Alaska’s JustUS Network: Indigenous Leadership to Strengthen Climate Response

A collaborative thought paper by the JustUS Network with support from Native Nations Institute, Raven’s Group, and Alaska Venture Fund
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Cover photo by Nalikutaar, Jacqueline Cleveland.
JustUS Network: Centering Indigenous Peoples in Climate Response

Indigenous peoples in Alaska should be at the center of global climate response.

We are on the frontlines in the climate crisis. We are experiencing the effects of climate change in real time, such as rapid coastal erosion and melting sea ice, threats to subsistence plants and animals, and corresponding stresses to our health and wellbeing. Climate change is an existential threat for Indigenous peoples in Alaska.

Further, we have a long history of surviving and thriving with few resources in unforgiving conditions. Our relationship to our lands and environment is our institutional knowledge. This deep knowledge and care for the land is the expertise the world needs in order to effectively address the climate crisis. We are at a pivotal moment where we have an opportunity to realign Western institutions to reflect Indigenous institutional values and principles.

Elevating Indigenous voices in our global climate response requires and advances Indigenous self-determination. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 and by the United States in 2010, states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination” and to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”

Indigenous peoples’ rights and wellbeing are at stake in the climate crisis, and Indigenous people must be at the center of U.S. and global climate response. This paper, developed by a network of concerned Alaska Native leaders, describes a pathway and principles for reaching this vision.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the Bezos Earth Fund for providing grant funds to support this work. We thank the JustUS Network participants who shared their time and insights with this project and who work daily to strengthen our people and planet. We also thank Nikoosh Carlo for contributing ideas and concepts to this paper.

1 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
Background and Context

In spring 2022, the Alaska Venture Fund (AVF) assembled a diverse group of Alaska Native leaders interested in elevating Indigenous approaches to climate change mitigation and adaptation and in reasserting the primary role of Alaska Native nations in the stewardship of their lands and waters. This report summarizes the work carried out by this group, with support from the Native Nations Institute and Raven’s Group, on behalf of these goals.

This effort was galvanized by the U.S. federal government’s Justice40 Initiative, which promises that “40 percent of the existing benefits of major US infrastructure investments, including in climate and energy, will flow to people most affected by environmental injustice, and whose communities were left out of or harmed by previous infrastructure investments.”

AVF sought to create an Alaska Native council that could take a leadership role in the state’s responses to Justice40 and support development of a framework to guide the achievement of Justice40 objectives in Alaska. AVF envisioned the council and framework not only as ways to address practical, near-term barriers to the success of Justice40 investments in Alaska Native communities but also as ways to harness the transformative opportunities that Justice40 offers for greater Alaska Native Tribal self-determination.

Initially called the “Justice40 Council”, the group evolved into the JustUS Network. The Network will focus on advancing and building sovereignty and self-determination in Alaska in order to actively address climate challenges while creating sustainable economic and capacity building opportunities for tribes and communities.

Development of the JustUS Network and Framework

In early 2022, Jonella Larson of AVF reached out to eight Alaska Native leaders, inviting them to participate in brainstorming efforts around the creation of an Alaska Native Justice40 Council. Through the series of meetings and discussions, the group of individuals shifted the focus from a Justice40 Council to the founding of the JustUS Network:

- Melanie Bahnke, President and CEO, Kawerak, Inc.
- Andrea Burgess, Global Director of Conservation in Partnership with Indigenous Peoples and Communities, The Nature Conservancy
- Nikoosh Carlo, Founder and Chief Strategist, CNC North Consulting
- Dalee Sambo Dorough, former International Chair, Inuit Circumpolar Council
- Karlin Itchoak, Alaska State Director, Wilderness Society
- Joe Nelson, Chairman of Sealaska Corporation
- AlexAnna Salmon, President, Igiugig Village Council
- Charlene Stern, Vice-Chancellor for Rural, Community, and Native Education at the University of Alaska Fairbanks

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2 Justice40 Initiative
Ahead of or shortly after the group’s first meeting, Stephen Cornell and Miriam Jorgensen of the Native Nations Institute at University of Arizona interviewed each participant about their interests and commitments concerning climate change mitigation and adaptation and tribal self-determination in Alaska.

