

Dialogue on First Nations Environmental Health

Feb. 14, 2008

University of Northern BC
Summary Report

Co-hosted by the BC Leadership Chair for Aboriginal Environmental Health, the First Nations Studies Department, and First Nations Environmental Health Innovation Network.



First Nations
Environmental Health
Innovation Network

On February 14, 2008, the First Nations Studies Department, the First Nations Environmental Health Innovation Network, and the BC Aboriginal Chair for Environmental Health hosted a dialogue session on environmental health at UNBC. Three knowledgeable First Nations Elders were invited to share their experiences of the cultural and environmental changes that have occurred over time in their traditional territories.

The Elders in attendance were Catherine Coldwell, from the Nak'azdli First Nation; Gisday'wa Alfred Joseph, from the Wet'suwet'en Nation, and Denimgyet Art Matthews, a Gitksan Elder. We were fortunate to have these three knowledge holders gather for the day at the university. Students, faculty and community members took in the great breadth and depth of knowledge from these three esteemed Elders.

This dialogue is the first of its kind at UNBC, in bringing together the host departments and the focus on environmental health. With the development of the First Nations Environmental Health Innovation Network underway, it is timely to seek guidance from First Nations Elders on the environmental health issues their communities are facing. This dialogue is intended to be the first in a series, with potential to host future sessions in other regions, and at UNBC.

The entire day of dialogue was recorded digitally and audio CD's are available for the participants, where requested. Permission of each speaker was sought in recording their words, and we hope that we have captured their voices and perspectives in a good way.

Discussion Themes:

Catherine Coldwell was the first Elder to speak, and she explained that First Nations community members have witnessed a significant decrease in the health of their lands and people over the last century, in areas where industry has been building infrastructure and extracting resources. Species are disappearing quickly, and disease rates continue to increase. The medicines and other sources of healing that involve gathering plants or otherwise interacting with the natural environment are scarce or inaccessible to many First Nations people today.

One speaker explained that within many communities, the concept of *health* is interconnected and holistic, and involves connecting with the natural environment for physical sustenance and rejuvenation. This exchange has a positive impact on physical, mental and spiritual health, and provides Elders with opportunities to educate and interact with youth. Healer and Dakelh Elder Grace Rossetti said that a lack of respect for ones self and for the

environment has a devastating effect over time on social and environmental health; another participant explained that the lack of acknowledgement and respect demonstrated by most industries for existing First Nations community land use has a similarly devastating effect over time. First Nations communities can advise and guide industrial activities towards harm reduction and impact reduction; however the advice offered by many community members is not regularly heeded by industry.

Revitalizing language and culture is another important aspect of environmental health, as this re-establishes identity and builds relationships between land and people. Alfred Joseph explained that bilingualism, i.e. fluency in ones traditional tongue *and* learning the language of one or more neighboring nations is an important component of language revitalization, as this brings to life cultural stories and ontological concepts. Another participant explained that every place has a story that belongs to someone's family. Fyre Jean Graveline, Chair of the First Nations Studies Department, suggested that the next Elder's dialogue could be held somewhere in the natural environment, on the land, in further recognition of both the people and the places being discussed.



Nak'azdli Elder Catherine Coldwell, with her Granddaughter Jennifer Mackie, a student in Community Health Sciences at UNBC.

Long ago, the people lived-it was nothing for a person to live 100 years, and they were all brought up on the land they were given. The creator placed us on this land and said here's your land, here's your language, and here's the food you're going to be surviving on. That's how the creator placed us on this land. And our Elders observed that. They lived off the land. There were no doctors, they had their own doctors, they had their own midwives; the children were brought into this world naturally. So, the creator says, fine, that's good, you're living good. And, these outside people came in and said no, you're supposed to live this way, you do this or do that, or else you're punished. But, you know, like my Elders, I see them, grew up with them, ever since I was a child. The medicine they took off the land, the trees; I see my Mother cooking that stuff and healing people. And I still see it today, with some very few Elders that have the gift of healing people. Mentally and physically. And, we really have to pay attention to these things. These things we have to grasp onto.

-Catherine Coldwell, Nak'azdli Elder

The more I work with communities the more I understand how important the environment, clean air, clean water, proper housing is to First Nations communities and all communities; environment means a lot more to the well being of the people. And of course this is something I have learned, that these things have a direct impact on the healthy living of the people.

-Laurie Chan, BC Leadership Chair for Aboriginal Environmental Health, and UNBC Professor, Department of Community Health Sciences

One of things that I've found with research over the years is that research can only be successful if we are responding to what the communities are asking for instead of sticking to our own pre-conceived agenda.

