded in workplace policies, meals, stories, and songs, a multitude of practices form a connective tissue, binding the community together. Culture is

inseparable from governance; it is both the foundation and the living expression of community sovereignty. Together, reflections illustrate how the everyday is inherently political. Cultural governance is defined not solely by what is preserved but by how and for whom culture is carried forward. It is shaped by intention, inclusion, and relational accountability. Each act, whether storytelling, beadwork, meal preparation, or ceremony, contributes to the ongoing vitality of culture.

**Land: Breathing Life Through Time and Place**

Across all conversations, land was consistently described as a sacred relationship – instructive, and emotionally charged. This perspective aligns deeply with Indigenous epistemologies, particularly those of the Coast Salish peoples who inhabit the Puget Sound region, including the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. Coast Salish teachings center land as a living relative, an active participant in the social and spiritual fabric of community life, embodying identity and environmental balance. Within this framework, land, water, animals, and plants form an interconnected family whose relationships are reciprocal, cyclical, and grounded in care, spanning generations. The women consistently emphasized a profound ontological bond which contrasts sharply with Western property concepts. Relationships are actively sustained despite centuries of settler colonialism seeking to sever Indigenous peoples from their territories through dispossession, displacement, and forced assimilation. One woman articulated this poignantly: "The eelgrass, the water, the salmon… those are more than food; they are identity, history, and the future of the community." Their statement captures how cultural survival and environmental stewardship are inseparable, each continuously reinforcing the other through the lived practice of responsibility, place-based knowledge, and ancestral teachings.

Land held in trust emerged as a central theme in the conversations, carrying complex historical and political significance. The notion of trust land is embedded in U.S. federal Indian law, arising prominently through the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. This law codified a trust relationship wherein the federal government holds legal title to certain lands for the benefit of tribes, shielding these lands from sale, taxation, or loss without explicit federal action. The legal mechanism arose as a response to devastating earlier policies like the Dawes Act of 1887, which fragmented communal Indigenous lands through allotment, opening vast territories to non-Native ownership and drastically reducing tribal landholdings. The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's historical experience reflects this tragic legacy, as much of their original reservation was lost through allotment, coerced sales, and encroachment by settlers. Community members shared how their ancestors undertook a painstaking, often precarious, process of purchasing parcels of their own traditional homeland in order to maintain a physical and cultural foothold within the settler legal framework. As one elder woman reflected, "Our ancestors started buying land like non-Indians just to stay. That was survival. They were paying taxes, dividing it among more S'Klallams just to keep us here." This account reveals Indigenous resilience and sovereignty operating within settler systems – strategic acts of survival seeking to resist erasure and displacement when treaty promises were repeatedly broken or ignored.

The tribe's long history of legal struggle is marked by persistent advocacy and determination. A defining moment was the 1925 lawsuit the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe filed against the federal government, seeking enforcement of rights guaranteed under the Treaty of Point No Point (1855). This treaty, as with many others, promised reserved lands and fishing rights that the federal government systematically violated. The lawsuit, emblematic of many Indigenous legal battles nationwide, sought compensation for these violations and took nearly

ninety years to reach resolution. This case must be understood within the broader scope of Indigenous legal resistance, including landmark rulings such as the Boldt Decision in 1974, which reaffirmed tribal fishing rights throughout Washington State and reshaped Indigenous-state relations. Community members recounted repeated federal attempts to forcibly relocate the tribe to reservations at Skokomish and Suquamish, efforts the community firmly rejected with the declaration: "They tried to move us to Skokomish. We said no. They tried to move us to Suquamish. We said no. We stayed here." This narrative reveals a profound, place-based refusal to relinquish identity through removal, a political act of defiance intertwined with cultural survival. One reflected, "This land, where we are now, was nearly taken from us. But we never left," underscoring the inextricable bond between place and people which sustains sovereignty beyond legalistic definitions.

In recent decades, restoring lands to federal trust status has become a central pillar of the tribe's land reclamation strategy. Trust designation is a legal and political safeguard designed to protect Indigenous landholdings from loss through taxation, foreclosure, or sale. A respected community leader emphasized, "When land is placed in trust, you can't lose it to taxes, foreclosure… it stays in trust forever, in perpetuity, on behalf of the tribe." This legal permanence offers protection which is rare and vital, with the reality that "the only way to make that land go away is by an act of Congress." Such protections anchor sovereignty by securing a physical and political base from which the tribe governs, plans for the future, and sustains culture. The deep pride in this collective achievement resonated powerfully: "I took pride in helping make those things happen, knowing I was keeping it in perpetuity for my grandchildren." Pride encapsulates the intergenerational responsibility embedded in land stewardship and policy work, binding present efforts to ancestral legacies and future community wellbeing.

Beyond legal status, the centrality of land to the community encompasses ecological, cultural, and economic dimensions. “Land is tied to everything… our food, our economy, our ceremony, our sovereignty,” one interviewee declared, illustrating a holistic worldview, challenging the Western conception of land as isolated property. Institutional priorities reflect these values: “We allocate more resources to natural resource protection than any other area of government, probably more than health.” The prioritization echoes Indigenous governance philosophies such as the seventh generation principle, which directs decision-making to consider impacts seven generations ahead. Ecological teachings focus on species such as clams and salmon, which are critical to the local environment and culture. One cultural expert explained, “There’s a teaching that a clam takes four years to reproduce. We have to leave some so they can provide more abundance.” Teachings inform governance and harvesting policies, blending culture and science into sustainable stewardship.

However, legal frameworks are only one part of an ongoing cultural and political journey. Restoring land to trust status carries spiritual and ethical responsibilities transmitted across generations. One woman reflected, “The Port Gamble S’Klallam Reservation was originally 100% trust land… and getting land back into trust means reclaiming our sovereignty, literally.” Sovereignty here is layered, encompassing political autonomy, cultural renewal, and a profound connection to place that sustains community identity and resilience. Trust land status thus functions as cultural policy, deliberate acts protecting not only territory but lifeways, ceremony, language, and traditional food gathering essential to cultural continuity.

From a policy studies perspective, the tribe’s experience illustrates how Indigenous nations engage with U.S. legal mechanisms to advance sovereignty and cultural survival. Trust land policies, though embedded in settler law, can be wielded as tools to promote Indigenous

governance, ecological stewardship, and cultural resurgence. This amplifies sovereignty as relational, lived in responsibilities and relationships rather than only formal institutions. Daily practices of stewardship, memory, and cultural transmission demonstrate sovereignty's complexity, blending legal status with ongoing accountability and cultural renewal. This also challenges simplified policy models and calls for frameworks honoring Indigenous epistemologies and governance traditions.

Community members described land protection as a shared responsibility encompassing both territorial defense and resistance to environmental threats. "If we don't keep protecting this land, we lose everything that makes us who we are," one woman explained, pointing to the existential stakes. Urgency is paired with reflections on personal agency: "Knowing that I helped protect that land, that I helped hold onto what they fought for, it means everything to me." The tribe faces persistent threats from logging, real estate development, and extractive industries. "If corporations and real estate development succeed, they'll ruin the fish, the shellfish, the way of life," warned a community member. The struggle is ongoing and relentless: "We have been in constant litigation or settlement talks with developers, logging companies, and real estate. Every single inch we save is hard-fought." Resistance extends to powerful federal actors: "We even challenge the Navy… do you know how big and formidable of an opponent that is?" This illustrates the scale and complexity of opposition the tribe confronts, requiring courage and strategic advocacy. Multi-scalar struggles reveal land protection as a multi-sectoral, intersectional effort rooted in cultural survival and political sovereignty.