The group met five times between April and September 2022—three times virtually and twice in-person. Facilitated conversations initially built on interview themes, including group members’ concerns about current approaches to climate change adaptation and mitigation in Alaska, the need for a new approach built up from the practice of Alaska Native self-determination and self-government, the meaning of collective self-determination and tribal government in the Alaska Native context, and opportunities for action that implicated both Justice40 spending commitments and a greater voice for tribes.

By summer 2022, work shifted to development of a framework for Alaska Native engagement with the Justice40 Initiative. In collaboration with the Native Nations Institute and Raven’s Group, the group created this document with the hope of motivating others—including state and federal entities and people as well as Indigenous people and entities—to participate in the work and to stay at the table as core players in this collaborative effort.

**Animating Themes and Questions**

The following themes and questions helped frame the group’s conversations. Appendix B includes more elaboration on these themes.

- **Vision and values:** What kind of world do we want to leave to our children?
- **Strengths:** How do we present as a united front and build on our strengths?
- **Sovereignty and self-determination:** How do we realize our sovereignty and self-determination in all realms, starting with climate change and climate justice issues?
- **Climate strategies and solutions:** What would an Indigenous climate strategy look like?
- **Land and related resources:** From an Indigenous perspective, what would a “conservation economy” look like, and how would it affect future generations of our people?
- **Tribes and Corporations:** How do we emphasize a different “bottom line,” one that looks not to next year’s results but to the next generation’s inheritance, broadly conceived? How do we identify shared goals and work together?
- **Political bureaucracy:** How do we overcome western political bureaucracy and frameworks that put us into conflict with our Indigenous values and practices?
- **Education:** How do we use education to create the leaders we need?
- **Healing:** What does a shift from transactional to regenerative approach look like?
- **Success on our own terms:** What does community and Tribal success look like when it is defined by us?
Through the process of conversations, participants coalesced around the following ideas about the JustUS Network’s approach:

- We will be a network rather than a council or other body that implies representation. Individuals and various entities are welcome to participate as they are inclined and able. The name “JustUS Network” was chosen to focus on justice (broadly understood), on climate change work that is done by and with Alaska Natives to advance tribal self-determination, and to point out that in the face of comprehensive climate change there is no “us” and “them”—there’s just us.

- Self-determination is key to Alaska Native peoples’ effective involvement in climate mitigation and adaptation. Operationalizing this idea requires (1) recognition of Alaska Native peoples’ right to determine the future of their lands through their status as the original stewards of those lands; (2) recognition of Alaska Native peoples’ right to participate as governments in discussion, analysis, policymaking, and implementation of adaptation and mitigation strategies; and (3) Alaska Native peoples’ ability to participate—to exercise self-determination—effectively.

- We will use the JustUS Network to advance Alaska Native voice and tribal self-determination over a wide range of concerns. Pressing present interest in conservation and climate change mitigation makes this set of issues a convenient place to start, but these issues are not the sum of the group’s ambitions for greater Alaska Native voice in decisions affecting Alaska Native people and their lands and for strengthened tribal self-determination and self-government.

- The Network’s efforts will be guided by Indigenous values, thinking, and knowledge. Particular attention should be paid to resetting relationships between Native and non-Native peoples, between human and nonhuman realms, and between past, present, and future generations. Healing, reciprocity, accountability, and other Alaska Native cultural values should be at the forefront of planning and action.

A Note on Alaska Native Entities

The modern Alaska Native organizational world is complicated. In addition to Tribes and regional Alaska Native corporations, there are dozens of Indigenous organizational entities with a range of purposes and responsibilities. Further, while we talk about Alaska Native villages as individual Tribes, many neighboring villages and Tribes are closely related to each other, sharing language and history and cultural responsibilities for specific lands and waters.

While this range of entities brings strengths, it has costs. The patchwork of organizations waters down Tribal sovereignty. Tribes and corporations sometimes find themselves at cross purposes. Neighboring villages may have a long history of close kinship and collaboration, but the current structure may pit them against each other in competition for funds or resources.

Indigenous leaders in Alaska are at a pivotal moment to interrogate current structures and rethink organizations and entities - less as obstacles and more as potential tools that could serve greater shared purposes. A restructuring of the current system might empower us all.
The JustUS Network’s Guidance for Those Engaged in Climate Change Action

The Alaska Justice40 framework aims to advance the intertwined goals of (1) increased Indigenous environmental stewardship, which increases Alaska’s potential to address climate change, and (2) strengthened Indigenous self-determination, which provides opportunities for and supports Indigenous stewardship.

