

CREEK WALKING THE GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST

From the end of August to mid-October, Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority (KXSA) technician Vernon Brown is out on the land, walking the creeks and rivers of Kitasoo/Xai'Xais territory to count, observe and estimate salmon populations.

A typical day on the job can mean traversing from 1.5 to 22 kilometres of shoreline and encountering as many as 25 bears along the way, in grizzly, black bear and white Spirit bear terrain.

On his last creek walk of the salmon season in 2019, Brown and KXSA Research Director Christina Service were charged by a startled mother grizzly. It was a close call that illustrated how quickly safety conditions can change for even the most experienced creek walkers in the Great Bear Rainforest.

"After that close charge, I realized how dangerous this job is for anyone involved in this work. But for the people who want to learn, it will change you in a big way," says Brown. "Every river is totally different, every day is different from the next, so is every bear. Working with bears and salmon has definitely made me who I am."

Since safety conditions around bears can vary drastically from day to day, he says, "you find yourself constantly planning, assessing and being extremely vigilant about bear signs and smells. You also need to make sure they have their river. We can't be scaring them off because they're as dependent on the peak salmon season as I am."

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Photo credit: Doug Neasloss

CREEK WALKING THE GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST (cont'd)



The Kitasoo/Xai'xais took over creek walking four years ago after the federal government salmon technician – who had monitored the region for 40 years – retired and was not replaced. “It was important to continue to make sure we had an understanding of the status of salmon in our territory,” says Brown. “One purpose of creek walking is to get an accurate observation of each river system and a count of pinks and chums.”

It was important for his Nation to take full control of the salmon count, he asserts, because “we live here and we have an understanding of every system. We see the trends in our territory and are able to analyze our data over the years.”

“It’s a portion of my identity I’d be missing. One of the main reasons why I’m sitting here today is because of salmon.”

“I’ve worked for 18 years throughout this territory and seen extreme declines of species - whether it’s bears, wolves, birds or many other at-risk marine and terrestrial species,” he says. “I’ve seen areas where there were only 20 salmon in a river that should have had 20,000. I’ve witnessed the temperature changes and seen creeks at the warmest they’ve ever been.”

Brown is concerned that this year’s returns are even lower than those of previous low seasons. Climate change is one of factors in salmon mortality. “There are glacial-fed creeks that simply don’t exist anymore. Some salmon streams are warming up as much as 18 to 20 degrees,” he says. Shifting rivers and landslides are further impacting spawning grounds and depleting fish populations. “Chums are almost off the chart gone. Pink salmon aren’t doing well either. I think we’re going to start seeing these droughts from last summer over the next few years.”

It’s time, he says, to put salmon back on the agenda. “Salmon should be a number one priority across our tables in government-to-government negotiations. It’s always been a difficult topic and we need to bring it back.”

When counts started more than 50 years ago, Brown says as many as 70 salmon technicians were walking the coast. Only three remain, he points out, despite the crisis in salmon decline. “A lot of these inlets and smaller systems that once had 20,000, even 30,000 fish are barely hanging on with about 40 fish a year. I’m sure there are many systems on the coast that are on the brink of extinction.”

The loss of salmon would mean more than the loss of a resource to his community. “It’s a portion of my identity I’d be missing. One of the main reasons why I’m sitting here today is because of salmon. It’s what sustained my family and my community and the Kitasoo/Xai’xais people. We want salmon to always remain in our DNA.”

Salmon also connects people to the places. “Your fish camp is like a classroom where you learn about the culture and the stories. If someone is telling you a sea otter or a Big House story, it’s directly connected to the area you’re in. This is another dynamic of how you feel when you watch salmon disappear. It’s a big ripple effect.”

The current global pandemic also highlights the importance of eating your own traditional food, he points out. “The Kitasoo/Xai’xais adapted to all the marine resources here and we became an ocean people. Our bodies are much more adapted to absorbing the nutrients of the ocean diet because they are in my DNA.”

“We need to find our passion again when it comes to protecting salmon.”



