

# It's all about relationships: First Nations and non-timber resource management in British Columbia

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## **Abstract**

This article summarizes several examples of management approaches used by First Nations currently managing for non-timber forest resources (NTFRs). It outlines recurring themes that underlie these approaches, and highlights noteworthy accomplishments or concepts of potential relevance to natural resource policy, planning, and management. A central argument is that to understand how First Nations manage for NTFRs and why they often choose not to maximize profitability of commercially useful products, you must first understand the relationship between First Nations and their territories. The article concludes with the recommendation that land use decision makers collaborate more with First Nations and consider incorporating their approaches to realize the social, economic, and ecological benefits stemming from holistic stewardship of NTFRs.

**KEYWORDS:** *British Columbia First Nations; management approaches; non-timber forest resources.*

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## Introduction and background

In our attempt to better manage non-timber forest resources (NTFRs) within British Columbia, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are all on the same journey, together. We know this in our hearts.

Aboriginal land use planners see that many levels of government, industry, and non-government organizations (such as universities) have begun to seriously engage First Nations in the realm of NTFR management. We suggest to you that the application of First Nations principles for sustainable forest management will have far-reaching, beneficial effects in British Columbia. In seeking to manage these resources sustainably, the opportunity will inevitably arise again and again to foster healthy ecosystems, to improve rural livelihoods for First Nations and neighbours alike, and to provide old solutions to new problems faced by rural communities.

The purpose of this article is to open the eyes and hearts of people to the opportunities of working together and promoting the NTFR sector from a First Nations' perspective. We strongly advocate that, as changes to forest conditions accelerate over the coming years, we all examine our relationship with the forests that give us life, wealth, and health. We sincerely hope that this article will encourage forest managers to consider possible benefits that might arise by adopting or working with a First Nations' perspective.

First Nations recognize the commercial potential of non-timber forest products. Nevertheless, saleable products are not all they see when they look at a forest. Among other things, a forest is a breadbasket, a medicine chest, a toolbox, a building supply store, a training centre, and a home. Most First Nations do not normally think first of the commercial potential of these resources, though the commercial aspect is still present. For this reason, we refer here to all the things we can derive from the forest, whether they are saleable or not, as non-timber forest resources.

First Nations often say that they see themselves and their relationship to their traditional lands as integrally connected, indivisible, and usually existing over very long periods. This relationship governs how they view the world, and what their part in the world is. A Carrier Sekani principle says, very simply and directly: "Look after the land and it will look after you" (Carrier Sekani Tribal Council 2006). This demands reciprocity of relationship between the Carrier Sekani and their territory. The implication of a two-way connection

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changes the approach to managing for NTFRs to not purely an extractive relationship. The Carrier Sekani people take what they need from the land, and then they must give back to it in equal measure.

It is often difficult to translate that strength of relationship directly into the English language given that concepts may not translate exactly. For example, the Gitksan term, *laòò'ys* roughly translates as "time-depth," which does not mean "eons," "centuries," or "ages." Instead, it carries connotations of a way of living with the land, and a relationship that has lasted thousands of years. *Laòò'ys* is but one example of an Aboriginal term that carries major implications for management of NTFRs. In this case, management has to include strong consideration for sustainability over the long-term—and in some cases, long-term sustainability has to trump short-term profit.

Returning, for a moment, to the Carrier Sekani vision and guiding principles for management and protection of their land, several common themes centring on their relationship to the land emerge. Here we condense a selection of points into one paragraph.

*We are part of the land ... our living and lives come out of the land ... the land is part of our family and we are part of the land ... all life forms are interconnected and sacred ... sharing and co-existence are the cornerstone of Carrier Sekani resource use (Carrier Sekani Tribal Council 2006).*

These principles are echoed throughout most, if not all, land use planning ethics described by First Nations within their home communities. They apply to what will be harvested and by whom; when it should be harvested and how; for which reason and where it should be done. Each First Nation carries a profound sense of responsibility the English language calls "stewardship for the land" but which differs from that parent-child view in that the relationship between the individual or community and the land is much more intimate and equal.