The framework was developed by the core JustUS Network members with support from the Native Nations Institute and Raven’s Group. The framework offers a set of guiding ideas for all parties committed to effective climate change adaptation and mitigation in Alaska. It consists of a purpose statement, a position statement, guiding principles, actions, and intended outcomes. These are described below and summarized on one page in Appendix D.

1. Purpose Statement

To advance Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in Alaska to actively address climate challenges.

2. Position Statement

Local Indigenous knowledge in Alaska can transform humanity’s relationship with the world.

Creation of successful climate adaptation and mitigation solutions requires a radical change in how we, as stewards of this earth, make decisions. Indigenous peoples have a tradition of making decisions not only on the basis of short-term considerations, financial or otherwise, but on behalf of generations yet to come and the world they will inherit. That kind of long-term, generational thinking and decision-making is required if we are to effectively address the climate crisis: centering Indigenous intelligence creates a respectful and balanced world for our future ancestors.
Centuries of effective environmental stewardship and a tradition of multi-generational decision-making have equipped Indigenous peoples of Alaska with knowledge essential to building effective climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. Implementing that knowledge and decision-making lens will require Indigenous self-determination: the freedom and ability of Indigenous peoples to make key decisions regarding management of their lands and resources, to pursue their own visions of environmental and economic sustainability, and to play an equal partnership role with other governments in environmental and natural-resource decision-making.

3. Guiding Principles

The following ideas are intended to help guide all parties committed to effective climate change adaptation and mitigation in Alaska.

**Indigenous knowledge is a critical resource in climate change mitigation and adaptation.**

Until the last two centuries, Alaska Native peoples’ ways of life had a light touch on the environment and a nurturing impact on the living beings that depended on the lands, waters, and air for sustenance and survival. Many contemporary Alaska Natives were raised in communities where life depends on localized understanding of the land, environment, and ecosystems. These unique place-based relationships inform the values, identities, and knowledge systems of Alaska Native peoples today and constitute unique resources for climate change mitigation and adaptation. This Indigenous knowledge must put to use for the sake of people and the planet.

**Indigenous decision-making traditions offer an essential basis for climate solutions.**

Long ago, in an Iroquois tradition shared in various ways by many Indigenous Peoples, the Peacemaker instructed us to make decisions on behalf of those yet to come, “those faces that are looking up from the earth, each layer waiting its time, coming, coming, coming.” The burdens of climate change will be borne most heavily by our children, our grandchildren, and those who follow. The current generation has to be responsible to them. This will require a change in our decision-making from short-term gain to long-term sustainability.

**Indigenous self-determination is a necessary component of any successful climate strategy.**

If Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge are to play their essential role in climate crisis mitigation and adaptation, Indigenous Tribes, nations, and communities need to be self-determining. It is not enough to participate in programs designed elsewhere. Success will require Indigenous self-determination and a belief among Indigenous peoples that their priorities and choices are driving climate actions. Indigenous self-determination has been shown to be the most effective policy approach for addressing the complex challenges facing Indigenous peoples. In places where tribal self-determination has flourished, Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities have experienced improved outcomes, from reduced social problems to increased economic prosperity.
Collective, coordinated, Indigenous-led action is needed at all governance levels.

Effective Indigenous action to address climate change will need to occur at multiple organizational levels, from villages or groups of villages to the statewide level. While efforts by individual communities are important, coordinated initiatives at multiple levels can magnify impact. Statewide and regional Alaska Native entities, grassroots Indigenous organizations, and Tribes are all key actors in addressing climate mitigation and adaptation. Shared cultural values and shared goals for cultural continuity, land stewardship, and Indigenous wellbeing can guide collaborative decision making and action.

Relationships that respect the sovereignty and priorities of Tribal Nations are essential.

Self-determining and self-governing Indigenous nations are critical partners to federal and state governments and other non-Indigenous institutions (corporate, non-profit, educational, etc.) trying to address climate change. To effect true change and implement successful climate response activities, relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous entities must be founded on trust and recognition of Tribal self-determination.

Ongoing investment and funding in Indigenous capacity-building efforts is required.