Photo credit: Doug Neasloss

CFN BOARD PROFILE – CHIEF BILLY YOVANOVICH



Ganaay Chief Billy Yovanovich is Chief Councillor of Skidegate and has been a board member of CFN during his three terms in office. Born and raised on Haida Gwaii, Yovanovich grew up in the logging and fishing industry. His mother Ada Yovanovich was one of four elders arrested in an iconic protest against clearcutting old growth forests on Lyell Island in 1985 – territory that today lies in Gwaii Haanas, the National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site co-managed through a landmark agreement with the Haida Nation and Canada.

“My mother was quite a political activist and involved with fighting for the rights of First Nations people,” says the Chief. “She married a non-Haida man so she lost her status and wasn’t allowed to harvest or eat her traditional foods. That’s why I grew up in Queen Charlotte City and was deemed a non-status Indian.”

It was a model that was hard for her to comprehend, he says. “Two of her sisters were in the same boat, so we all had to live in Queen Charlotte because we weren’t allowed to live on reserve. For people like myself, it created a whole other minority because we weren’t First Nations and we weren’t band members.”

His mother’s activism influenced Yovanovich’s decision to get involved in politics. “You can be an armchair quarterback or you can be part of addressing problems and seeing the change. I lived through the impact of drug and alcohol myself, and sitting on council, I saw I could be a voice for change.”

Yovanovich wants to improve community health and wellness by providing members with access to treatment and rehabilitation facilities that aren’t covered by the health authority. The outcomes are better, he says, when people have a choice over where they go to heal. As a board member, he believes CFN could play a strong role in advocating for change at the grassroots level to improve health and wellness. “When people get well, they’ll create their own opportunities,” he says. “Having people well in the first place is key.”

Yovanovich says participation in Coastal First Nations has given Skidegate a say at the table in the direction of the nine-member coastal alliance. Looking back over the years, one issue stands out in particular. “One decision was to not support the LNG file because the Haida Nation is quite firm on that.”

It’s a decision he believes helped Skidegate to forge a stronger bond with other communities. “Since that day, that decision has put me in touch with other CFN members on a weekly basis at least. That’s where I’ve established some pretty strong relationships – through CFN.”

“You can be an armchair quarterback or you can be part of addressing problems and seeing the change.”

As Coastal First Nations Great Bear Initiative celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, what does Yovanovich see as the biggest challenge facing the organization going forward?

“I think it’s just sticking to a common interest we all can support. If we drift off into initiatives we all don’t support, that could be the demise of the organization. Probably energy is a good one to focus on now. We all have a common interest in fisheries, energy and tourism.”

With 10 years of service to the Skidegate Band Council, the Chief’s biggest mentors have been his mother and other family members in political and hereditary roles. Recently, his uncle named him to be his successor as the Chief of the Ts’aahl Clan. “So my current political position is helping me prepare for the path forward to the hereditary role someday.”

It’s a far way to come for a boy who grew up stripped of his status under a discriminatory Indian Act. “It’s been quite a journey when I look back,” Yovanovich admits. “I remember I had a little moment waiting outside the Prime Minister’s office one time for a reconciliation meeting in Ottawa. I had sat outside the principal’s office at school but had never expected one day to be sitting outside the Prime Minister’s office.”

What does he think is key to developing the next generation of CFN leaders?

“I think we should be mentoring our youth at CFN because they’ll be our next leaders – include them in board meetings and host meetings in our communities. I’d love if our board meetings were rotated so we have a good sense of where each other’s communities are; to meet some of the people and see how they live day to day.”

GULKIHLGAD YAKGUJANAAS – 2020 TAWGA HAALA LEEYGA BURSARY RECIPIENT



Gulkihlgad Yakgujanaas is one of 12 secondary school graduates chosen for the 2020 Strong Minds, Strong Nation grant awards of the Haida Nation. This year's bursary awards recognize students beginning post-secondary studies in a range of careers, including medicine, business, social work, health and renewable energy.

The eighteen-year-old is starting her studies in a rural pre-med program at Selkirk College in Castlegar, BC. Gulkihlgad was awarded the first Tawga Haala Leeyga bursary created this year in honour of her grandmother May Russ, a former Hereditary Chief of the Village of Massett, who passed away last year. The award is given to a post-secondary student of Haida descent who is a female leader in the community.

