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Coast Salish Gathering
Swinomish Indian Tribal Community

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Ecosystems in many parts of North America are under severe stress. Pollution, the overuse of natural resources, and habitat destruction threaten local flora and fauna. Conservation attempts often fall short because they target one species or site within an ecosystem. The Coast Salish Gathering demonstrates a more successful approach. It is a forum created by the Coast Salish peoples of the United States and Canada for a trans-boundary integrated response to environmental stress. Representatives of the Coast Salish peoples living in the watersheds of the Salish Sea come together at the annual Gathering where, using a traditional consensus decision-making process, they determine effective environmental strategies, policies, and practices for their entire Salish Sea homeland. Through the Gathering, the Coast Salish people speak with one voice to protect the natural resources that are central to the sustainability of their identity, culture, and lifestyle.

A Vital Ecosystem Under Threat

Since time immemorial, the waters of the Pacific Northwest have supported the Coast Salish people. The area known as the Salish Sea lies on both sides of the U.S. and Canadian border, and includes the watersheds of Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the Strait of Georgia. It is one of the most biologically rich inland seas in the world and is home to an abundance of shellfish, fish, and marine mammals, such as the distinctive killer whale.

Human settlement in this beautiful and lush region has been growing rapidly. Two major urban areas, Vancouver, British Columbia and Seattle, Washington, are located on the Salish Sea, along with the smaller cities of Tacoma and Olympia in Washington State and Victoria, the capital city of the province of British Columbia. The region's population has more than doubled over the last thirty years.

As a result of human activity, Coast Salish tribes in the U.S. and First Nations in Canada have witnessed a significant decline in the health of the Salish Sea ecosystem. The growth in business and residential activity in the area has destroyed virgin habitat for suburban development, stepped up recreational use of waterways, and generated damaging amounts of industrial and sewage runoff. This human encroachment is reducing water quality and displacing the area's wildlife and plants. Some shellfish beds have become so polluted they have been closed to harvesting. Several salmon runs have been ruined and others are significantly reduced.

For the Coast Salish people, the loss of the marine resources that their communities depend on for food and cultural traditions is devastating. The depletion of the Salish Sea impacts the physical health, economic well-being, and spiritual practices of their communities.

The Coast Salish people believe they have a sacred obligation to be good stewards of these resources. For a long time, however, they lacked an effective way to make concerns about their homeland heard. Because the management of human activity within the region falls under the jurisdiction of two countries, as well as state, provincial, and municipal governments, protecting the waters of the Salish Sea is fragmented and complicated from a governance point of view. Individual tribal communities also lacked clout with government officials because of their small populations. Although some government initiatives offered opportunities for public comment, the Coast Salish communities wanted to take a much more active and expansive role given the seriousness of the issues. What was missing was a way to make their collective voice heard in creating a broad plan to protect and restore the entire ecosystem.

A Traditional Gathering

In the early 2000s, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Environment Canada requested tribal and First Nation input on a trans-boundary planning agreement. Coast Salish leaders and elders decided they were “tired of being talked to” and would not participate in a non-Native style consultation. Instead, they proposed an environmental policy gathering along the lines of a traditional Coast Salish decision-making meeting that would bring leaders, elders, and officials together to build consensus on environmental policy for the Salish Sea area.

The first Coast Salish Gathering was held in 2005 with 175 attendees. Chiefs, Chairmen, elders, and staff from over 66 U.S. Coast Salish tribes and Canadian First Nations began a dialogue with key environmental agency officials from federal, provincial, and state governments on goals and plans for the Salish Sea. Since 2007, the Gatherings have been held yearly. They are led by a Steering Committee composed of twelve to seventeen Chiefs and Chairmen chosen by the Gathering. The Committee stays in close contact and meets face-to-face several times a year to keep momentum going. To encourage widespread participation, the member communities take turns hosting the Gathering. Funding for the meetings comes from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Environment Canada, environmental organizations, and individual tribal communities. To date, over 1000 tribal and First Nation representatives have engaged in the Gatherings.