In many Alaska Native communities, self-determination and self-government—and, therefore, effective partnership—face significant capacity challenges. Indigenous success in efforts to address climate change, exercise effective environmental stewardship, and achieve economic prosperity will depend to a large degree on addressing these capacity challenges. We need investments that increase the capacities of Indigenous nations for sustainable, value-driven, collective self-government. One critical area is institution-building: helping Tribes build governing institutions that reflect their cultures, can mobilize their peoples, and can produce and implement decisions.

4. JustUs Network Desired Long-term Outcomes

The following are desired long-term outcomes that will result from the Network’s collaborative and strategic planning and efforts:

- Development and adoption of a statewide approach to climate change mitigation and adaptation centered on Indigenous values, knowledge, and self-determination.
- Increased awareness and understanding of self-determination in Alaska and its impact on climate change mitigation and adaptation and on environmental stewardship goals.
- A new, government-to-government relationship between Alaska Native peoples and the State of Alaska, moving away from client-patron relationships and toward collaborations and partnerships that treat Indigenous peoples as equals in addressing climate change and other challenges.
- Increased equitable and practical engagement of Alaska Native people, nations, and organizations in climate strategies across the state.
- Enhanced Indigenous capacity to translate core values and goals into environmental stewardship, cultural continuity, and effective governance.
- More resources to directly address climate-related and other challenges Indigenous people face and to yield better outcomes for all Alaskans.
5. JustUS Network Member Identified Projects and Actions

In identifying projects and actions that will advance the goals and long-term outcomes of the JustUs Network, three categories emerged: I) Support Alaska Tribes to strengthen their sovereignty and self-determination, II) Strengthen relationships to land and environment in the time of climate change, and III) Increase funding for tribal capacity building. These actions are expanded in Appendix C. The ideas below are not meant to be an exhaustive list.

Sovereignty and self-determination are key components of Native Nation building. Nation Nations Institute describes Native nation building as the process by which a Native nation strengthens its own capacity for effective and culturally relevant self-government and for self-determined and sustainable community development. The text box on page 11 shares core principles for effective Native nation building. ³

Projects identified include:

I. Support Alaska Tribes to strengthen their sovereignty and self-determination.

- Develop a JustUS Network response to Biden administration policies that invoke the importance of Indigenous knowledge and culture, stewardship, and nation-to-nation relationships with Tribes.
- Build support for Tribal government resolutions promoting Indigenous leadership on climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Develop an Indigenous capacity-building strategy that focuses on Alaska Native core values and needs.
- Build an organization for self-determining, self-governing Alaska Native nations.
- Provide meaningful education, training, support, and networking opportunities in tribal self-determination and self-government.
- Organize a statewide event to discuss the practical meaning and requirements of self-determination and self-government.
- Organize an event that highlights stories of successful self-determination and self-government.
- Develop classes on Alaska-focused Native Nation building for tribal governance and capacity building for Alaska Tribes and Alaska Native organizations.
- Create a virtual platform for story sharing about effective self-determination and self-government.
- Seek ways to partner with other players working on behalf of Indigenous peoples and purposes—from Tribes to corporations to grassroots organizations—in the self-determination and climate change mitigation and adaptation effort.
- Create an accountability tool that allows Alaska Native entities to assess state, federal, and other funding programs against Indigenous standards, principles, and goals.

³ University of Arizona Native Nations Institute. What is Native Nation Building?
II. Strengthen relationships to land and environment in the time of climate change.

• Support development of tribal land use plans.
• Establish Indigenous guardian and stewardship projects.

III. Increase funding for tribal capacity building.

• Work to increase philanthropic and grant support to advance the work described above.
• Work to establish long-term, ongoing federal funding streams that honor the federal government’s trust responsibility to Alaska Native peoples.

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5 Core Principles for Native Nation Rebuilding

*Native Nations Institute*

- The nation makes the major decisions: Native nations that have been able to assert self-governing power have significantly increased their chances of sustaining development on behalf of their own goals.

- The nation backs up authority with competence: The chances of sustainable development rise as Indigenous nations put in place effective, non-politicized dispute-resolution mechanisms and build capable bureaucracies.

- Governing institutions match community beliefs about how authority should be organized: Institutions that reflect Indigenous conceptions of appropriate ways of governing are more effective at creating and sustaining thriving Indigenous communities.