In the First Nations view, humans do not have dominion over the land, as some might interpret from the Biblical passages. Instead, in keeping with our disproportionate ability as humans to alter the landscape, we have a matching responsibility to manage our own actions to ensure the health and sustainability of the land and all the creatures that depend upon it. This worldview clearly has profound implications for management of NTFRs.

First Nations have also clearly understood the economic potential of the wealth of resources available to those with the intention to exploit them. There are many examples of pre-contact and early contact situations where First Nations traded with each other and European explorers. The popular Canadian Museum of Civilization publication, *Tsimshian Narratives 2: Trade and Warfare*, yields many stories of encounters between First Nations, their neighbours, and Europeans that led to trade agreements for desirable resources. Moreover, early post-contact trade agreements with businesses such as the Hudson's Bay Company established local First Nations as efficient middlemen and suppliers of desirable local resources.

However, it's not just in the past that others have relied on partnerships with First Nations. Recent developments demonstrate a growing respect within academia, industry, and government regarding the traditional values and management of NTFRs from a First Nations' perspective. For example, in her article "Doing it right," Nancy Turner articulates the need to address concerns about commercial non-timber forest product harvesting among the First Nations People (Turner 2001). Another recent article by the Sustainable Forest Management Network, entitled "Benefits of aboriginal land use studies," focusses on the preservation of traditional First Nations culture and their relationship with the land and each other (Kopra and Stevenson 2007). These articles are just two examples, but they document the recognition and need for government and industry to work with First Nations to sustainably manage these resources, and to appropriately involve First Nations in natural resource management within British Columbia.

When First Nations look at the forest, they see more than simply economic potential. They see a personal relationship, where give and take is the norm. They see a relationship with the forest and everything in it that extends over very long periods of time. They acknowledge a responsibility to ensure the health and well-being of the forest and all who depend upon it.

They see clearly that sometimes a decision must be made to not maximize profit if doing so would harm the well-being of another species; however, they also see that a decent living can be made from buying and selling some of the resources as long as sustainable harvest standards are observed. It is within this sensibility that we explore a few of the most recent developments of management of non-timber forest resources from a First Nations' perspective.

## Examples of First Nations traditional non-timber forest resource management

As First Nations traditional values are increasingly incorporated into forest management within British Columbia, we will attempt to describe a few examples and success stories from specific First Nations. We wish we could summarize every First Nation's approach to NTFRs; instead, we have chosen very specific examples, acknowledging that many other inspiring stories remain to be told.

### The Tsleil-Waututh story: Leading within the system

The Tsleil-Waututh Nation occupies the area now known as the Burrard Inlet and Indian River Watershed. They call themselves "People of the Inlet" and they "have lived in and along our inlet since time out of mind." (Tsleil-Waututh Nation 2004a). In their Declaration, their sense of responsibility to care for the land is clear.

*We have always been here and we will always be here.*

*Our people are here to care for our land and water.*

*It is our obligation and birthright*

*To be the caretakers and protectors of our Inlet.*

(Tsleil-Waututh Nation 2004a)

Today, their territory is among the most heavily impacted areas in British Columbia. The impacts are so severe in nature and extent that the provincial government has identified the Indian River Watershed as one of the top 10 priority watersheds for restoration. The Tsleil-Waututh people take seriously their responsibility to care for the land and resources (Tsleil-Waututh Nation 2004b).

In other land use planning processes where First Nations are engaged at the consultation or stakeholder level, some communities have entered either unwillingly or not at all. In the Tsleil-Waututh's case, a First Nation is leading the provincial process in the Indian River Plan for

the first time (Tsleil-Waututh Nation 2004b). They see their role very much as:

*bringing balance to discussions where environmental concerns and economic demands are in conflict, for the good of the land and water, resulting in sustainable outcomes*  
(Tsleil-Waututh Nation 2004b).

The Tsleil-Waututh clearly see themselves as being present in land use decisions over the long term. Their vision for the watershed is that:

*the river will be healed, the salmon will flourish, the forest will be carefully harvested, meaningful training and jobs will be provided, and Tsleil-Waututh culture will flourish*  
(Tsleil-Waututh Nation 2004b).

