

STORIES IN ALASKA

Ciulistet: A New Program for Bristol Bay's Next-Gen Leaders

In Bristol Bay, questions about the future and how to navigate a changing world share a common thread: The next generation will need to be ready.

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Ciulistet: Being able to navigate forward based on where you've come from.

“If you want to make effective change you need to start at the beginning,” says Kristina Alqayaagaq Andrew, of the Bristol Bay Native Association, a regional tribal consortium. “And the beginning starts with young people.”

It's this wisdom that led to the creation of Bristol Bay Ciulistet, a new program helping prepare ambitious young people between the ages of 18-26 to lead in their communities. [Ciulistet](#) is led by the [Bristol Bay Native Association](#) with support from the [Bristol Bay Native Corp.](#), [Bristol Bay Economic Development Corp.](#) and The Nature Conservancy.

The name “Ciulistet” (chi-list-eat) comes from the Central Yup'ik language, meaning “being able to navigate forward based on where you've come from.”



ALASKA'S VAST BRISTOL BAY The region extends across an area equal in size to the state of Ohio. Its lakes and rivers produce more wild salmon than anywhere in Alaska—or anywhere else on Earth. © Clark James Mishler



Now preparing for its second year, Ciulistet is building a new professional network of young adults from far-flung Bristol Bay villages who are committed to the future of their communities. In this vast coastal region in western Alaska, where few villages are linked by roads, Ciulistet is fostering the creation of peer-relationships that otherwise might not occur due in part to the difficulty of travel.

“Geographically our communities are isolated, and we’re spread out over an area the size of Ohio,” Andrew says.

Where Ciulistet Was Born

The growth of the new Ciulistet leadership development program is rooted in the [Bristol Bay Vision](#), a formal process which distilled the voices from 26 Bristol Bay communities into a shared statement. Education, and nurturing future generations for healthy and productive lives in Bristol Bay, emerged as clear priorities. This vision reflects how the Indigenous caretakers of [Bristol Bay](#)—the Yup’ik, Dena’ina and Alutiiq people—continue to maintain a way of life sustained by a natural abundance of the healthy lands and waters that surround them—including the largest runs of wild salmon on Earth.

Also a top priority: The continued stewardship of healthy lands and waters alongside sustainable economic development. The specter of the proposed [Pebble mine](#) in Bristol Bay headwaters has heightened local resolve for asserting the authority of local people to chart a prosperous future and maintain tradition.

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RANDOM REAMEY

Among Ciulistet’s goals is delivering hands-on experience in the behind-the-scenes work of leading a community. Local tribes, municipalities, businesses and non-profits host paid Ciulistet interns, providing real-world lessons about what is too often left out of the classroom in Indigenous communities in Alaska: Tribal governance and the role of Indigenous authority in important decisions about the natural resources that sustain a local way of life.

“We’re not taught in school about tribal government. It’s very Western-focused. It creates a lack of knowledge in our area and for Alaska Native people in general. That’s the intent of the program, to bridge that knowledge gap,” says Random Reamey, the former Ciulistet program coordinator with the Bristol Bay Native Association.



TNC HOSTED LEARNING EXCHANGE From left, TNC’s Kelly Pierson, Clinton Boskofsky of Chignik Lake, Kristina Andrew of Dillingham, Judy Jo Matson of Naknek and AlexAnna Salmon of Igiugig. © Kelly Pierson/TNC

Hope for the future: Early Results and Emerging Leaders

With the program well underway, Andrew says the results are encouraging. In its first year —2022—eight interns worked for local governments, non-profits and businesses in four-month-terms. Employers included United Tribes of Bristol Bay; Native Village of Perryville, a federally recognized tribe; Pilot Point Tribal Council, a federally recognized tribe; Manokotak Village Council, a federally recognized tribe; and the City of Aleknagik. Participants also took part in learning retreats with local mentors and elders. Three of these Ciulistet interns then received offers of full-time jobs.



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progressing in their leadership and their learning and just watch how they grow.



CIULISTET TNC worked with local organizations to help create Ciulistet, a locally led leadership development program for the next generation

Inspiration for Ciulistet also came from the success of the [Sustainable Southeast Partnership \(SSP\)](#) in Southeast Alaska. SSP is a collective impact network of tribal governments, community-minded organizations, Native corporations, culture bearers, businesses and others, including TNC, who are working together on a range of cultural, ecological and economic issues in a region recovering from an over-reliance on an unsustainable extractive industry. At its heart, SSP creates a space for local people to steer local conservation and community development efforts.

Andrew and a cohort of other young leaders, including AlexAnna Salmon of Igiugig, Judy Jo Matson of Naknek and Clinton Boskofsky of Chignik Lake, took a deep dive into the workings of the SSP in 2019 when they traveled to Kake, Alaska to attend the partnership’s ten-year anniversary retreat. That retreat was a demonstration of how communities and groups who might have been at odds over a range of issues—often, the pace of logging in the coastal temperate rainforest—are listening, building trust, and coming together around shared values.

“To see everybody’s ability to trust each other and dive right into the work at hand was so cool,” Andrew says. “It captivated our whole group. The cohesiveness and the relationships that people had established was beautiful and inspiring to all of us.”

Now in Bristol Bay, that inspiration has proved to be powerful as Ciulistet builds trust and creates relationships with peers and mentors for emerging leaders in Bristol Bay.

Andrew says she sees tremendous possibility ahead. “Knowing there are young adults out there like them in our region who want to connect and learn, and giving them a chance to do that has been super inspiring,” she says. “Yeah, I’m really excited to see where these young adults end up.”