Today, the Port Gamble S'Klallam Reservation comprises roughly 1,135 acres of trust land, a fraction of the expansive ancestral territories which once encompassed the shores and forests of Puget Sound. The loss stems from settler colonial policies including treaty violations,

allotment, and dispossession, severing Indigenous relationships with place (Wilkinson, 2005). These lands represent the physical and spiritual home of a people whose identity is inseparable from the region's ecological and cultural richness. The territory includes upland forests alongside vital shorelines, eelgrass beds, beaches, and waterways, spaces understood as interdependent and integral parts of a living landscape that sustains and is sustained by community.

Relationships with land also extend beyond ownership and legal protections. Many described ongoing barriers limiting access to sacred sites and ancestral places – physical barriers, legal, and social in nature. One poignant account described police intervention when a small group was near a beach: "Our people weren't even crossing the barriers and the others still called the cops." Such policing reflects settler colonial spatial regimes which restrict Indigenous presence through zoning, property rights, and surveillance. The same woman shared a bittersweet reality: "I look outside my mom's apartment and I can see a cedar tree, but I can't harvest it because it's property of Silverdale." Layered experiences reveal the entanglement of spiritual connection with colonial dispossession and exclusion. Despite constraints, tribal members nurture relationships with land, asserting presence and stewardship where access is limited. Tensions spotlight how land sovereignty is continually negotiated – cultural, emotional, and legal.

Amid challenges, humility and reciprocity endure as vital practices. One woman described harvesting cedar with reverence: "When I go harvest cedar, I only take what's necessary and leave something for the next generation." This stewardship ethic is often quietly practiced: "You don't have to say anything out loud… just in your head, like 'I hope it's okay I'm taking your bark to make some cedar hats.'" Such actions express profound accountability extending beyond humans to the more-than-human world. One young woman recalled being

injured while harvesting but feeling calm and reassured: “Anywhere else I’d panic, but I felt calm. I think that’s because of my ancestors.” This illustrates the emotional and spiritual connection which affirms land as a living presence who teaches, heals, and supports.

Land also remains a source of teaching even where physical access is limited or disrupted. Several described organized “Places of Importance” trips where elders and cultural leaders guide youth through sites rich with history, family stories, and ceremony. “When I was in high school, our youth center put on ‘Places of Importance’… they took us to significant places where big events happened,” one recalled. Journeys were described as intergenerational transmission reinforcing identity through place, story, and memory. Despite landscape changes – fences, development, natural alterations – the sites remain cultural anchors. The connection extends beyond local geography; “Even when I’m in another state, I find a way to connect to the land and give thanks,” a woman artist noted. Flexibility calls attention to the dynamic nature of Indigenous place relationships which transcend physical boundaries but remain rooted in tradition.

The persistence of land knowledge reflects a relational epistemology grounded in memory, storytelling, prayer, naming, and embodied recognition. Cultural teachings weave people, place, and history across time and space. Whether physically present or distant, individuals sustain active relationships through these practices. One observed how naming a location or recounting its story is itself an act of sustaining connection, ensuring land teachings endure despite limited access or landscape alteration.

Everyday acts of return were shared with tenderness and intention. Quiet gestures – walking a shoreline, a child naming an object in S’Klallam, a silent thank you while harvesting a tree – express fidelity and care. “It’s about keeping the connection to the places that mean the

most to us, not just for today, but forever," said one woman. Seemingly small acts bridge personal and collective histories, affirming belonging.

One of the most profound articulations of the community's land ethic was: "We're protecting what can't speak – eelgrass, salmon runs, shorelines – but they speak through us." This monumental statement encapsulates a worldview placing humans not as owners or dominators of the environment but as caretakers and stewards who bear responsibility for non-human relatives. The living ecosystem, those elements that cannot literally speak, are understood as active participants in community wellbeing, culture, and identity. Large-scale efforts such as litigation to defend treaty rights, habitat restoration projects, and environmental regulations are not merely policy battles or bureaucratic procedures but expressions of these deeper obligations. As one cultural leader put it: "We regulate, we mitigate, we litigate—it's constant. And it's all to protect something deeper than just property lines." Their vulnerable insight reveals how governance over land and environment in the Port Gamble S'Klallam context weaves together legal frameworks, cultural values, and spiritual commitments into an integrated practice of care and protection.

Land is referred to as a living, breathing participant in the community's ongoing story. One woman reflected: "Our relationship with that land across the bay – Port Gamble – it goes back generations. Our people worked there. Some even died working there." This grounds the land connection not only in ancestral presence but in histories of labor, family, and sacrifice, deeply intertwined into individual and collective identity. Land is far more than a physical space; it is a vessel of emotion, memory, and resilience which sustains community across centuries of upheaval. These relationships have tangible influence on many domains of life, including language revitalization, parenting practices, governance approaches, and visions for the

community's future. Land is simultaneously a source of strength and a reminder of the persistence required to remain rooted, despite consistent challenges.

The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribes' ongoing relationship with land defies fixed or purely legalistic definitions. Instead, it is a vibrant, evolving practice of reclamation, stewardship, and sovereignty, pulsing through generations. "We're slowly getting our land back, which I think is really cool," remarked one mother with pride. Their statement carries immense meaning, reflecting a profound resurgence not only of physical territory but also of cultural lifeblood and ancestral presence restored through decades of tenacity, legal advocacy, and communal care.

The unity of land and water is foundational to this worldview. "The eelgrass, the water, the salmon… that's not just food. That's our identity, our future," one woman explained. This expresses the Coast Salish understanding of waterways and marine environments as living relatives, whose health is directly tied to human wellbeing and cultural survival. Stewardship of these interconnected ecosystems spans rivers, bays, tidal zones, and forests, embodying a relational ecology fundamentally at odds with colonial property regimes which attempt to fragment and isolate nature from culture.

As stated earlier, land reclamation is simultaneously political, legal, and relational. One interviewee shared a cross-cultural moment, illustrating the complex realities of stewardship beyond ownership: "There was a patch of cedar trees not on land owned by the tribe, but the people who did own the land reached out and said, 'Would you like to come harvest these?'" Such gestures represent tentative acknowledgment of Indigenous stewardship which transcends formal property boundaries, even as the realities of limited access remain: "It's hard to harvest certain things because you can only harvest in certain areas." Barriers expose persistent colonial

restrictions which continue to limit Indigenous control and access, even within ancestral territories.

The connection to land and water is profoundly embodied through cultural practices. One young woman described cedar weaving as a source of joy and healing: “Cedar weaving makes me happy… even if I mess up.” She spoke of the calming power of the land: “Usually I’m a perfectionist. If I mess up something, I get livid… but not with cedar.” Similarly, “Same thing with pulling in the canoe… I’m not good with physical activities, but once I’m in that canoe, I’m happy.” Embodied practices function as conduits for ancestral knowledge and wellbeing, aligning with Indigenous epistemologies which privilege relational and sensory experience. They are not simply crafts or recreation but vital means of reconnecting with place and self, sustaining culture through lived engagement.

Despite deep bonds, significant barriers endure for community members on a regular basis. “It’s been kind of sad, ’cause I’m trying to move home, but there’s no housing for me,” shared one participant, highlighting the realities of displacement and structural inequities affecting Indigenous peoples. While “We recently obtained more parcels in the area,” the path to full return and sustainable presence remains fraught with challenges, illustrating how Indigenous land justice must address not only legal restoration but also housing, infrastructure, and community viability.

Embedded throughout various narratives is an ethic of stewardship grounded in reciprocity and foresight. “You only take what is necessary and leave something for the next generation,” explained a mid-life age woman, “Our cultural director, she’s been a great mentor for teaching us how to give and take.” This ethic shapes ecological and political frameworks as the community strives “to leave as small of a footprint as possible and be sure that we are being

responsible to the Earth." Such care for land and water is inseparable from cultural survival and political sovereignty.