The Indian River Plan is necessarily tied to management of the Say Nuth Khaw Yum Heritage Park/ Indian Arm Provincial Park. Because of its proximity to Greater Vancouver, this park is also a popular place for a diversity of recreational users.

In 1998, a management agreement was signed between the Tsleil-Waututh Nation and the Province. The agreement created a partnership between the two parties to co-manage all aspects of the park. It established a management board with equal representation from Tsleil-Waututh Nation and the British Columbia government to provide recommendations to the Minister regarding management and operations. It is a partnership based on co-operation, shared values, and mutual respect (Tsleil-Waututh Nation 2004c).

When the Tsleil-Waututh engage in provincial government processes, they do so as equals. They bring to the table a sense of deep connection to the land that draws as much from the knowledge that they can derive benefits from the resources as from the need to protect their land from exploitation. In doing so, they help bring balance to the conflict between economic and environmental interests.

### **The Tla'amin story: Leaders in adapting to survive**

Changes to British Columbia's economy today are rapid and sometimes severe. The Tla'amin, also known as the Sliammon, located just north of Vancouver, are using their traditional teachings to help them survive these changes. The Tla'amin are engaged in late-stage treaty negotiations with the Province of British Columbia

and the Federal Government. The Tla'amin have a clear vision for the future. They say:

*Tla'amin people, through Ta'ow (our teachings), will empower the community to be healthy, self-governing stewards of the land. With full jurisdiction, we will provide certainty by creating economic and employment opportunities, capacity, and sustainability through knowledge and responsible leadership for future generations*  
(Sliammon Natural Resources Committee 2005).

The Tla'amin share common experiences with other urban First Nations located very close to, or within, major towns and cities. Finding sources of strength and guidance has been a challenge, but the Tla'amin have found it in their roots, their traditional past. *Ta'ow*, their traditional teaching, covers all aspects of life, including managing for resources. Some examples and principles of *Ta'ow* that are most relevant to management of NTFRs include:

- Minimize human influence on the land
- Support family-maintained hunting and gathering areas
- Practice selective hunting and gathering
- Seasonally rotate harvesting sites
- Rituals to give thanks to the creator for all of nature's gifts
- Implement replanting and reseeding systems
- Take only what you need, and find a use for every part of what you take
- Trade with other nations
- Take care of the land and it will take care of you

The Tla'amin use each of these as guiding principles, changing how land use decisions are made. It has been said that some of British Columbia's clearcuts are visible from the moon. Although applying "minimal human influence" certainly changes clearcut sizes, it also helps ecosystems retain features important to resiliency, such as old-growth nodes, complex forest profiles, or sensitive wildlife habitat. Similarly, using every part of what is taken reduces the amount of waste in industrial processes. Being mindful to "trade with other (First) Nations" supports and helps stabilize a greater local economy.

Adopting a Tla'amin viewpoint when making land use decisions might help local communities better survive economic downturns. It might even help them become better local stewards of initiatives such as community forests.

### The Nisga'a Lisims story: Leading with a new system

Whereas the Tsleil-Waututh people are recognized for leading within an existing provincial process, the Nisga'a have created an entirely new process; one where they set the context, the terms of reference, and the regulations. The Nisga'a have been very forward-thinking in the realm of NTFR management and one example is their management of pine mushroom habitat and harvesting within Nisga'a lands.

Of the many NTFRs available for harvesting, pine mushrooms (*Tricholoma magnivelare*) are the most commonly sought after, fetching prices that often range between \$33–44/kg for top quality, to \$2.20/kg on the lowest end for the poorest grade.<sup>1</sup> Despite the sometimes wildly fluctuating prices, the serious picker can generate substantial income during the 2-month mushroom season.