- Decisions are made with long-term priorities in mind: Native nations that are successful in achieving their goals tend to approach development not as a quick fix but as a means of building a community that works.

- Individuals who recognize the need for fundamental change and can engage with community to make that happen: In Native nations that are achieving their goals, there is typically a group of individuals who recognize the need for fundamental change in the way things are done and can bring the community along with them in shaping the future they desire.
Appendices

Appendix A. Glossary

**Alaska Native nations:** There are 279 federally recognized Alaska Native nations/Tribes/tribal governments in Alaska. Alaska Native nations are the seat of sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples in Alaska. They are separate from—although they collaborate with—the 198 village corporations and 12 regional corporations that derive from the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

**Self-determination (Alaska Native Tribal self-determination):** In the specific context of U.S. law, tribal self-determination means that Native nations themselves, rather than federal or state government agencies, decide priorities (particularly funding priorities) and manage tribal resources. In the broader context of international law, tribal self-determination is the right of an Indigenous People (Tribe) to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their own economic, social, and cultural development goals.

**Sovereignty (Alaska Native Tribal sovereignty):** Sovereignty is the inherent authority of a People to govern themselves; it includes the authority of a nation to organize its government, preserve its culture, protect its lands, and oversee its economy. In the context of U.S. law, an Indigenous nation’s sovereignty includes that nation’s right to form its own government; to make and enforce laws; to tax; to establish and determine citizenship; to license and regulate activities within its jurisdiction; to zone; and to exclude persons from tribal lands. Hundreds of treaties, along with the Supreme Court, the President, and Congress, have repeatedly affirmed that tribal nations retain their inherent powers of self-government. These treaties, executive orders, and laws have created a fundamental contract between Tribes and the United States.

Figure 2. Tundra. Photo by Nalikutaar, Jacqueline Cleveland.
Appendix B. Expansion of Key Themes and Questions

This appendix shares some reflections of participants to provide more insight into the thinking behind the JustUS Network’s theory of change and recommendations.

- **Vision and values:** *What kind of world do we want to leave to our children?* We asked ourselves, in regard to the future of the planet, the future of Alaska, and the future of Indigenous peoples, we need a 100-year plan, and maybe even that isn’t long enough. We need to think multi-generationally. We need leaders who are culturally centered, have integrity, and think long-term.

- **Strengths:** *How do we present as a united front and build on our strengths?* We get framed by outsiders as disadvantaged; we’re the subject of dozens of social programs. Every program is supposed to address a problem, something that’s wrong with us. We need to flip that: we’re advantaged by so many things, among them our continuing relationship to the land (the essential core), our resilience, our tradition of innovation, and our commitment to future generations. One of our strengths is diplomacy; we had to get along with each other across cultural and language boundaries.

- **Sovereignty and self-determination:** *How do we enact our sovereignty and self-determination in all realms, starting with climate change and climate justice issues?* Sovereignty means we govern our lands and ourselves. It means the freedom to build the relationship with the natural world that we want. It means we say who’s a Tribal citizen. It means the stewards of the land own the land. Self-determination means that we determine the challenges we need to address, and we decide how to address them. Right now, these decisions are made by others. That limits what we can do in relation to climate change.

- **Climate Strategies and Solutions:** *What would an Indigenous climate strategy look like?* Alaska Native residents living in rural locations know the land, and they are the front-line observers of climate change. They’re key to an effective climate response. Instead of funding externally determined climate programs, we should fund villages, tribes, or communities to address climate issues in the ways that work best for them and for their lands. Additional questions to consider are: would the strategy be regional; rooted in the local community; involve shared governance? Should the federal government provide funding for such strategies just as they do for Land Use Plans? How would we measure economic “success” in the context of climate response, and does success still mean growth?

