

Coast Salish GATHERING

Quw'utsun Territory – January 24-26, 2007



For the environment's sake

When the Coast Salish Gathering was held in late January in Cowichan territory, it was an historic renewal of ancient relationships. But the Gathering was more than a family reunion for

the Coast Salish from Washington State and British Columbia. It was called by leaders from both sides of the international border over common concerns about the environmental damage that is

changing the way of life lived by all creatures of the world. Both federal governments as well as state and provincial governments sat alongside their Coast Salish counterparts.



Together for the Salish Sea – Chief Harvey Alphonse of Cowichan and Brian Cladoosby of Swinomish were joined by government representatives from the US, Canada, Washington and British Columbia in signing the deer hide map.



More than one person spoke of the time before the arrival of 'Europeans'; the not-so-distant past, a time in recent oral history when the Coast Salish were living along the shores of what some now call the Salish Sea, the area around Puget Sound in the state of Washington and the Georgia Strait in British Columbia.

Environment the focus

Leaders representing many of the 100 Coast Salish nations gathered at the Quw'utsun' Conference Centre on Vancouver Island. There was talk of dead zones along our coast, and the effects of environmental and cultural pollution that have caused us to lose our way.

SALISH SCIENCE

They have to include our own scientists – the knowledge keepers, the people who are looking after our resources. We really respect the scientists, but we haven't had a good relationship with them. Traditional knowledge needs to be recognized as well.



The Gathering served as a stark warning of what may be coming for all of us – the *mustimuhw* – if we don't change our ways.

The fish... the fish. Here around the Salish Sea, it's the salmon that is the canary in the coalmine among the Coast Salish.

The Pacific salmon has been more than the lifeblood for thousands of years, but now they are hurting.

Salmon are being fished out. Immigrant Atlantic salmon are bringing disease and genetic weaknesses. Rivers are drying up in late summer, making it more difficult to spawn. And there's more flooding in winter, washing away eggs and fry.

It's impossible to separate culture and environment for the Coast Salish. The environment is hurting and the pain is felt within us all.

Change coming fast

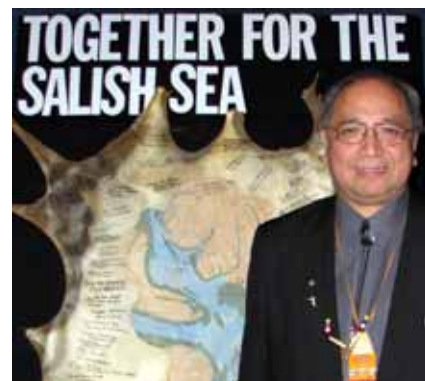
Terry Williams, commissioner of fisheries and natural resources, Tulalip Tribe, told the Gathering that:

"This is the first time so many chiefs have been concentrating on one issue since Custer rolled into town."

He said rapid change is upon us. "The Salish Sea population is predicted to double in the next 25 years. Climate change is happening five times faster than first thought. Change is coming fast."

He said that now is the time for governments to engage the Coast Salish people to find solutions.

"We're good planners. We've been planning for 10,000 years. Our tribal traditional knowledge will give science a foundation to work from."



Messages from heart

Two visitors from the North brought special messages – messages from the heart.

Clarence Alexander is the former Grand Chief of the Gwich'in people in northeast Alaska. But when he talked about flowers or leaves on trees, he cradled his arms and it was like he was talking about his grandchildren. His people, the Gwich'in, listen to flowers singing.

Clarence spoke of the recent work of the peoples who live along the 2,300-mile Yukon River watershed.

"We have a mission. Our land is precious because it is our whole way of life..."

"We are making ourselves known. Who we are is going to save the world. If all things go bad, we will still survive, because we know how to live off the land."

"We are teaching our youth to be not only teachers, lawyers and health providers, but traditional survivors."

Harold Gatensby is Dahka Tlingit, living in Carcross, Yukon Territory, about 1,200 miles from Clarence. "Before European contact, we all had the same laws."

IT'S WAR!

What we're doing here is declaring war on pollution.
Chief Gibby Jacobs, Squamish

Every living thing in creation is family. Everybody knew these laws, but now we've forgotten them.

"And now the earth is dying... We have an important message to deliver to humanity."

"We've gotten so much from the earth. Now it is time to give back."

Are we too late?

Stephen Point of Sto:lo Nation, who is chief commissioner of the BC Treaty Commission, said:

"Something is happening. The animals are telling us..."

"We're at a critical time as people of this earth. The scientists are telling us we have a deadline to meet. Are we already too late?"

"It's funny that we are just coming to a time when aboriginal people are taking the first steps in economic development."

"But we've seen the impacts of technological developments over the past 200 years. We can't afford to make the same mistakes."

"As much as I encourage our communities to get involved, the first question has to be: How is this going to impact the environment?"

'It's a dead zone'

Billy Frank Jr, chair of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, said:

"Puget Sound is a dead zone. It's gone and no one is doing a damn thing about our backyard that's dying."



"No one cares about the natural world. This is our sustainable community, and it's dead. How do you put a spin on this? This is all documented, but never seen on TV."

"We've got to have hope. We can't stop doing what we're doing. But there are not enough of us. We're being overrun."

"But we have time, us Indian people. We know how to walk slow. 'President Bush will be gone, but we'll still be there. The government will be gone, but we'll still be there."

"We know where we're going every day. We've got that great rhythm of our people, wherever we go."

"The status quo is unacceptable and we've got to change it"

WE NEVER FORGOT

For the longest time, the Coast Salish were formally separated. There was this big border and a whole different culture between us. But we never forgot our relatives. It is important to get back to working together, to support one another and learn from each other.

Ray Harris, Hul'qumi'num



Working Group of Chiefs created

The last morning of the three-day Coast Salish Gathering was expected to be a leisurely affair, with little business being done as words of farewell passed between friends.

But the leaders kept arriving at breakfast time and extra tables and chairs had to be brought into the meeting room.

As lunchtime neared, about 25 people gathered around the head table to make sure the many things talked about over previous days would live on in the future.

They eventually passed a motion to form a working group of Coast Salish chiefs.

This is very important, because in the past there have only been various steering committees created. Now the tribes and nations have stepped



up level of participation to the chiefs.

The working group of chiefs will bring the discussion on the environment to a completely new and higher level.

This will allow us to discuss and fill positions with various levels of governments to act on behalf of tribal governments.

Now we have to find our own people to fill positions. It's a way to work on governance structure to respond to government policies and participate in all the policy discussions on an equal level."

The working group of chiefs has no set leader or spokesperson. This is customary in traditional Coast Salish culture.

In longhouse work, you own the work being done when it is being done where you live. The Hul'qumi'num people own the work that was done at this Gathering.

Many huy ca 'gas to Chemainus First Nation for providing all the wonderful seafood that was served at The Coast Salish Gathering.



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