The interviewees' reflections demonstrate how land and water function as dynamic, living legacies, fundamental sources of identity, sovereignty, ecological knowledge, and spiritual care for the Port Gamble S'Klallam community. Their stewardship transcends conventional notions of legal ownership or policy mandates; it represents an enduring, intergenerational responsibility grounded in relational accountability. This relationship actively shapes both present realities and future aspirations, stressing how land and water are integral to the community's cultural survival and self-determination rather than mere physical assets.

**Language: The Heartbeat of Culture**

The S'Klallam language, once targeted for erasure by federal assimilation policies and boarding school punishment, is now re-emerging as a central expression of identity, governance, and community continuity. The women described how language was suppressed through both overt and subtle means, from formal prohibitions to the quiet shaming of young speakers. Across all four interviews, language surfaced as a living, daily act of presence and return, reflecting continuity, resistance, and cultural renewal rather than absence or loss. It functions as both anchor and horizon: something to come home to and something to grow toward.

"Language is hard… but it's worth the fight," one woman shared, expressing the deep effort involved in revitalization. The intense work is emotional, ongoing, and rooted in relationships. Whether spoken during meals, in meetings, or on walks with family, the S'Klallam language continues to re-enter homes and public life with intention and care. Storytellers repeatedly described this labor as a collective act of resistance, love, and continuity. The

resurgence continues older traditions while forging new ones, it is an assertion of the present and a deliberate shaping of the future. “I didn’t even know we had our own language,” one young woman admitted. “And now I’m helping teach it.” That transition from unawareness to instruction illustrates both individual transformation and the broader structural momentum behind community-led education. What emerges is a locally authored form of language revitalization that is deeply relational and culturally entrenched.

Collaborators described language learning as interwoven with daily life and emotional healing. Teachers and parents spoke of classrooms where S’Klallam words are posted on walls, integrated into routines, and practiced aloud. “Anything that has a S’Klallam word for it… in our classrooms has that word written out,” one contributor explained. Another woman shared, “The elders always told us, don’t just learn the words. Learn the meaning behind them.” This line speaks to the philosophical and cultural weight carried in each term. Words are not standalone – they are anchored with history, relationships, responsibilities, and teachings. Language revitalization, then, becomes an act of recovering not just vocabulary but a way of seeing and being in the world. It is a process of aligning voice with value, echoing the depth of Indigenous epistemology through each spoken word. One cultural leader added, “The language has a rhythm. You learn to breathe like the elders did,” describing language not as a skill, but as a form of embodied knowledge. She added, “Learning the language taught me how our ancestors thought. Everything is based on where you are in relation to the water.” Her reflection reveals how language transmits more than words, it carries a relational worldview rooted in geography, ecology, and interdependence. For the S’Klallam people, water is not just a location; it is a framework for understanding one's place in the world. The rhythm of the language, the stories it holds, and the ways it orients the speaker are all deeply tied to the land and waters of the region.

Moments of this kind reveal a pedagogy of connection, rooted not only in fluency, but in the act of showing up, together, to reclaim what was once taken.

Some storytellers reflected on witnessing others become certified speakers in the region. "Some younger people—maybe 15 or 20 years younger than me—have stepped up, become certified, and speak it fluently." These individuals were frequently described as role models, evidence that community-based teaching is working. "Hearing someone like *[NAME REDACTED]* speak it… so eloquently and beautifully – they inspire me." Certification in this context is not only a credential; it is an act of intergenerational commitment. The cultural department, described by one speaker as "a rockstar," serves as a coordinating hub for curriculum design, mentorship, and sustained programming.

Community members also spoke highly about the collaborative creation of the tribe's dictionary and grammar book. "Our language dictionary and grammar books… were from Tim Montler, a linguist. He helped produce the S'Klallam language and get it published, which we're all thankful for," one person explained. Montler's contributions were acknowledged with appreciation, while also affirming the tools now belong to and are actively stewarded by the tribe. These materials are used widely in classrooms, in homes, and for self-guided learning. They also form a basis for policy innovation. One young adult, for example, successfully advocated for S'Klallam street signage, helping to install visible reminders of language presence in everyday life. As one woman put it, "We even have signage with our street names in the language. That's visibility. That's power."

Other examples of policy engagement emerged from educational settings. "Our education director was successful in getting the S'Klallam language in Kingston High School as a credit class, which is absolutely amazing," one woman remarked, emphasizing how long-term

advocacy within the school system translated into formal recognition. Another drew focus, “We knew we had to get language into the schools if we wanted it to survive,” highlighting the strategic foresight behind these efforts. Changes of this kind have required years of negotiation, curriculum development, and persistence across multiple leadership roles. “Just having one language class can change the way you think about everything else,” said another interviewee, reflecting on the ripple effects of normalization and inclusion.

These achievements were not only symbolic, they were also structural. They reflect how community members are not only reclaiming the language, but insisting on its recognition within institutional frameworks, on their own terms. This is an expression of policy-making that looks different from traditional Western models. While some forms of policy operate through legislation, councils, or formal agreements, others are forged through years of persistence, relationship-building, and grassroots negotiation. In the context of language revitalization, policy-making may take the form of convincing a school district to offer credit for Indigenous language classes, developing learning tools in-house, or mentoring the next generation of teachers when external institutions lag behind. What emerges is not a universal blueprint, but a community-driven process of defining priorities and implementing change across educational, cultural, and governance sectors. This work is policy-making in action – local, adaptive, future-oriented, and grounded in relational accountability.

Nonetheless, many challenges remain. Interviewees pointed to ongoing barriers related to capacity and sustainability. “There’s limited staffing and limited funding for cultural programs,” one woman stated plainly, revealing how structural limitations continue to shape what is possible. Others described the difficulty of sustaining programs when accreditation must come through external institutions. “The certified language teachers can’t provide the accreditation…

that has to come through the college," one interviewee explained. Grant funding remains competitive and often privileges fluency rates, institutional partnerships, or formal immersion school models. "We're not yet at the immersive level others are," a mid-life adult shared. This comment reflects how external standards often fail to acknowledge the immersive work already happening within the community. While the tribe may not have a full-time immersion school, interviewees described consistent language exposure through early childhood programs, classrooms, signage, prayer, and home use. Their model of immersion is lived and distributed, expressed through daily routines and guided by cultural values rather than institutional templates. Frustrations revealed the limits of dominant policy frameworks, which continue to evaluate Indigenous language work through metrics misaligned with relational teaching models, such as standardized fluency assessments, institutional accreditation, and program scalability. External benchmarks rarely capture the intergenerational reciprocity, emotional healing, and trust-based pedagogy which define community-led revitalization. What is often described as 'progress' in institutional terms may overlook deeply rooted, culturally specific forms of success which matter most to the people doing the work.

This disconnect is particularly evident when considering the tribe's L1 speakers, which are certified in the language. While their numbers may appear limited from an external perspective, within the community they are held with immense respect and reverence. These individuals are often described as irreplaceable carriers of memory, pronunciation, rhythm, and meaning. As one woman emphasized, their presence is not only valued, it is vital. L1 speakers are living bridges between past and future, and their way of speaking is filled with nuance, breath, and embodied history which cannot be replicated through written materials alone. "We're not fluent in large numbers," one cultural leader acknowledged, "but the efforts are loud and

consistent." These voices shape both the tone and integrity of the language, guiding revitalization through lived continuity.

