



COASTAL GUARDIAN WATCHMEN: STAYING CONNECTED DURING COVID-19

Coastal Guardian Watchmen are often focused on home, protecting the local culture, communities and ecosystems of their respective Nations.

However, regional perspectives play a crucial role in the Guardians' day-to-day work, and are a major reason why these efforts are so important.

The Coastal Stewardship Network has been supporting this regional work for years, by planning and facilitating annual gatherings and monthly conference calls (now via videoconference), which give Guardians a chance to learn from others and share best practices.

As issues related to COVID-19 continue to affect communities throughout the North and Central Coast and Haida Gwaii, that regional collaboration and coordination has taken on a new importance—especially for Guardians who often carry out frontline duties above and beyond their stewardship role.

"At our last two videoconferences, Guardian teams were able to update each other about how their respective communities were responding to issues related to the virus," says Jackie Peat, who facilitates the calls each month for Coastal Guardian Watchmen. "It was also a really good chance for them to show support for each other during a very difficult time."

To that end, Peat and others on the CSN team put together a comprehensive package of information and resources related to the virus—everything from the ways to prevent its spread to financial and other benefits that are available for those not able to work under lockdown or quarantine.

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Those same resources were used to help create a new [COVID-19 page](#) on the CFN website, which will be updated as the pandemic progresses. The page will be a resource not just for Guardians but for residents throughout coastal communities.

"Like everyone else, Guardians are feeling the effects of this global crisis; it's been a major disruption for their regular work, including daily patrols and monitoring," says Peat, adding that many are now doing frontline work to protect their communities, such as operating check-points and ensuring Elders are cared for. "Across the board, Guardians are stepping up to keep their communities as safe as possible," he says. "Through it all, they're demonstrating tremendous resiliency and adaptability."

As the roles of Coastal Guardian Watchmen shift in response to coronavirus, CSN is working with CFN Nations to develop safe working procedures and appropriate protective

equipment, which will help Guardians once they fully get back out in the field to safely protect their lands and waters.

Nuxalk Guardian Watchmen manager Ernie Tallio says those updated safety procedures will be crucial as his team begins the delayed patrol season. But they were also very important for Nuxalk Guardians who've been busy [working at the Nuxalk COVID-19 information checkpoint](#) over the last couple months.

"The safe working procedures and PPE [personal protective equipment] have been a huge help at those checkpoints for sure," says Tallio. "But we'll definitely be implementing them once the team is fully back out on the water as well."

Tallio says it may take some time getting regular Guardian patrols up-to-speed again, but he's confident the team has fully bought into the procedures that will make their day-to-day work as safe as possible throughout this ongoing crisis.



PRESERVING THE MIGHTY WANNOCK CHINOOK



The biggest fish that hereditary chief and fish guide Ted Walkus ever landed on his boat was a 72.5-pound Chinook salmon caught and released by a guest on August 24, 2012.

But Walkus wasn't able to lay claim to the biggest catch that day. Three hours earlier a woman from Ontario, who had never fished a day in her life, landed an 83-pound Chinook.

Fish stories of this magnitude are not unusual for the Wannock River that runs through the heart of the traditional territory of the [Wuikinuxv Nation](#). Legendary in size, the Chinook that swim these waters are some of the biggest salmon in the world.

In fact, if you catch a Chinook over 40 pounds anywhere on the coast from Alaska to California, there's a 90 per cent chance it's from the Wannock or the Kitsumkalum River in Tsimshian territory near Terrace, BC.

Concerned about the future of these big fish, the Wuikinuxv Nation joined with partners in 2016 to build the [Percy Walkus Hatchery](#) in River's Inlet to preserve the species for generations to come.

When asked what the biggest threat to salmon is, Walkus responds, "Humanity." He points to past logging, commercial fishing and sport fishing practices, and cautions, "We have to look at the whole picture rather than just a portion of it."

Born and raised in Wuikinuxv territory, Walkus has spent a lifetime fishing in River's Inlet. His late Uncle Percy Walkus started the Oweekeno Hatchery north of Wuikinuxv Village that closed in 1995.

"I've always looked for a champion to bring some awareness to these beautiful animals," says Walkus. He found his champion in Paralympian Rick Hansen and brought him to River's Inlet. "Rick's a wonderful man. An avid fisherman and conservationist."

"I told him my dream was to start another hatchery in our community," the Hereditary Chief explains. "Not only to help salmon but to make a difference for the people who live in River's Inlet."