- **Land and related resources:** *From an Indigenous perspective, what would a “conservation economy” look like, and how would it affect future generations of our people?* What’s the Tribal role in land, waters, wildlife? We need a co-management model where all land is Native land/Tribal land in that Native people/Tribal citizens have responsibilities to the land regardless of ownership status. Is some sort of “concurrent management”—perhaps analogous to joint tenants in common in western property law—a model for federal-tribal cooperation? ANCSA/ANILCA ignored water rights. Is that a potential opening for new relationships, a wedge into other issues? Jurisdiction and the land relationship are directly tied to intergenerational survival, including food security, which already is substantially affected by climate change. Any development of our lands and waters should prioritize the subsistence way of life—and be linked to a regional or local Indigenous climate change strategy (introduced in the “climate” bullet above).
• **Tribes and Corporations:** *The new era of creating effective climate change strategy plans requires us to move beyond the institutional focus. How do we evolve and adapt to the modern times to adapt and respond to the rapidly changing climate and environment and not be bogged down by “management” or “bureaucracy” that gets in the way of our traditional stewardship practices.* We need a safe space to talk about big issues. Western political bureaucracy and the dysfunction that comes from operating from western frameworks that put us into direct conflict with our indigenous values and practices. The new era of creating effective climate change strategy plans requires us to move beyond this distracting institutional focus. If “the bottom line” is what matters to the corporations, how do we redefine it? How do we emphasize a different “bottom line,” one that looks not to next year’s results but to the next generation’s inheritance, broadly conceived? How do we get corporations and Tribes to share goals and to work together? How do we get corporation and Tribes that already share goals to recognize that they do? How do we get away from the “versus” mentality that focuses on institutional interests—corporation vs. Tribe—and instead focus on the mutual need to be good relatives and responsible stewards? Some change is happening now: Indigenous stewards of our lands and waters are joining some of the corporate boards.

• **Education:** *How do we use education to create the leaders we need?* Education compacting could have a big impact; it allows us to gain some control over the education of our children. Values, stewardship, Indigenous knowledge—all are critical to our future and essential to education. It would help us build a new generation of leaders who know who we are, our history, our values, our relationship to the land, and our long-term goals—preparing the next generation of Alaska Natives. We need to bequeath to future generations a sense of purpose, a shared responsibility to each other and to the land. We should talk to the older people and ask them: “What were the characteristics of the leaders you looked up to when you were younger?”

• **Healing:** *What does a shift from transactional to regenerative approach look like?* A growing focus in a lot of our work is healing. For example, we’re seeing organized thematic sessions on critical issues such as boarding schools, trauma, the loss of language and traditional ways, etc., with an emphasis on wholeness and relationships. A lot of people are working on this. Among other things, “doing” can be a path to healing—for example, enlisting people in a shared purpose, a shared effort; building collective self-determination can be a healing process: the reassertion of Indigenous voices, decisions, and relationships to the land and each other. Healing, not stealing.

• **Success on our own terms:** *What does community and Tribal success look like when it is defined by us?* We are advancing in ways that stem from our community. There are examples of things that are working, and we can look to them and learn and adapt more broadly. Tribes are growing in their own capacity to operate within/along the confines of their western structures. Tribes are interrogating structures and adapting to increase impact as they see fit.
Appendix C. Expansion of Identified Actions

This appendix provides more detail about identified actions noted in this paper, organized by category.

I. Support Alaska Tribes to strengthen their sovereignty and self-determination.

- **Develop a JustUS Network response to Biden administration policies that invoke the importance of Indigenous knowledge and culture, stewardship, and nation-to-nation relationships with Tribes.** The Biden-Harris administration has sought to recognize and honor Indigenous nations through these and other policies. But implementation of these ideas in Alaska will require additional adjustments to policy and practice, regulations, and possibly statutory law. An Alaska Native response to these orders could clarify the steps necessary to lower barriers to participation of Alaska Native Tribes, Tribal organizations, and consortia, and realize the promise of these ideas in Alaska, especially as they align with the Justice40 Initiative.

- **Build support for Tribal government resolutions promoting Indigenous leadership on climate change mitigation and adaptation.** A model Tribal government resolution could be created and shared throughout Alaska. If adopted by a significant number of governments, it could then be taken to regional bodies. With sufficient support from across the Alaska Native governance landscape, an Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) member organization (i.e., a Tribe or regional corporation) could then propose an AFN-wide resolution for the annual meeting. A statement from AFN, the largest Indigenous organization in Alaska, could provide powerful support for the kind of resource and decision-making realignment that the JustUS Network envisions.

- **Develop an Indigenous capacity-building strategy that focuses on Alaska Native core values and needs.** Among these are language revitalization, natural resources stewardship, and nation-level government. Some options to include in the strategy might be: pursuit of federal or other funding for tribal language specialists and natural resource managers; creation of professional development courses in Alaska Native nation government and the skills it requires; and creation of a donor-advised fund with a focus on capacity building. Across these activities, the focus should be on collective self-determination and governing—i.e., cultural governance, nation rebuilding, strategic thinking, leadership transitions, making law, and intergovernmental relations.