Interviewees described revitalization through local action, building curriculum, fighting for school credit, hosting language nights or retreats, and mentoring new speakers. Efforts were not framed in terms of national or international policy, but through community-rooted values. The focus remained on what could be shaped and sustained within the tribe: practical steps to make the language visible, usable, and alive. Actions function as a form of policy in practice, expressions of governance shaped by relationships, persistence, and care.

Women also spoke to the emotional weight of this work. Some described regret and grief over not having grown up with the language. "I never did learn the language… but my daughter went through early childhood and is now learning how to introduce herself in S'Klallam." Others described a void of guidance around them in their younger years. "I didn't necessarily have an elder in my life to pass that down to me… so I rely on my peers and the culture department." One woman reflected, "I used to have some guilt, but now I don't, because I have a better understanding of how we push through that… even though it skipped me, what I can do is encourage my daughter." Reflections within interviews made clear how language learning is cognitive, cultural, and at times carried alongside shame, pride, and healing.

Language revitalization, as expressed by Port Gamble S'Klallam community members, operates not only through programs and pedagogy but through the quiet, daily acts. A child speaking to their grandparent in S'Klallam, an educator gently correcting a pronunciation, a parent learning beside their child at a language night – these are not peripheral actions. They are policy enacted in real time. Not every policy is written; some are carried through gestures and

pauses, in laughter during a lesson, or in the shared trust and effort of collective memory of what was nearly silenced.

Rather than viewing revitalization as recovery, interviewees framed it as reorientation: a deliberate move forward into what can be sustained, reshaped, and grown, without romanticizing or replicating the past. This perspective aligns with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's theory of grounded normativity, which centers Indigenous governance not in institutions, but in lived relationships to land, family, and language. In this framework, resurgence is not a return, it is an enactment of everyday ethical life. Cultural continuity is maintained through evolving practice rather than by preserving an untouched tradition, but by practicing relational care, revising pedagogy, and breathing words which were once forcibly silenced back into everyday life contemporary form.

The work is ceremonial and strategic, emotional and administrative. It moves across homes, schools, signs, gatherings, and policies. Each act of teaching or speaking becomes not just a cultural gesture, but a political stance and a form of self-determined authorship. "It absolutely does play a role in identity and it requires a massive commitment and effort to maintain it," one cultural trailblazer emphasized, accentuating the endurance and depth of this work. Another acknowledged, "I still don't know that many people who are actually conversational in it, but the efforts are prevalent," pointing to the dynamic between progress and persistence. Regardless, there is hope in every direction: "People want to learn it. The desire is there."

These voices trace a pathway between resilience and aspiration. "We have some incredible speakers. It's beautiful to hear," one woman voiced, honoring both the language bearers and the emotional experience of hearing fluent S'Klallam. "We have our own certified

teachers. It's amazing," another added, celebrating the community's internal capacity-building. This expansion of teaching power within the tribe signals not only sustainability but sovereignty. "It's being taught in the high school now for credit. That was a dream for our community," one knowledge holder shared, linking personal triumphs with collective milestones. "You can sign up for college classes. There's signage around the reservation. Signage inside government buildings." Daily touchpoints that are visible, tactile and audible, anchor the language in the lived world. As one storyteller noted, "Peninsula College is teaching the curriculum — and some of our tribal members attend those college-type classes." This expansion into higher education settings shows how language revitalization is becoming increasingly academic, formalized, and accessible.

Regional connections further sustain this momentum. "Our sister tribe… committed extensive resources and have been willing to share that," one woman expressed, recognizing how intertribal collaboration amplifies shared goals. Each of these quotes forms a thread in the larger fabric of revitalization, material proof of how the work is alive, expanding, and held together by care, creativity, and vision. The infrastructure supporting this movement is equally important. "There's a dictionary, a full dictionary now!" a young adult exclaimed, marking a shift from oral loss to documented presence, from vulnerability to visibility. Others pointed to the growing integration of language into public and private life: "There are classes, signage, and now even formal introductions in the language." These snapshots normalize the language, bringing it out of archives and into action. As one woman put it, "Even when someone just introduces themselves and names their family in the language… that's identity right there."

Importantly, revitalization is not confined to grassroots momentum alone. "Elected officials are taking the time, even seeking to learn more," one contributor observed. This reflects

how cultural policy, while rooted in local practice, can resonate outward, gathering institutional attention and legitimacy without compromising community control. As one elder woman mentioned, “We don’t operate in a vacuum. We collaborate with county, state, and federal governments… but we do it while holding onto who we are.” This speaks to the tribe’s ability to engage with external systems without diluting their own values. It is a reminder how cultural policy can be collaborative without being assimilative. As another cultural leader said, “We were always tight-knit, like a basket that can hold water.” Her metaphor captures not only the strength of the community’s social fabric, but the way its cohesion holds and carries cultural knowledge. The image of the basket, woven strand by strand, resonates with how policy here is built: through interdependence, craft, and continuity. Efforts described across interviews form a deeply textured ecosystem: one where resistance is quiet, continuity is creative, and policy is lived rather than declared.

This framing resonates with Audra Simpson’s theory of refusal, not as disengagement, but as a strategy for protecting Indigenous governance from external imposition. Within the context of language revitalization, refusal manifests not as rejection of policy but as the redefinition of policy’s source. Authority is not sought or borrowed, it is enacted. The Port Gamble S’Klallam community’s approach resists pressures to conform to externally defined standards and instead builds legitimacy through internal accountability and cultural continuity. Governance is experienced not necessarily in paperwork or policy meetings alone, but in the daily and deeply human choices: the moment a speaker pauses to recall a word, the joy shared between learners, the persistence of those who teach even when external systems do not recognize their work. For policy scholars, this model demands a widening of vision and a rethinking of how policy is made, measured, and recognized. Policy is often understood through

institutional templates: laws, charters, or strategic plans. Conversely, for the Port Gamble S'Klallam community, this may take the form of a certified teacher mentoring a new learner, or a child greeting their elder in S'Klallam.

The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe is shaping a language policy through lived practice. This policy work begins with listening, relationship, and the long memory of community. It is authored through kinship and commitment, sustained through intergenerational responsibility, and reinforced by daily decisions which guide the language forward. What emerges is a framework for cultural governance that is evolving, place-rooted, and deeply relational, spanning ceremonial spaces, classroom moments, and institutional negotiations alike. These are expressions of governance grounded in cultural continuity and relationship, intentionally carried forward by the people most affected.

**Steady Hands: Women and Leadership**

When European colonizers arrived, they brought not only devastating diseases which decimated Indigenous populations but also rigid and patriarchal gender systems, disrupting long standing Indigenous social and governance structures. The Port Gamble S'Klallam, along with many other Coast Salish peoples, originally lived within relational systems where leadership roles were more fluid, shared, and deeply interconnected with kinship and spiritual responsibilities.

Women held critical authority as cultural bearers, caregivers, ceremonial leaders, and decision-makers. Colonizers imposed binary gender roles and hierarchical governance models through laws, Christian missionary efforts, boarding schools, and federal policies that devalued and marginalized women's relational labor. Colonial forces sought to reorder community life

around male-dominated, top-down structures alien to Indigenous worldviews. Yet this imposition was never absolute; Indigenous women's leadership did not vanish but endured, often hidden or transformed, sustaining cultural survival through adaptation and quiet resilience. This layered history shapes contemporary leadership dynamics, where women continue to embody and enact governance in ways that resist colonial legacies while affirming ancestral continuity.