Although wild edible mushrooms have been widely collected in the Pacific Northwest since the 1860s, it was only during the 1980s and early 1990s that large-scale commercial harvesting expanded (Hosford 1997; Pilz 2001). In British Columbia, the pine mushroom is currently the most economically important commercial species of wild mushroom harvested from the forest (deGeus 1995; Wills and Lipsey 1999; Cocksedge and Hobby 2006). The pine mushroom resembles the Japanese matsutake (*T. matsutake*) and is shipped almost exclusively to Japan where the retail price for fresh matsutake can exceed \$440/kg (Berch and Wiensczyk 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Before the signing of the Nisga'a Treaty, mushroom harvesting in the Nass Valley was as unregulated as most of the rest of the province. On their own land, Nisga'a pickers competed with massive annual influxes of seasonal pickers from all over British Columbia. They also competed with logging interests—some of the best timber in the valley coincides with some of the best mushroom habitat. Little attention was paid to questions of sustainability of harvest, nor of balancing economic interests. All this changed when the Nisga'a settled their treaty.

The Nisga'a now govern their lands and are able to make the autonomous decisions necessary to manage

their natural resources. The Nisga'a Lisims Government (NLG) through its Department of Forest Resources regulates the harvest of botanical forest products including pine mushrooms using an area-based permit system.<sup>3</sup> The Nisga'a have an entirely new system of policy, enforcement, permitting, and land use planning unprecedented in British Columbia. As signatories to the first modern treaty, the NLG currently regulates a broad range of commercially interesting botanical forest products, including 11 mushroom species and fiddlehead ferns. The NLG Department of Forest Resources now requires pickers and buyers to purchase annual permits if they wish to operate within Nisga'a lands, and penalties may be assessed for those without a valid permit. This is intended to control the numbers of harvesters and buyers, and indeed, recent interviews with locals indicate that fewer transient harvesters come to the Nass Valley.<sup>4</sup>

Sustainability (and dependability) of harvest has long been desired as an outcome of non-timber forest product forest planning. Nisga'a harvesters have used their traditional ecological knowledge from hunting and other food gathering activities to help them locate prime pine mushroom picking areas. This knowledge, along with contemporary ecological knowledge, has assisted the Nisga'a in their economic development of the pine mushroom sector and First Nations' land stewardship values have served as a guiding influence for developing sustainable harvesting practices (Menziez 2006).

Though some pickers indicate harvest levels are relatively stable in recent years, others suggest that harvest levels are in an overall decline. Logging is one of the activities commonly attributed as a cause of decline, and to this end, NLG has enacted the following regulations to provide special protective measures to prime pine mushroom habitat, as well as other botanical forest products:

- Forest management decisions will consider cumulative effects on the appropriate habitat for botanical forest products across all of Nisga'a lands;
- Access to harvesting areas for botanical forest products will not be unduly restricted by forest management practices;
- Land use decisions within the botanical forest products zone will be supported by an assessment of botanical forest products habitat; and

<sup>1</sup> Dow, K. 2007. Commercial development of non-timber forest resources: A case study of pine mushrooms in the Nass Valley, Nisga'a Lisims First Nations Territory, British Columbia. Unpublished report.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

- No incompatible use will be permitted in areas identified through the assessment process as productive pine mushroom habitat.<sup>5</sup>

No other area of the province has so thoroughly integrated regulation of NTFR activities (i.e., permitting harvesting and buying) with regulation of timber harvesting activities (i.e., habitat management). It is too early to say how this first effort at management integration will fare, but the Nisga'a have initiated the first NTFR–forestry management program that others can learn from, and potentially apply in other areas of British Columbia.

Although the NLG has been proactive and advanced in its resource management efforts, enforcement of harvester permitting remains a challenging issue. Interviews with buyers indicate that, at best, a compliance rate of 60% among harvesters was the norm in 2006–2007. The farther pickers are from Nisga'a core lands, the less compliance with harvester permitting is observed.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding these observations, the reader should not conclude that management for pine mushrooms in the Nass Valley is failing—far from it. Instead, there is much to learn from the experiences of the Nisga'a in developing regulations for NTFRs.