- **Build an organization for self-determining, self-governing Alaska Native nations.** Organizations are risky ventures, prone to self-preservation as a primary goal. Yet there may be a need for an organization devoted to fostering excellence and creativity in Alaska Native nation government. Ultimately, this might be a vehicle for sustaining intertribal (or inter-community) communication about what’s working where in the pursuit of self-determination, land stewardship, intergenerational sustainability, and Indigenous prosperity. Or, it might be a network, an “Alaska Network of Indigenous Innovation and Expertise,” for example, devoted to intertribal communication and cooperation in fostering self-determination, self-government, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and Indigenous wellbeing.

- **Provide meaningful education, training, support, and networking opportunities in tribal self-determination and self-government.**

  - **Organize a statewide event to discuss the practical meaning and requirements of self-determination and self-government.** For self-determination to be effective, it has to be put to work. That’s where self-government comes in. Effective self-government requires consideration of such things as relationships and identity (a shared sense of peoplehood or nationhood), popular support, scale of organization, and capacity to get things done. A core question is, “Who is the collective
‘self’ in self-determination and self-government?” Is it a village, a group of villages, a language group, and/or the population of an area? Every community should be able to participate in governing structures that reflect that community’s culture and purposes. An event or discussion could help communities figure out how best to organize for self-determination and self-government in the context of climate change.

- **Organize an event that highlights stories of successful self-determination and self-government.** The event should focus on sharing relevant, practical, and potentially transferable stories of Tribes, villages, or nations taking effective action to address the issues they face. A conference or event offers the opportunity for participants to network, learn directly from one another, ask questions, and begin to form partnerships.

- **Develop classes on Alaska-focused Native Nation building for tribal governance and capacity building for Alaska Tribes and Alaska Native organizations.** Classes would address the practical challenges of self-determination and effective self-government, helping Tribes rebuild their self-governing capacities, center core values, and move beyond a primary focus on social service programs to a longer-term strategy for cultural continuity, environmental stewardship, and community prosperity and wellbeing. Classes would also include technical assistance, thought conversation, examples of what’s working well and why, and would ideally help connect participants to philanthropic partners. Classes could be offered via Zoom and potentially hosted by a college or university.

- **Create a virtual platform for story sharing about effective self-determination and self-government.** Alaska Native Peoples need easy ways to begin sharing stories of successful self-determination and self-government—stories of communities, Tribes, and nations that have found their own ways to address a problem or a challenge, including the challenges produced by climate change. Such stories demonstrate the potential of self-determination as an effective strategy for increasing Indigenous community wellbeing. For example, Alaska Venture Fund’s Aywaa Storyhouse is an emerging effort of exactly this sort.

- **Seek ways to partner with other players working on behalf of Indigenous peoples and purposes—from Tribes to corporations to grassroots organizations—in the self-determination and climate change mitigation and adaptation effort.** Partners can collaborate in specific initiatives and can help generate and spread conversation about how to organize, what to do, what to demand of federal, state, and NGO partners, how to be good partners, and how accountability should be organized (i.e., to whom, for what?).

- **Create an accountability tool that allows Alaska Native entities to assess state, federal, and other funding programs against Indigenous standards, principles, and goals.** For illustration, questions that might be asked of any proposal, grant opportunity, or outside initiative could include:
  - Does the proposed relationship, program, or activity support or undermine Indigenous self-determination?
  - Does the proposed relationship, program, or activity, if successful, advance Indigenous goals? For example, does it advance the wellbeing of current Indigenous citizens? Of future Indigenous citizens? Does it support Indigenous land stewardship? Will it increase Indigenous capacity for effective and self-determined government? Will it reduce Indigenous dependence on outside decision-makers and funders?
  - Will the Indigenous nation(s) or community(ies) involved in this relationship, program, or activity be involved as full and equal partners in a collaborative effort, or will they be primarily recipients of goods or benefits?
  - Do the long-term benefits of this relationship, program, or activity outweigh the costs?
II. Strengthen relationships to land and environment in the time of climate change.

