

Tuyanitun (Central point trails)

Indigenous place name marker proposal

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Wayfinding and geolocation are the inspirations of my proposed design for a future series of markers that denote the indigenous Dena'ina names of places and geographical features on the Kenai Peninsula to be installed systematically over time as they are individually sourced and approved. These posts that resemble the region's iconic boreal spruce will not only be emblazoned with traditional names nearly lost from memory, but they will also act as individual parts of a larger concept that pays tribute to the ancient Dena'ina system of navigation. The knowledge of this system has only been recorded in trace oral histories and linguistic studies, but evidence of how it was used thrives today and can be found in many contemporary place names.

Before the introduction of the compass and the universally known concept of North, South, East, and West, the Dena'ina culture of today's southcentral Alaska and Cook Inlet had their own system and language for navigation and in use for centuries. Like other cultures of the continental northwest waterways were an important factor in communicating distance, however, the unique patchwork of this region's geography added more complexity. Rather than having one universal system that all communities used which could result in confusion, the Dena'ina made use of two (and possibly more) mirrored central points of navigation depending on which part of the region the locations are in that each use the same system of directional terminology.

On the Kenai Peninsula, which historically uses the Outer Inlet dialect of Dena'ina, this center point of directional origin (*Tuyan*) is at a freestanding high point in the Caribou Ridge area approximately 25 miles northeast of Homer and 16 miles southeast of Ninilchik. From this point there are five directions that extend from it and the Dena'ina language describes locations as how far things are close to or away from the point origin along one of five directional lines.

One of these directions, called *Yunch'*, is anchored to the direction of the today's Deep Creek River from Tuyan to *Tikahtnu* (Cook Inlet). It can be viewed as the "main direction" as the river is the shortest water access route to the ocean from Tuyan. The other four directions roughly radiate around the point of origin evenly in addition to *Yunch'*, which is slightly more northwest than true west. The other four directions are:

- *Yutsem*: Towards Kasilof, Kenai, and Kalgin Island, north-northwest
- *Yunit*: Towards Lake Tustumena and Sterling, north-northeast
- *Yuneq*: Towards Caribou Hills and Kenai Range, east-southeast
- and *Yudur*: Towards Homer Spit and the mouth of Kachemak Bay, south-southwest

Based on this system my proposed designs are markers composed of graduated naturalistic shapes to mimic the *ch'wala* (boreal spruce) and the *tinitun qalnigi* (stone trail markers) used to mark trails between settlements, campsites, and important spiritual places. Along with their respective place names each marker will also display the name of the general traditional direction that point is located in. To further communicate its distance relative to Tuyan, the number of bead-like layers will be equal to how many graduated 5-mile wide rings are between the marker and Tuyan.

The materials for these structures would ideally be reclaimed sources as a testament to the cultural dedication of environmental stewardship. These would include of transportation grade metals for the main metal posts, bases, caps, and round interpretive beads to honor ancient copper metallurgy, and translucent cast glass or recycled plastic acrylic for the stone shaped layers to reference sea glass beads, iconic to modern coastal culture and representational of Dena'ina seafaring and economy. These markers would also include a solar cell to power a light source either on top of or embedded within the pole to give a subtle illumination to the translucent elements in the night. This would both add an additional dimension of artistic value and a valuable safety measure, especially for vision during the long dark winters.