Leadership within the Port Gamble S'Klallam community cannot be easily mapped onto Western paradigms. It does not rest in titles, charisma, or declarations of authority. Instead, leadership emerges through daily acts of care, cultural stewardship, and an enduring ethic of responsibility, often carried by women whose names may not be publicly recognized but whose influence shapes the everyday rhythm of community life. What emerged across conversations was not a singular model of leadership, but a constellation of steady hands – mentors, cultural practitioners, caregivers, policy workers, harvesters, educators, artists – who keep the tribe thriving. Their presence affirms a deep, intergenerational structure of cultural governance where relationality guides decisions and action.

When asked about women's leadership, many expressed deep pride. "We didn't always call ourselves leaders. But we were the ones teaching, cooking, caregiving—keeping everything alive," one person shared. Another said, "It's a miracle we sustain as much as we do. We're caregivers, employees, volunteers, committee members—all at once." Their reflections are not complaints but sober acknowledgments of cultural labor too often invisible beyond the community. Many contributors reflected on the nature of this work. Some described preparing food for their families after a full day of employment, while also managing cultural responsibilities, coordinating logistics for events, or mentoring others. This flow of caregiving, both in formal employment and informal kinship roles, mirrors global patterns of gendered labor,

often assigned but rarely resourced. As one cultural trailblazer shared, “The demands on women are never-ending… we carry it all.” Another pointed out, “Even if they’re not out front, believe me… They’re right behind or beside the man who is.” The quote illuminates how leadership often lives in the wings – supportive, enduring, relational – and how this labor sustains governance even when unacknowledged in policy or institutional settings.

One woman admiringly shared, “I enjoy my woman-dominant workplace,” highlighting the growing presence and strength of S’Klallam women. “Now that I’m looking at all the staff, I’m seeing a lot more women.” Another observed, “It was a slow trickle at first… but now that things are opening up, more women want to work for the tribe.” This increased presence sparked reflections on longstanding recognition: “Oftentimes women are being referred to as strong S’Klallam women.” One mid-life adult explained, “I feel that way often — matriarchal in a way, but not necessarily visible until more recent years.” Such subtle matriarchal structures shape the community’s network.

Reflecting on personal and collective support networks, one woman remarked, “From what I’ve seen, any woman I have in my life right now – I could go to for mom advice, breastfeeding advice, mental health.” She added, “Without them, I don’t think a lot of people would even understand how important our culture is.” This deep reliance casts light on women’s central role not only in leadership but in everyday cultural transmission. “Even if we make mistakes, they say it’s okay. You’re learning,” she affirmed, highlighting a compassionate and ongoing process of growth and resilience.

Mentorship featured prominently in every conversation. Those described as leaders were often aunties, grandmothers, older cousins, people who modeled generosity, love, and cultural values. Teachings are not always formal lessons, but they are very much alive. They are

transmitted in kitchens, in offices and in canoes, in stories told while weaving or cooking, in careful reminders offered during discussions. One highly respected and admired elder explained, "I don't know if other people would consider me a cultural leader, but I'm definitely a cultural activist." Another shared how they were honored with the title of master bead artist, not self-proclaimed, but given by a respected woman elder who had witnessed and actively been a part of years of steady cultural contribution. "That kind of thing is not self-proclaimed," they said. "It's handed to you." The act of recognizing someone's role through gifts, invitation, or spoken acknowledgment, is its own form of governance and are long-embodied systems of trust and memory.

Ceremonial work – beading, food preparation, song nights, gifting – was described as often led or initiated by women. "She raised everybody's kids. People went to her if they were hungry," one woman shared. Another remembered, "A lot of the old teachings were passed down by aunties and grandmas. That's how we kept going." The stories point not to nostalgia but to structure: an informal but powerful framework of leadership embedded in daily life. One woman described how even administrative leaders today were already doing the work long before being recognized for it: "Our executive and admin team is mostly women now. That wasn't always the case. But it makes sense. They were already doing the work." Another stated simply, "Our women leaders have always been there. We just didn't always call it that."

Reflecting on community roles, one storyteller noted, "It was an evolution… being in education, teachers being primarily women. I don't think it's specific just to our community — it's wider." This highlights how women's leadership in education is both a reflection of broader societal patterns and a crucial site for cultural preservation within the tribe. Women in these roles serve as essential transmitters of language, medicine, values, and history, helping to heal the

ruptures caused by colonialism. Another woman emphasized, “Being adaptable… that’s part of it too,” reinforcing how resilience in leadership requires flexibility to navigate changing social and political realities. Having adaptability enables women to sustain cultural stewardship by shifting seamlessly among roles – as educators, caregivers, cultural leaders, and organizers – ensuring the community’s identity continues to thrive despite pressures or challenges.

What is visible now, many suggested, is not a sudden shift but a return. “When I first came around the tribal center, it was mostly men. Now it’s more balanced. There’s a lot of strength in that.” An additional woman added, “Maybe no one articulates it, but I think we are a matriarchal community, a quiet one.” This quiet leadership was never framed as exclusive. Rather, it was part of a broader collective ethic. Men, women, and gender-diverse members were all described as contributing to governance, teaching, and ceremony. However, the cultural labor described in these stories was most often held, at least in visibility, by women whose work spanned generations and domains. They teach language, write grants, organize events, prepare regalia or open meetings. The women also lead boldly, gently and always in love. Community members described S’Klallam women as the ones who “just showed up no matter what,” because “someone did it for them,” and now it is their turn.

This labor is not new, but it is often misunderstood by policy institutions. Western governance often separates caregiving, cultural preservation, and emotional work from policy and power. For many Indigenous communities, those things are inseparable. Teaching a child how to speak in a language, holding a ceremony, or teaching someone how much to harvest from land, are considered acts of cultural policy. They reinforce protocol, identity, and relational trust. As one mid-life adult said, "We weren’t told we were leaders—we just started doing the work." That distinction matters because what is at stake is not merely representation, but an entire

epistemology of governance: one which defines power through relationality, presence, and care rather than hierarchy or visibility.

Some shared the emotional weight of this responsibility. A mother reflected, "We're doing things now that I wasn't allowed to do. That means everything." Their reflections highlight how leadership is not only operational, but deeply healing as well. It involves forgiving oneself for what was missed, and modeling a different future for those who come next. The women often shared how revitalization reshaped their own sense of belonging. Leadership, in this framing, is not a destination, but a rhythm, measured by how one shows up, who they carry with them, and how they make others feel safe and seen.

Another woman reflected on the vitality and deep meaning of this work, saying, "I'm alive and breathing and able to do these things… why wouldn't I want to?" Her words express a profound commitment to cultural stewardship as both a privilege and responsibility. Yet they also acknowledged the demanding nature of this labor: "It's exhausting, but it also shows how resilient we are." This resilience, born from years of endurance and adaptation, forms the foundation of a powerful cultural identity, one the community embraces with pride and strength. Many women invoked this spirit with the phrase, "We are the Strong People," capturing the vibrant, living force which continues to sustain the Port Gamble S'Klallam people today.

This section does not aim to romanticize or essentialize, as it holds complexity. Leadership can be exhausting. It is not always recognized and can oftentimes feel heavy. However, it is also a source of deep cultural pride and rootedness. Many emphasized how recognition comes through community affirmation and lived responsibility. One respected cultural leader shared, "I didn't ask to be a leader. But I'm a canoe skipper." Within the Port Gamble S'Klallam community and broader Coast Salish canoe traditions, this statement carries

tremendous weight. Historically, the role of skipper has often been held by men entrusted with navigating, maintaining spiritual protection, and guiding the canoe both physically and ceremonially. For a woman to step into this crucial role today represents not just individual skill or leadership, but a broader shift in visibility, responsibility and recognition. It reflects the community's capacity to honor leadership in all its forms, while continuing the core teachings that define who is trusted to guide others. As an elder said, "There's leadership all around if you look at it that way." Observations affirm what is already known within the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe: leadership is not conferred, it is practiced, remembered, and upheld by those who carry others forward.