-Dr. Fyre-Jean Graveline, Chair of the First Nations Studies Department



First Nations Studies Chair Fyre-Jean Graveline and UNBC students listen during the First Nations Dialogue on Environmental Health

I've been raised to live with and for the land. I was raised by my Grandparents, since the day I was born. And I have seen a lot of changes. Of disrespect. And dishonor. To our lands. By and for greed. Greed and power. But like us, the old people said, things will change. The land will fight back. The land will take the power back where it belongs, to the people, the keepers of the land. We, are the keepers of the land. What are we going to do, to take back the power that was bestowed upon us, by the old people? We are the generation that is going to make a difference, I was told...The things that we carry as knowledge is not for ourselves, but for the nation. And I think that, when we go back, to remember who we are, the world will become right.

-Marianne Whitefish, UNBC Student, Cree First Nation

Some loggers, who came from head offices down in the States or Montreal, just destroyed the territory and were gone. Of all the money they made, they never left any money to re-plant. After they took all of this, with nothing left but a few spots for First Nations to work on, the government came around and the First Nation signed on with the Minister of Forest for a new program they had...getting money out of the bug kill that used to be controlled by the people who know the territory. When they see these things come, they would burn them, to control pests. But we no longer can do that, you go to jail; but this is how we controlled the pests that would come around and after burning, they would get something else from that burn, new berries, new plants, etc. Not only did people not destroy what was there, but they also had something new as well...Some people say we're trying to stop industry and we're not, we're just trying to help them. And just because they are not doctors and we don't have letters behind our names, they don't listen.

-Art Matthews, Gitxsan Elder



(L-R back row) Gitksan Elder Art Matthews, Dr. Laurie Chan, Dr. Ross Hoffman, Dr. Fyre-Jean Graveline. (Front row L-R) Wet'suwet'en Elder Alfred Joseph and Nak'azdli Elder Catherine Coldwell.

And as First Nations communities, we look at everything as a whole, and we know, we come from that spiritual space that everything is interconnected. We don't allow things to fall into categories. We un-categorize things when we talk about things. We include everyone.

-Ivy Chelsea, UNBC student, Alkali Lake First Nation

...My heart really got attached to that issue, that the Gwich'in people are facing across Alaska and Canada,

with the Porcupine Caribou herd and the possibility of drilling that they face every year in the sacred place where life began. And I followed their movement to an Arctic Refuge Rally that they held, in Washington DC. They were outside the capital, as Bush and the Bush administration was trying to push to have their energy bill include the Arctic refuge in it, you know opening the Arctic refuge up to oil drilling... Many other Alaskan native people had come, Tlingit, Haida, Aleut; they were all there to show solidarity to the Gwich'in against drilling in the Arctic Refuge... And in this issue, a particular standpoint is being pushed, and pushed, and pushed, yet that basic fundamental understanding hasn't yet occurred, between the two groups. And I don't know that it ever will. But, that's something, why I'm doing what I'm doing and continuing. Trying to find that understanding.

-Brooke Boswell, UNBC student, Community Health Sciences

I'm going to talk a little bit about a great big boulder, a rock, that used to be in Hagwilget Canyon. Maybe the size of this room. 10 feet high. That rock fell in about 1820, into the Bulkley River. Our people were living in Moricetown but they used to come down there to fish too. But one year, the fish didn't come in Moricetown. So they sent runners down the river, who came to Hagwilget and the river was blocked. Fish weren't getting up. So, they came back and told people about that, so the people moved down there to catch the fish, below where the blockage was. But they were worried about the fish; the fish weren't going to get to the spawning grounds. So when fishing season was over, they all moved down to Hagwilget from Moricetown, and started clearing the west and east side around the boulder. They made an opening about 10 feet wide on both sides. But it was after they cleared it, it was all white water from there down to, quite a ways down

the river. So, they managed to clear that. Then they moved down there. And it took them days. They did it little at a time. They moved down there and they cleared, maybe one side. The next year they opened the other side. Just one boulder fell, and created more whitewater. So, the fish, had to get to the spawning grounds after that, were a little later than usual. The water was so strong, that the fish came and they had to lay below the falls, for maybe a week or two. All that time, they are jumping out of the water, all over the canyon. What they were doing was building up their strength, to tackle that falls. So, it made it easier for the Wet'suwet'en to catch the fish. Finally, after about 130 or 40 years, department of fisheries all of a sudden got interested. We have to remove that boulder, that is still there. But our people said no. The fish have established their timing, to get to the spawning grounds by that time. And they fought over meeting after meeting with fisheries. People that came from Takla, Bear Lake, Babine, and from Stella'quo, Nadleh-all used to come down there to fish and have their annual feast and discuss everything that happened over the years. So, they came every year. They always did that, because the fish in Babine don't get there until September on the Skeena, and further out in the Bulkley, that flows from Morice Lake. People who live further up river all came down to Hagwilget, to the settlement feast. They all came and met the spring salmon. After trapping all winter long, in Babine, Bear Lake and Takla, it was nice to get to a little bit warmer climate in Bulkley, where the breeze from the Pacific Ocean is closer, 100 or 80 miles. Summers are warmer, winters are warmer. So they come down for a sort of a holiday. But they head about the fisheries coming in. The DIA were right behind the fishery. The federal government watched that rock, wanted to remove that rock, but our people said no, we don't want that. And they got the backing from Bear Lake people, from Takla, Moricetown, Stella'quo-they all backed him and the Hagwilget people. And the department of fisheries, kept saying, it's going to improve the fishery in the canyon. Yet our people said no, you are not going to remove that rock. So they met from 1949-50 to 59. For 10 years. They fought they DIA and said no, you are not removing that rock. Finally the DIA said all right, we're going to remove that rock, whether you like it or not. You won't give us your permission to remove it, so we'll go to Ottawa, to the parliament building, get an order in council. Then, you can't do a thing, you can't stop that. In 1959, they finally blew the rock out. The people from the neighboring areas, like Babine and all them people, they fought along with us and said no. They blew that rock out anyway, in 1959. That was the end of the fishing in Hagwilget Canyon. Once that rock was removed, the water came down, no more white water. All smooth. And the fish, never stopped there, they just went right through. And then, the DIA, before the removal told us, if the fish don't come, if you're fishing just stops, we'll supply you with fish from other areas. We'll supply you canned fish, carloads/railcars full of fish, to compensate for that. So when the fish didn't come, there was still