"It was truly an honour. I don't want to boast about myself," Gulkihlgad responds when asked why she was chosen for the award. "For my essay I wrote about how my grandmother basically raised me – growing up I spent every weekend at her house. Coming from a small community you never think you will make it so I want to be a role model. I want the youth of Haida Gwaii to have somebody to look up to so they can say, 'Hey she came from the same place I did – she went through the same things I did and look at her now.'"

"Coming from a small community you never think you will make it so I want to be a role model"

Raised in Old Massett in the K'wii Gandlas Yakgu Laanas/Jaanas clan, Gulkihlgad was named after her grandmother. "She was a very powerful woman and well respected. I had the honour of growing up with her. She taught me a lot of what I know today and she dedicated her life to our Nation."

She is thrilled to be attending BC's only pre-med program designed specifically for students from rural communities who want to practise medicine in rural and Indigenous communities.

"Ever since I was little, I really wanted to be a doctor. Coming from a small community, I never thought I could do it. But there's been so many people who have encouraged me," she explains. "I thought at first I would become a nurse and then, after people told me they believed in me and encouraged me, I thought I would do my best to become an Indigenous doctor."

"There's not a big Indigenous presence in the healthcare field. I believe in order to change the system of racism and discrimination I need to be part of the system," she says. "I want the hospitals and health care system to be a safe place for Indigenous people, especially youth and women who have been abused, because I know there's a lot of people who are scared to speak out because they're worried nothing's going to happen if they do."



GULKIH LGAD YAKGUJANAAS

– 2020 TAWGA HAALA LEEYGA BURSARY RECIPIENT (cont'd)

Gulkihlgad says her understanding how Indigenous people and communities work together is something she can offer as a future family doctor. “I will bring my knowledge of how we’re just one whole family and of what my people have gone through and what they continue to go through. Many non-Indigenous people don’t understand why our people hurt so much.”

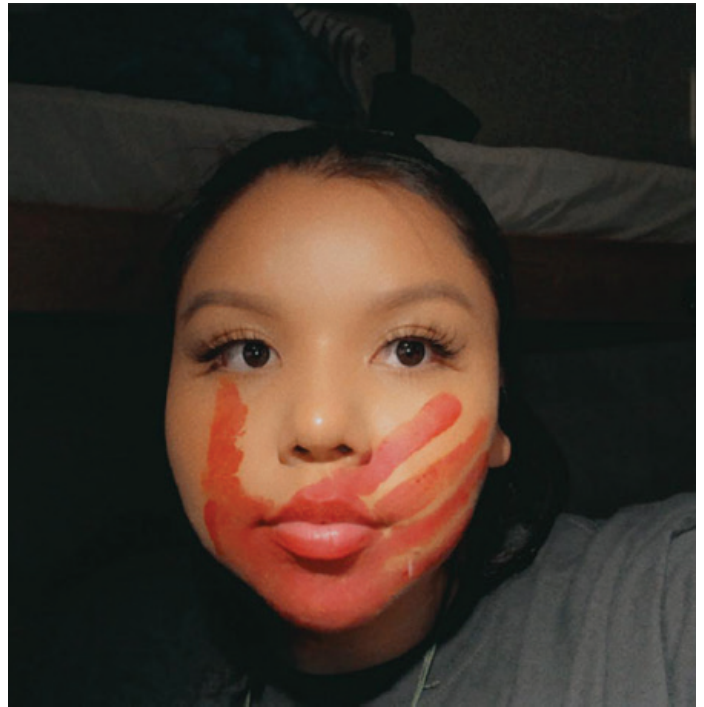
After graduating from medical school, she hopes to gain experience practising in diverse communities across the province. “I’d like to work in different Indigenous communities and open my mind to the different cultures. I’d like to help Indigenous communities other than my own then return home and work in my community.”

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One of the biggest challenges Gulkihlgad faced in secondary school was a lack of cultural understanding and support when she began struggling with her grades due to missing classes when her grandmother passed away. “Because she was such a big influence in my life, it was hard. My teachers didn’t get the connection I had with her. They weren’t Indigenous so they didn’t realize how hard I was struggling and they didn’t understand the connection we had to our families.”

Gulkihlgad demonstrated her leadership skills when she called for a meeting with school officials. “Finally I had to use my voice and let them know they had to support me through that process in my life. I think that also sparked a realization about the racism also in the education system. I told them they should put a system in place to support the students when that happens.”