It is vital to clarify how emphasizing women's leadership does not seek to diminish or overlook the vital roles other genders hold within the Port Gamble S'Klallam community or Indigenous communities broadly. Indigenous governance and leadership traditions often transcend rigid Western gender binaries, embracing fluidity and shared responsibility. This focus on women's leadership responds to the historical erasure and marginalization imposed by colonial and patriarchal systems which disrupted Indigenous kinship and governance structures. Recognizing women's contributions is a necessary step in restoring Indigenous epistemologies, honoring multiple gender roles and interdependent leadership. All genders are integral to sustaining cultural vitality, governance, and community wellbeing, each fulfilling distinct and overlapping responsibilities. This intersectional and decolonial framing affirms leadership as a collective, dynamic practice planted in Indigenous values of reciprocity, respect, and balance – challenging colonial gender norms while honoring the fullness of Indigenous relational governance.

For the field of policy studies, there is much to learn here. The work described in these stories such as teaching, organizing, caregiving, or remembering, is not supplementary to governance. It is governance. Even so, such practices are rarely legible to conventional policy frameworks that prioritize legislation, institutional leadership, or technical intervention. When policy overlooks cultural labor, it dismisses the very infrastructure enabling Indigenous governance to endure and evolve. Across all interviews, we see how cultural work, often gendered and intergenerational, functions as relational policy: sustaining networks of knowledge, accountability, and care which formal systems depend on but rarely recognize. All actions showcase community maintenance, memory work, and education – all policy, in form and function. Actions have the capacity to shape values, influence behavior, and ensure continuity across generations. To ignore them in policy discourse is to misread how governance is practiced in non-Western contexts.

Moreover, when funding decisions, evaluation tools, or leadership development programs fail to account for this kind of labor, they perpetuate a narrow definition of power, one rooted in colonial hierarchies rather than lived systems. The Port Gamble S'Klallam's various forms of leadership are deliberate, interdependent, and deeply effective, not despite their cultural grounding, but because of it. Indigenous governance does not need to be translated into dominant paradigms to be valid; policy fields must instead widen their aperture and recognize the most sustainable, impactful forms of governance are often the ones least acknowledged by mainstream institutions.

What emerges in these reflections is a model of leadership grounded in rhythm, relationship, and accountability. It is responsive and steady, woven through small, repeated actions, building deep trust over time. Women assist in shaping the terms of cultural life through

presence, guidance, and endurance, often holding multiple roles at once without pause or recognition. Their leadership is clear, not because it is loud, but because it is reliable. Systems do not require external validation to be real; they have already been working and have already shaped generations. The weight of that labor is carried with intention, and its impact is felt in the places policy rarely looks.

**Bright Roots: Youth, Teaching, and Cultural Renewal**

Across all four interviews, one message came through with clarity: the children of the Port Gamble S'Klallam community are not only learning, they are leading. While much academic literature frames youth as the future, within these stories, young people are already shaping the present. Their role in cultural resurgence is embodied in their everyday actions, from the classrooms where they sing in S'Klallam to the family dinners where they share stories or correct pronunciations. "Fourth grade through high school are taking in the kindergartners through third grade, to teach them song and dance," one woman shared, emphasizing the deep mentorship structure now guiding youth engagement. Leadership emerges from Indigenous values of relationality, responsibility, and collective strength. It is not a task assigned to them, it is simply a rhythm they grow into, one which deepens over time.

Generational linkages are also transformative. Youth are not only recipients of knowledge, they are becoming active transmitters. Their ability to guide and teach reveals a cultural pedagogy resisting linear, top-down education models. One storyteller marveled, "You see a kid teaching their parents a song… and you know it's working." Stories are not isolated within the tribe. Elders and mid-life cultural workers repeatedly described growing up without access to the teachings which now surround today's youth. For many, language and ceremonial

practices were absent from public life whether restricted, suppressed, or quietly held in private spaces. The contrast was striking: “It’s almost the opposite of boarding school now. We’ve got our babies learning culture and they’re the ones influencing their families.” This shift is systemic, visceral, and spiritual.

Young children now enter cultural immersion from early on. “The early childhood teachers start with the babies from birth,” one woman explained. “They were out here in the courtyard… all of the early childhood kids were singing and dancing.” Classrooms are not just spaces of instruction, they have become critical sites of cultural memory being rebuilt in real time. “Even the babies are hearing it now,” one woman smiled with pride. “They don’t even realize they’re learning, it’s just part of their world.” Immersion has become a daily practice who many have spent years working towards. “We’re counting with them every single day. We have our alphabet up on the wall.” A cultural leader outlined, “If there’s a word for it in the language, it’s in the classroom.” Structural integration, including language, values, and protocol are scaffolded into daily life, normalizing cultural practice and ensuring it grows alongside the children themselves.

The reach of cultural education extends well beyond school walls. “They go back home and they share with their families,” a woman said. Another shared, “Even the little ones get to lead a song. That’s their responsibility.” One mother recalled, “My son says ‘qʷəyəm̓ú̓ti’ for hug, or ‘ʔitáxʷ cn’ for I love you.” Little phrases, simple on the surface, hold enormous cultural weight. They are signs of healing and return. An interviewee described watching their child proudly dance and sing a song at their graduation, knowing movements by heart. Despite the child being two years old, mumbles of the correct words were clear when singing. “He lights up,” she said. “You can just see how much he loves his culture just being in it.” Everyday acts

signal deep-rooted shifts, culture no longer hidden or strained, but alive in the voices, movements and rhythms of S'Klallam children.

The visibility of youth is not limited to only classrooms or homes. They are showing up to community events in "full regalia, singing loudly, dancing proudly," and carrying themselves with remarkable confidence. "You go to song and dance… and they're all young people. That's exactly where we need to be focusing," one elder woman said with a twinkle in her eye. Such instances signal and represent Indigenous joy, power, representation and belonging. They are visual and audible evidence of a resurgence which cannot be denied. Young people are growing up knowing they belong in their culture and that they are free to express it. Their voices fill auditoriums and their feet fill dance floors as they are often the first to step forward. An elder shared, "What gives me hope? The sheer number of young people I see participating. They outnumber the adults."

Youth leadership also appears in unexpected spaces. One interviewee described how a teenage boy taught adults how to smoke meat using traditional methods: "A 15-year-old boy was teaching adults how to smoke meat that he hunted." Shared stories reflect not only cultural confidence, but also the trust being placed in youth. That trust is part of a broader shift toward intergenerational reciprocity. As one woman explained, "They're gonna raise another generation that's even stronger. And so forth and so forth." It is not just about preserving knowledge; it is about ensuring knowledge lives, evolves, stretches, and expands with each generation. Instances of this kind upend colonial assumptions about age, authority, and learning. In the Port Gamble S'Klallam community, youth model confidence, skill, and generosity in how they share what they know.

Some of the most powerful transformations were also deeply personal. A young woman described a moment of reconnection, altering the course of their life. “When I got in the canoe for the first time, something clicked. I thought, ‘This is who I am.’” That very experience became a pivotal point not just for her own identity, but for how she chose to raise her child. “And then ever since my child was born, I’ve been out there like crazy,” she said, laughing but serious. She added, “We’re teaching our babies but my child also teaches me.” This story is one of many which demonstrate how youth leadership is no longer a future goal, it has become a present reality, made possible by the decisions of countless cultural leaders who refused to let culture slip away.