### **Traditional use and commercial development of NTFRs by the Siska Indian Band: Reconnecting with tradition and the land**

Located just south of Lytton on the Trans-Canada highway, the Siska Band is a member of the Nlaka'pamux First Nation. The Siska people have become actively engaged in NTFR management and largely use these resources for traditional and subsistence purposes; however, they are also involved with the commercial side of NTFRs. Recently, they established Siska Traditions, a community-owned business that makes specialty soaps, salves, jams and jellies, and other NTFR products. Although some Band members are quite cautious about the commercial development of NTFRs, the resulting effect of NTFR harvesting has been mostly positive. Band member (community) harvesters describe cultural bridges built between generations that many thought had been lost. Siska Traditions has helped reconnect people to the land and to each other. In addition, community members predict this reconnection will lead to stronger use and

occupancy claims established in the Siska traditional territory regarding natural resource uses. Ultimately, Siska Traditions may positively influence its ability to have these resources protected for future use (Sampson 2005).

Working with local First Nations to manage for NTFRs, whether for local consumption or commercial development, can help communities reconnect to the land and each other. By making the opportunity available, land use decision makers can help communities heal themselves, and gain independence.

### **The Carrier Sekani story: Leaders in creative thinking**

Finally, the Carrier Sekani provide an example of how managing NTFRs might support a healthy nation. There is considerable research towards, and evidence for, a clear linkage between First Nations traditional diet and their health (Wortman in Schanfarber 2007), and in particular a strong case for using NTFRs to combat Type 2 diabetes. The Carrier Sekani Family Services advocates an innovative solution to addressing the diabetes epidemic in Aboriginal communities:

*“It’s taken 50 years to bring us to this point. We can’t afford another 50 to undo the damage. By increasing the availability of traditional and quality foods through land use planning and the re-building of communities, both on and off reserve people can become healthy once more.*

*The [Land and Resources Diabetes Initiative] concept is based on evidence that some individuals with [Type 2 diabetes] can drastically improve their quality of life within months. We believe that applying this principle to whole communities can result in improvement for all in a very few years.”<sup>7</sup>*

Although unconventional in approach, this project is unique in that it seeks to directly connect land use planning with health services. This intriguing concept focuses on the reciprocal relationship discussed earlier in the article: the health of the land and the health of the people are connected. To have the one, you need the other.

An unconventional partnering of land use planning and health services could help communities leverage limited funding. Economic solutions could help reduce rising health service costs.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Carrier Sekani Family Services. 2007. Lands and Resources Diabetes Initiative, 2007. Unpublished report. For a full account of the CSFS Land and Resources Diabetes Initiative, contact the Carrier Sekani Family Services at: <http://www.csfs.org/pages/contact/contact.html>.

## Conclusions

We began this article by suggesting that to understand the management of NTFRs from a First Nations' perspective, it is necessary to understand the relationship of First Nations with the land. When applied and integrated with intelligence, openness, and sensitivity, this perspective can help land use decision makers to:

- achieve balance between competing agendas with a focus on benefits to the land and water;
- protect important ecosystem values and processes;
- reflect traditional ecological knowledge;
- stabilize local economies, add value to NTFRs, and meaningfully employ workers within communities;
- proactively draft and implement effective, outcome-oriented regulations for NTFR use;
- help communities bring generations together and heal themselves, and;
- find unconventional solutions to common community concerns based on foundational principles and the recognition that human health and ecological integrity will always be interdependent.

Reflecting the spirit of stewardship that is expressed in the summaries of these First Nations' approaches, it seems only fitting to conclude with an observation. To truly "manage" NTFRs, we need to develop and strengthen our relationship with the land. We need to:

*Take care of the land, and it will take care of you.*

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## Test Your Knowledge . . .

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How well can you recall some of the main messages in the preceding Perspectives article? Test your knowledge by answering the following questions. Answers are at the bottom of the page.

1. First Nations land management could be considered a two-way relationship vs. an extractive relationship with the land.
  - A) True
  - B) False
  
2. The Nisga'a have an entirely new system of policy, enforcement, permitting, and land use planning unprecedented in British Columbia.
  - A) True
  - B) False
  
3. The Sliammon First Nation teaching of *Ta'ow* supports all of the following principles except:
  - A) Minimize human influence on the land
  - B) Practice selective hunting and gathering
  - C) Rituals to give thanks to the creator for all of nature's gifts
  - D) Maximize profits and take care of yourself
  - E) Take only what you need, and find a use for every part of what you take

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**ANSWERS**

1. A 2. A 3. D