no-they never lived up to their promise. Finally they did, around 1965-6- they gave us a little bit of fish from other areas, like Vancouver Island, other spawning areas, but they fish was all from the spawning areas down the Pacific Coast, Adams River and all them places, and they were already spoiled. By the time they delivered them to Hagwilget, it was pretty well-all red and green. So, we wouldn't accept that. That's when they, a few years later, supplied us with other canned salmon. But, the department of fisheries, finally admitted-they said, we were wrong in removing that boulder. It was supposed to improve the spawning. But it didn't. Why it didn't, was the fish that went right through the Hagwilget Canyon got to the spawning area too early. It threw off their timing. They were all fat, by the time they got to their spawning area, so it didn't improve on the Bulkley. And that was the mistake they just admitted to. Yet they give us little compensation and then forgot about it. So, we feel, our people in the village, that Dora Wilson was the chief councilor when all that, after everything was blown out. And Hagwilget Canyon was just dead. Nothing. Nobody was catching fish. It was too fast for net fishing, and too slow for gaphing. So it was, nobody caught anything. Another thing happened-a way of life, gone. When Dora saw that, she went after the government, for funding. She finally got a few dollars, to open a small cannery. That funding ran out too. By the time she got this little cannery going, already one generation was gone. They didn't know how to handle the fish, the young ladies. They didn't know how to clean the fish. When the program started, they all came to the building and started cleaning fish. They all wore white blouses and everything nice. They just didn't know how to clean it. So, some of the Elders that new, showed them how to split the fish. Some were for canning, some for smoking, but they had to learn all over again how to split the fish, how to dry it. It took a little while for the young people to catch on. It was the exercise they needed, over the centuries, packing fish out of the canyon. About a thirty foot drop from the suspension bridge to the bridge and they had to pack the fish all the way up. They packed fish out of the canyon, all summer long. When fishing was finished at the end of August, then they went up the mountains for berry picking, ground -hog hunting, and mountain goat. So all the young people were in very, very good shape, then. But you go there today, and that's gone. We were up in Fairbanks, in 1988 for our language conference. Catherine was there. And there were people from Takla who came up there-one of them came to us. He used to visit Hagwilget when he was young, when the fishing was really good, when people had smoke houses all over. But one of his sons was married in Hagwilget. He came down to visit his son's wife's family. He said, when I go into the canyon, after being there as a young person, he was a bit older than me, -'when I saw that canyon,' he said, 'I had a good cry. That used to be the happiest place on earth, when the fish was running good. But when I went there, there was nobody in the canyon. Nobody fishing. You couldn't

catch fish.' Today, it's like that. So, that happened in 1959. We went to court for land claims. That was included in the court. But yet, there's nothing happening. So, after the court case was over we started on that. Today, we're still fighting that. I think the last commissioned evidence that I did about a month ago, at Hagwilget, with the fishery, lawyers, our lawyers, and we're just waiting for what we're going to do. But the judge told them, federal judge said to our professionals-settle this case, right now, -said-if you go to-if they take you to court , if you have to go to court it will cost you 4 or 5 times what it will cost you to settle out of court. So, that really affected the people's health. When they went down there, when you could pack fish up that steep hill, and you're down there nearly 24 hours a day, it really makes you really; it's like jogging every day. Mountain climbing everyday. So all the young people, they were all in good health.

-Alfred Joseph, Wet'suwet'en Elder

When they saw what happened in the Nechako River [the ice-jam currently on the Nechako River in Prince George causing flooding], they said there must be something about what the First Nations did that blocked the river. There were burial spots there at one time [the Cheslatta Carrier Nation whose burial grounds were flooded by the damming of the Nechako River]. This is our spiritual belief, and if you don't respect and follow our laws, something bad will happen. And our spiritual belief says that destruction will happen. Just because scientists can't prove it doesn't mean that it's wrong or unbelievable.

-Art Matthews, Gitxsan Elder