That revolution, however, is quiet. It unfolds in kitchens, classrooms, and on tribal land, not through sweeping proclamations, but through consistent, deeply relational acts. A child offering hunting tips to adults. A teenager taking responsibility for walking around with a microphone during discussions to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak. A toddler playing the drums. These are the new norms shaping the future. They teach belonging by doing, and policy frameworks must catch up with this reality. Investments in cultural education, early immersion learning and youth programming are policy necessities, ensuring the next generation has the tools and confidence to carry their traditions forward with both pride and fluency. Policy, in this context, must reflect that intergenerational mentorship flows in all directions.

This generational rhythm also creates a broader sense of homecoming. “People are coming home,” one cultural leader said. “They’re starving for culture. Starving for connection.” The hunger is palpable and it is being met. Participation is healing not just for the individual, but for everyone watching. It affirms the community’s success in reclaiming what was once stolen. The visual and emotional impact is revolutionary, according to various speakers.

While conventional policy frameworks often relegate youth to "future stakeholder" status, the Port Gamble S'Klallam community reveals a model where children are active policy participants in shaping language access, teaching practices, and cultural priorities through their presence alone. Their participation makes the invisible visible. A child naming a fish in S'Klallam during a beach harvest or helping prepare regalia for a community ceremony is doing policy work. They are enacting cultural preservation, language normalization, and identity formation in ways that no written plan alone can achieve. As one contributor said, "Eventually we're just going to have two languages." This future is already materializing, born from extensive community care. External policy must now match the rhythm already underway, supporting the environments, resources, and relationships that make resurgence sustainable. The children are not waiting because they are already building the world they deserve.

*Chapter Seven*

# Policy Implications

This project's findings illuminate a profound disconnect between dominant policy frameworks and the lived realities of Indigenous cultural governance, revealing an urgent need to reimagine how policies support, recognize, and sustain Indigenous resurgence. For the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, sovereignty is the foundation of daily life, expressed through language spoken in homes, land stewarded with care, ceremonies enacted across generations, and leadership carried with relational accountability. Yet prevailing state and federal policies too often compartmentalize these practices into fragmented "programs" measured by quantifiable outputs, overlooking the rich, interwoven governance embedded in cultural resurgence. This chapter calls on policymakers, funding bodies, and institutions to move beyond tokenistic inclusion and toward genuine partnership rooted in Indigenous self-determination, knowledge systems, and cultural priorities.

At the tribal level, this means acknowledging cultural revitalization not as an optional supplement to governance, but as its very core. The ongoing work of storytelling, caregiving, language use, and ceremony is how identity, authority, and responsibility are transmitted across time. Policies and funding mechanisms which invest in elders, cultural educators, and women leaders – who often hold relational roles essential to community wellbeing – must be stable, flexible, and respectful of cultural rhythms. Funding tied to short-term deliverables or fiscal calendars risks disrupting ceremonial pacing and seasonal practices, fracturing the very continuity it claims to support. Instead, multi-year grants designed with community input are

necessary to sustain language immersion programs, land stewardship efforts, caregiving initiatives, and ceremonial life as integrated governance rather than isolated projects.

On a broader scale, state and federal frameworks must confront colonial logics embedded in technocratic evaluation models which prioritize efficiency, control, and measurable outputs over relational, intergenerational, and spiritual dimensions of Indigenous governance. Success cannot be reduced to language class attendance or acres restored. True measures must be defined by communities themselves, such as increases in fluent speakers, strengthening of kinship networks, or the health of cultural practices sustained through silence, story, and ceremony. These forms of governance resist codification in conventional policy metrics but are essential to sustaining sovereignty, identity, and resilience. Policymakers must champion evaluation models rooted in trust-based partnerships which honor Indigenous epistemologies.

The sacred relationship to land stands as a central, living assertion of sovereignty and responsibility. The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's efforts to secure trust land status and protect ancestral territories are deeply political acts entwined with cultural survival. Yet regulatory regimes, from environmental oversight to economic development policies, frequently undermine tribal authority, introducing bureaucratic hurdles which delay restoration projects or restrict access to traditional harvesting grounds. These constraints not only threaten Indigenous stewardship but exacerbate ecological degradation at a moment when climate change intensifies risks to both ecosystems and cultures. Policy must evolve to recognize Indigenous governance as a frontline strategy for environmental justice and climate resilience, affirming treaty rights and supporting Indigenous knowledge systems as essential to sustainable land management.

Women's leadership, though foundational, remains largely invisible in mainstream policy and funding structures. Women are leaders, whether this shows up in nurturing ceremony,

caregiving, cultural transmission, or administration, and their participation is critical to governance continuity. Programs often fail to recognize or resource these roles adequately. Effective policy must include leadership development which centers women's relational expertise, paired with practical supports such as childcare, flexible scheduling, or mentorship. Likewise, youth emerge as confident stewards of language, ceremony, and governance education, embodying the future of cultural continuity. Investment in intergenerational programs focused on empowering youth as active cultural and political agents – not merely future inheritors – is indispensable.

At the systemic level, this analysis exposes how mainstream policy frameworks reproduce colonial power dynamics by imposing top-down, hierarchical models which marginalize Indigenous governance. Policies framed around "saving" Indigenous communities from deficits replicate paternalism and dependency, reinforcing structures Indigenous resurgence seeks to dismantle. The transformative potential lies in co-creating policy with Indigenous nations, centering their values, knowledge systems, and self-defined criteria of success. This requires recognizing governance as inclusive of the authority to define terms, refuse externally imposed standards, and holistically manage cultural and ecological systems. Policies must move from management to partnership, from control to respect.

The urgency of realigning policy grows ever sharper as cultural funding diminishes, climate threats accelerate, and federal–tribal relationships become increasingly fraught. Interviewees described the immediate consequences of these pressures: loss of fluent language speakers, displacement, or restricted access to sacred lands, all of which threaten the capacity to sustain enduring knowledge systems. These burdens fall disproportionately on those carrying cultural resurgence forward, who continually navigate systems not designed for their

participation. Indigenous cultural governance is foundational to community health, resilience, and sovereignty.

For policymakers, funders, and educators, this means moving beyond superficial consultation toward genuine, sustained partnership. State and federal agencies must formalize commitments to tribal sovereignty by aligning all programs, funding, and decision-making with Indigenous self-determination frameworks. This includes co-designing initiatives with tribes, offering flexible, multi-year grants which respect cultural rhythms and priorities, and adopting Indigenous-defined success measures. Investment in leadership development will build internal capacity essential to sustaining resurgence. Education policies should support place-based, intergenerational language immersion programs with clear, community-led milestones. Land and environmental policies must uphold tribal authority over natural resources, treaty rights, and stewardship practices.

Such policies are not abstract ideals but practical necessities grounded in the voices and lived experience of Indigenous communities actively rebuilding futures under continued strain. The researcher calls on decision-makers to listen deeply, step back from rigid frameworks, and embrace the complexity, nuance, and relationality that Indigenous governance embodies. True policy transformation requires humility, structural flexibility, and the courage to center Indigenous leadership and knowledge as the foundation of just, sustainable governance.

These policy insights open into the next layer of this work, stories which are grounded in lived experience. The findings emerge from within the community itself, reflecting a process built on trust, relationship, and profound care. These are stories of leadership, memory, place, and continuity, each one echoing the broader currents of cultural resurgence already in motion. The narratives expand what counts as research findings; they hold complexity, resist

simplification, and invite reflection. Knowledge, in these stories, is something carried, protected, and returned to over time. Their strength lies in how they shape relationships: between past and present, between people and place, and between what is spoken and what is held in silence. These stories do not signal an end point. They carry the work forward. When policymakers embrace this vision, they can do more than simply shape regulations, they become active allies in the enduring work of Indigenous resurgence and the flourishing of communities for generations yet to come.