- **Support development of tribal land use plans.** Support Tribes’ development of comprehensive land-use plans from a community perspective. Such plans would consider land relationships with other owners and where to prioritize land acquisition and where to prioritize land management. These plans can serve as guiding documents to help the Tribe make decisions and move toward self-governance and stewardship of the community’s ancestral lands and waters.

- **Establish Indigenous guardian and stewardship projects.** Across Alaska and the globe, Tribes are pursuing a return to Indigenous stewardship, applying Indigenous knowledge and traditions to return to a more balanced relationship with the land and its inhabitants. These projects take many forms. Models in Canada (Indigenous Guardians) and elsewhere can serve as examples and inspiration for this work. *We recognize that the words management, stewardship, guardians, and other English-language terms are inadequate to convey the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the lands, waters, animals, and plants.*

III. Increase funding for tribal capacity building.

- **Work to establish long-term, ongoing federal funding streams that honor the federal government’s trust responsibility to Alaska Native peoples.** Funding is central for advancing all of the activities described above. Ideally, funding should be sustained and provided with flexibility and certainty so that Tribes and Alaska Native entities can make important and durable decisions about its use. Activities and efforts should focus on establishing long-term, ongoing federal funding streams in light of the government’s trust responsibilities to Indigenous peoples in the U.S.

- **Increase philanthropic and grant support to advance the work described above.** Philanthropic and grant support will continue to be critical, along with partnerships with universities, nonprofit organizations, and other entities. It will be important to educate potential partners and funders on Alaska Native self-determination in the use of funds. It may be necessary to decline funding opportunities that do not provide for self-determination or align with Indigenous or community values and priorities (see assessment tool mentioned above).
### JUSTUS NETWORK POSITION STATEMENT

**INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SHOULD BE AT THE CENTER OF GLOBAL CLIMATE RESPONSE**

Solving the climate crisis will require the active participation of Indigenous peoples and incorporation of Indigenous knowledge. Effective involvement of Alaska Native peoples requires Alaska Native self-determination: the right to participate as governments in discussion, analysis, policymaking, and implementation of adaptation and mitigation strategies, and the right, as the original stewards of Alaska’s lands, to co-determine the future of those lands.

### FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

- Indigenous knowledge is a resource for climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Indigenous decision-making traditions offer an essential basis for climate solutions.
- Indigenous self-determination is a necessary component of any successful climate strategy.
- Indigenous community-level efforts need to be accompanied by coordinated Indigenous-led action at regional and state levels.
- Trusted relationships with federal, state, and local governments and non-governmental organizations that respect the sovereignty and priorities of Tribal nations are necessary to effect true change and implement successful climate response.
- Investing in Indigenous capacity-building efforts on all fronts is necessary for effective self-determination and partnership.
- Indigenous rights and well-being are at stake in the climate crisis.

### IDENTIFIED ACTIONS

- Develop a JustUS Network response to federal Executive Orders aiming to strengthen Indigenous self-determination and improve government-to-government relationships with Tribes.
- Build support for an Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) resolution in support of Indigenous climate-response leadership.
- Organize events, classes, and a virtual platform for learning about self-determination and self-government and sharing success stories.
- Build an organization to advance self-determining, self-governing Alaska Native nations.
- Develop an Indigenous capacity-building strategy that focuses on Alaska Native core values and needs.
- Create an accountability tool to assess state, federal, and other funding programs against Indigenous standards, principles, and goals.
- Partner with others working on behalf of Indigenous peoples and purposes—from Tribes to corporations to grassroots organizations—in the self-determination and climate change mitigation and adaptation effort.

### PURPOSE AND GOALS

Advancing sovereignty and self-determination in Alaska to actively address climate challenges:

- to support the intertwined goals of increased Indigenous environmental stewardship and strengthened Indigenous self-determination.

### INTENDED OUTCOMES

- A statewide approach to climate mitigation and adaptation centered on Indigenous values, knowledge, and self-determination.
- Increased understanding of Indigenous self-determination in Alaska and its importance.
- Increased engagement of Alaska Native people, nations, and organizations in climate strategies across the state.
- Enhanced Indigenous capacity to translate core values into stewardship, cultural continuity, and effective governance.
- More resources to address climate and other challenges and better outcomes for Alaska Native people, state and federal governments and all Alaskans.