Each Coast Salish Gathering builds on the previous years' work. Following the initial Gathering, the Steering Committee drafted and later adopted a mission statement, declaring that the participants would work together and speak with one voice to protect the Salish Sea ecosystem “for the sustainability of our sacred inherent family rights and values that have been passed on to us by our ancestors.” Subsequent Gatherings have developed policy recommendations, produced an environmental action plan, and identified short and long term goals. Priority issues include access to toxin-free traditional foods, adequate water quality and quantity, and collective climate change policies. The Gathering has also facilitated a partnership with the U.S. Geological Survey to monitor water quality in the Salish Sea during the annual Tribal Canoe Journey. Pairing modern equipment with traditional knowledge, the tribal canoes carry instruments to collect over 52,000 data points on the water, measuring factors like temperature, salinity, and turbidity. The data give the Coast Salish and their

partners scientific information to supplement traditional knowledge and community member observations about the health of the Salish Sea.

Finding One Voice

The Coast Salish Gathering creates a unified front on environmental issues for communities whose voices were once fragmented by geography, history, and politics. Under the traditional consensus-driven model, each tribe and First Nation retains full sovereignty. The Gathering does not speak on their behalf but instead provides the opportunity to develop collective solutions that do not put the priorities of one community above another. By collaborating, the tribes and First Nations amplify their influence. As a result, other governments and organizations now treat Coast Salish nations as valued partners in federal, state, and provincial forums. In one remarkable turn-around, the influential bi-annual Puget Sound Georgia Basin Ecosystem Conference, which had not previously included Coast Salish people, now invites Gathering representatives to play key participatory roles in the proceedings.

At the most recent Gathering, Salish leaders presented in a plenary session on the topic of traditional ecological knowledge. The conference closed with a Coast Salish witnessing ceremony to cement joint ownership and identify critical participants who will acknowledge that they witnessed the event. These witnesses will vouch for the integrity of what happened and ensure that the community at large knows of the event and remembers it in the future.

Certainly, the active contribution of the Coast Salish tribes and First Nations enriches environmental policy in the region. Communities take a broad view of the health of the entire watershed. In an important success, the Coast Salish Gathering helped push for official recognition of the name “Salish Sea” by the U.S. Board of Geographic Names and the Geographical Names Board of Canada. This marks a positive movement toward future policy and science collaboration to address a vital ecosystem. The designation of the name is an historic acknowledgment of the Coast Salish spiritual, cultural, economic, and political connection to their lands and waterways since time immemorial.

The term is not only deeply symbolic of the connection of the Coast Salish people to the area but also reminds policy makers that what occurs in one part of the watershed impacts all of the species that depend on this inland sea. In a similar way, by insisting that the region be treated as an interconnected ecosystem, Coast Salish participation has facilitated cross-jurisdictional collaborations between governments.

As the Coast Salish Gatherings have made crucial contributions towards safeguarding the Salish Sea, they also have had a profound impact on the communities involved. By facing the environmental crisis in a way that is faithful to Coast Salish traditions, the Gatherings have renewed familial relationships, thereby strengthening kinship ties. Participants enjoy traditional food, art work, and dancing. Discussions are often in the Coast Salish language and the meeting is accompanied by drumming and song. One participant notes that a course of action is often revealed by reflecting on how the problem would be spoken in Coast Salish and this deliberation provides clues or directions for action. Elders’ reflections on the past and on what is being lost help focus the conversation on what must be preserved and protected. This real-world example of traditional consensus decision-making reaffirms the cultural ways of the Coast Salish and underlines their on-going relevance to dealing with today’s problems.

Bringing the Lessons Home

Native nations throughout the U.S. face environmental problems that span multiple jurisdictions, and sometimes even international borders. The experience of the Coast Salish people suggests that tribes can work with each other to tackle environmental issues affecting a region and assert their right to participate in decision-making related to the protection of their homelands. By working together to advocate for the region with one voice, the Coast Salish Gatherings have enabled the region's tribes and First Nations to share concerns and develop initiatives to preserve and restore the fragile Salish Sea ecosystem. While much work remains to be done, the Coast Salish people are confident that their traditions will guide their way.

1 When tribal nations speak with a unified voice, they are better able to make an impact on other governments' policies.

2 As Indigenous nations reclaim their borders, they re-affirm and strengthen tribal and familial ties.

3 Ecosystem planning supports environmental sustainability by bringing all the necessary players and information to the table.

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