*Chapter Eight*

# Conclusion: Policy In Relation

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This capstone began as a question rooted equally in research and responsibility: How have the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe's efforts to reclaim and preserve their culture, land, and language shaped their community, especially women and children? Yet, as the conversations unfolded, the question revealed itself less as a puzzle with a fixed solution and more as a living rhythm – an ongoing story of persistence, care, and renewal. This rhythm pulses through legal battles and ceremonial gatherings, language classrooms and shoreline restorations, the weaving of cedar hats and the quiet act of teaching a child a word. The efforts shared were not new awakenings but continuations, acts held steady across generations, sustained with intention and fierce love.

Revitalization did not appear as a momentary revival but as a continuous system already vibrant long before policy frameworks could name or contain it. The community's cultural knowledge was never lost; it was guarded, nurtured, and practiced in the shadows, fighting for space to breathe again. As one woman reflected with quiet certainty, "We're not reviving something dead. It was always there. We're just giving it room to breathe again." This insight captures the heart of this capstone, illuminating the profound truth of how what matters is not what was erased but what was never surrendered.

Language revitalization emerged as a cornerstone of cultural resilience and identity, spanning elders reclaiming forbidden teachings and children introducing themselves first in S'Klallam before their English names. Language here is far more than vocabulary or grammar; it

is the vessel of relationships, memory, place, and emotion. “If there’s a word for it in the language,” a storyteller explained, “it’s in the classroom.” This resurgence is the product of decades of deliberate community effort including curriculum building, youth cohorts and retreats, signage throughout the reservation, fluent speakers sharing knowledge with others, and a fully documented grammar and dictionary – none of it incidental or accidental.

Land, too, was consistently described not as inert property but as a living, breathing relative, one who listens, remembers, watches, and deserves protection. The tribe’s success in securing trust status for their lands was a fulfillment of ancestral promises and ongoing connection. One person expressed this enduring relationship plainly: “That land is safe for my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren. We’re maintaining connection to the places that mean the most to us.” The connection is deeply layered, both spiritual and legal, maintained through trust deeds, court battles, treaty enforcement, and resistance to extraction and displacement. The resilience in this work echoes a broader ethic, “Land is tied to everything… our food, our economy, our ceremony, our sovereignty,” demonstrating the land’s foundational role in sustaining community lifeways.

Women and children stand as pillars within this continuum of cultural survival. The multitude of roles carried by women from administrative leadership to ceremony, from grant writing to creating art, constitutes an often-invisible infrastructure sustaining life itself. Youth were described with deep pride and tenderness. Far from passive inheritors, children are active stewards in the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe – singing, teaching, dancing, and rekindling family memories almost lost.

This research stands in deliberate tension with dominant policy metrics which prioritize codified law, bureaucratic authority, and state-centered governance while overlooking the

relational, embodied, and culturally specific systems thriving within various Indigenous Nations. Cultural labor such as caregiving, teaching, ceremony, or language, constitutes governance itself. It is defined not by official documentation but by the collective memory and lived action of the people. These practices require no external validation to be real; they are already in motion, offering the policy world vital models rooted in accountability, relationship, and communal continuity. Policy aspiring to carry justice and efficacy must open itself to already existing systems and work towards adaptation, rather than imposing alien structures.

The methodology of this capstone reflects a reciprocal commitment, as interviews were not extraction but collaboration, shaped by what was shared rather than preconceptions. This honors Indigenous knowledge on its own terms, a knowledge never in need of validation but deserving of respect within policy discourse, where Indigenous governance remains too often misunderstood or sidelined.

The Port Gamble S'Klallam people are not emerging from invisibility; they have been steadfastly sustaining governance regardless of stolen time or repression. One woman's call to action remains clear: "We have to provide those opportunities—even the gentle pushes," emphasizing the continuity of mentorship and growth. Another honored the wisdom of elders, reflecting, "I've had the opportunity to learn from a few elders—it's been incredible," highlighting the power of intergenerational knowledge transmission. The indispensable role of women within this narrative was made undeniable: "You can't say S'Klallam history or identity without acknowledging the women." Such acknowledgment carries with it a deep responsibility and pride. "We're fulfilling what our ancestors fought for. I'm making their fight count," a storyteller affirmed, tying today's work to generations past.

A collective assertion of identity and resilience resounds in declarations such as, “We used to survive by blending in. Now we survive by standing out.” The web of communal care threads through every story: “I always say, the community is like a family. If one person is struggling, we all feel it.” These words illustrate a lived relationality which sustains collective survival.

This capstone does not conclude, and instead invites reflection and transformation. It holds space for a policy field which too often demands Indigenous communities translate, assimilate, or await recognition. Instead, these findings call for humility, relational engagement, and a recognition of cultural practice as a dominant policy lifeform. This is not an invitation to reinterpret Indigenous governance but a challenge to listen deeply, to engage responsibly, and to honor legitimacy which is embodied rather than granted.

This capstone is not a story of recovery or rediscovery, it is the fierce continuation of a life force that colonization sought to extinguish but never could. It beats in the voices teaching language to children before they can walk, in the hands harvesting food or plants beneath the weight of centuries, in the steady reclamation of land promised but stolen. These are the acts of a people who carry sovereignty not as a token or a title but as breath, relationship, and responsibility. For policy to serve justice, it must stop viewing Indigenous governance through the lens of absence or deficit and instead recognize it as an unbroken, living presence, raw, resilient, and resolute. The Port Gamble S'Klallam *are* the Strong People, rooted in the waters and forests of the Pacific Northwest region, carrying the weight of history with intense pride and strength, and living proof that no challenge can break their spirit or their bond to the land.

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# Appendix A – Interview Question Guide

| Cultural Preservation & Revitalization |
| --- |
| What are some of the most meaningful efforts the Tribe has taken to preserve or reclaim its culture? |
| What challenges has the community faced in doing this work? |
| What does cultural preservation mean to you personally? |
| How do cultural revitalization efforts influence daily life in the community? |

| Role of Women in Cultural Leadership |
| --- |
| In what ways have women shaped or led efforts around cultural preservation, language, or land? |
| Are there specific programs or stories that highlight women's leadership? |
| Has women's leadership evolved or changed over time in the community? |
| What challenges or successes have women faced in cultural leadership roles? |

| Language Reclamation & Education |
| --- |
| How does language play a role in maintaining cultural identity? |
| What role do schools or community programs play in teaching and maintaining the language? |
| What impact have these efforts had on the community? |
| How do you see language being used or valued among younger generations? |

| Land Reclamation & Environmental Connection |
|---|
| What does reclaiming land mean to you? |
| Are there any land-based practices that have been revitalized in recent years? |
| How is land connected to spiritual or cultural identity? |
| What role does the natural environment play in cultural practices today? |

| Intergenerational Knowledge & Youth Impact |
|---|
| How is cultural knowledge passed across generations within the Tribe? |
| How are youth and younger generations being affected by revitalization efforts? |
| What role do elders and families play in cultural education? |
| What gives you hope for the future of cultural preservation? |

| Role-Specific Follow-Up Questions | | |
|---|---|---|
| Elders | Mid-Life Adults (Parents, Staff, Leaders) | Younger Adults (20s-30s) |
| What teachings do you most hope to see carried forward? | How do you contribute to cultural revitalization? | How did you connect with culture growing up? |
| What has your experience been like sharing knowledge with younger generations? | What advice would you give to future generations about protecting their culture? | Do you see yourself as a part of revitalization efforts—why or why not? |
| How has the community changed over time in your view? | What changes or resources have helped your work in this area? | What does preserving your cultural identity mean to you today? |