In what Walkus describes as a "true partnership", the Nation built the Percy Walkus Hatchery with support from the Rick Hansen Foundation, Good Hope Cannery fishing resort, Duncanby Lodge and Pacific Salmon Foundation. It was named to honour his uncle's dedication to salmon conservation.

The first eggs were extracted from the Kilbella and Chuckwalla Rivers in 2016 where the fish numbers were so low, "it took us two weeks to catch 60,000 eggs out of the two systems."

Fast forward four years and 120,000 eggs were harvested in only four days. "It just goes to show you if you give these fish a little bit of help, they're going to rebound."

While last year's egg take in the Wannock River was down, Walkus is excited about this year's return. "It's a bittersweet thing. COVID-19 will shut down a lot of lodges north of us so we'll see whether our chinook get caught as they swim past."

About one per cent of the released fry return every year. "If we get one per cent back, we're happy," Walkus explains, "We don't want to overpopulate the river with hatchery fish."

The local fishing lodges have also adopted a 100 per cent catch-and-release policy. "We used to celebrate who killed the biggest Chinook, now we celebrate who released the biggest fish."

Is Walkus optimistic about the recovery of the king of salmon?

"It's really interesting to see that if you give salmon a chance, if you have a river you can put a hatchery in, it's possible," he says. "We did it here in our little community of River's Inlet. I encourage other Nations to do the same."

FOOD SECURITY DEEPENS A RELIANCE ON ANCESTRAL FOODS IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES



Heiltsuk member Jessie Housty never imagined a time when Pacific Coastal Airlines would shut down all its flights to Bella Bella on the BC Central Coast.

"You definitely feel this sense of remoteness that you don't usually feel here," she says. "And it's woken people up to the reality that the more self-sufficient we are, the more resilient we can be."

In response to COVID-19, the Heiltsuk and other [coastal First Nations](#) communities are ramping up local food programs and relying on traditional harvesting to address food security concerns.

The tenuous nature of the food supply chain for remote CFN communities – most only accessible by air, ferry or water taxi – has been heightened by flight cancellations, supply shortages, and the need for COVID-19 protective health measures restricting travel to larger centres.

While freight continues to arrive to Bella Bella on Campbell Island, Housty says it's hard not to think about threats to food security.

"There's the perceived risk and the actual risk," she points out. "We have an amazing grocery store and people harvesting ancestral foods for the community. But with COVID-19, the security of our supply chain suddenly feels tenuous."

In Haida Gwaii, Old Massett Village Emergency Operations staff report that local food bank numbers have risen from 120 to 320 people biweekly as a result of unemployment from the pandemic. Chief Billy Yovanovich says in Skidegate traditional food harvesting is on the rise.

"A lot of people are gathering octopus and crab on the shoreline along the highway. They're gathering food wherever they can," he says. "Not just Skidegate members but all Island residents."

The Qqs Projects Society under Housty's direction has been hosting food security programs since 2013. When COVID-19 hit, Housty says, the focus switched from land-based group activities to supporting households in its "Granny Garden" movement.

Practically overnight, the Granny Gardens project has grown from twelve to 70 households.

The Society delivers seeds and soil to households and provides garden boxes — made by the local sawmill — for free or by donation. Video tutorials, garden tips on Heiltsuk radio, and a Bella Bella Gardens Facebook page provide support to novice gardeners.

Old Massett Village Council also recently approved four new community gardens and distributed 89 seed packages to families. Skidegate Band Council is supporting a project to build garden boxes and provide soil. It's one positive outcome of the crisis, Yovanovich says, that people have more time to spend on the land and a new interest in gardening.

"It's something to do," he explains. "You have to care for it. You have to water and weed it. And you're getting your own organic food — free of pesticides."

Skidegate is also hiring members to harvest and distribute traditional foods — including urchins, halibut, prawns and, in the near future, sockeye salmon from the Copper River run.

The Chief posted a [do-it-yourself Facebook video](#) demonstrating his own technique for filleting and drying thinly-sliced halibut pieces — a traditional Haida delicacy. "I remember doing it years ago, so I thought I'd try it again using an electric knife and a hydrator," he explains.

Yovanovich makes a tasty traditional treat by wrapping the dried fish in a leaf of kelp with oolichan grease like a little burrito.

"I got a lot of feedback from my video post. A lot of people haven't had it dried before, so I'm hoping they will try it."

"Everyone is sharing tips, swapping seeds and plants, posting Facebook photos and celebrating their gardening successes," says Housty. "It's amazing community-building that's happening at a time we can't physically be together."



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