Her biggest mentor has been her mother, Elizabeth Moore, a former Chief Councillor of Old Massett “As I was applying for this program, I doubted myself a lot because of my grades, but my mother encouraged me every single day. She said even if you don’t get in, you can say you tried. I think she’s also one of the reasons I want to become a doctor. I want to make her proud.”



Her advice to other students? “Just keep working hard, you can do it. Always believe in yourself and surround yourself with good energy. Get connected with people full of knowledge, especially the elders. No matter what you’re going through you can always be successful.”

When not working hard on her studies, Gulkihlgad loves to be out on the water. “I grew up with my Dad on the boat fishing so that’s a happy place for me to food gather and be out on my traditional territory.” She has also spent the last four summers as a dedicated youth counsellor at the Swan Bay Rediscovery Program in Gwaii Haanas.

“It’s something I love doing. It has definitely given me a strong sense of who I am and a better connection to my culture – and it grounded me as a teen,” she says. “I hope that I can continue working with Swan Bay throughout my whole life because it really helped me a lot and I want it to be always accessible to all Haida youth.”

SEAS CULTIVATES THE NEXT GENERATION OF STEWARDS AND SCIENCE RESEARCHERS



Photo credit: Doug Neasloss

When summer arrives in Klemtu, SEAS Coordinator Vernon Brown can be a hard man to track down. From the early hours, he's out on the land with Kitasoo/Xai'xais youth in the Supporting Emerging Aboriginal Stewards (SEAS) program helping to cultivate the next generation of stewards and science researchers.

Brown had a rare moment in the office to talk about this year's SEAS program that launched in July despite COVID-19 setbacks. He was preparing to head out with participants to survey for monumental cedars in the territory.

"For us, it's important to go out and look at these trees before engineers set foot in these areas. Today is our first day," Brown says.

"Under the Great Bear land use order, in any areas outside of protected areas that are under forestry pressure, First Nations can measure and grade a tree. If it's the size of a monumental, we can keep it standing," he explains. "If we don't protect those trees, they're exactly what foresters are looking for."

This is Brown's fourth year coordinating Klemtu's SEAS program. This summer's eight-week internship hosts participants from 14 to 19 years old, offering stewardship and science research exposure and training in Kitasoo/Xai'xais territory.

"They get an idea of the purpose and vision for stewardship," Brown says. "A huge part of our approach is the cultural and territorial connection. I want them to know there's more than being on this little reserve – we're in a giant vast territory."

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"Another major piece is exposure to the territory through forestry or surveying, or cultural feature identification, archaeology, anthropology and geology," he adds.

"It's ushering them in a nice direction just to get one spark of interest or passion for any of the professions or academics that we're doing."

Today SEAS youth will be identifying giant cedars that stand 100 cm in diameter and hundreds of years old. Brown points out that, aside from coastal First Nations' efforts, not much is being done to protect monumental trees. "I've flagged 174 trees. I tell the kids, 'your grandparents probably never imagined we had the ability to do this work.'"

"It's quite the learning curve for a lot of them. For some, it's their first job."

Work to identify traditional medicinal plants, culturally modified trees and other cultural features gives participants technical skills and on-the-job experience. "They learn the navigation skills, the compass, the preplanning to the field work, checking the weather, and how to become a professional on the vessel and the land," he outlines. "It's quite the learning curve for a lot of them. For some, it's their first job."

The Nation has an agreement with all researchers who work in the territory through formalized partnerships with research

and academic institutions. "They have to talk to the kids or do a research presentation to the school, otherwise they're just writing a paper and leaving it on a shelf."

This gives youth an opportunity to ask questions about career opportunities on the land, he says. "What made you want to pursue a career in marine biology, or become a bear biologist? What got you into this profession of archaeology? What opportunities exist for youth in this kind of field?"

"If something is going to change your perspective, it's your culture."

"Growing up I never had that. There wasn't a youth program or much opportunity for work. That's the reason the band office and stewardship office started to create more of a youth portfolio for the community. We wanted to make sure a youth program was ongoing and fully operational."

"If something is going to change your perspective, it's your culture," he concludes.

"I want kids to know that in this program, you're going to go to every corner of this big territory you live in. And you'll be involved in research that will utterly change your whole perspective on your world."

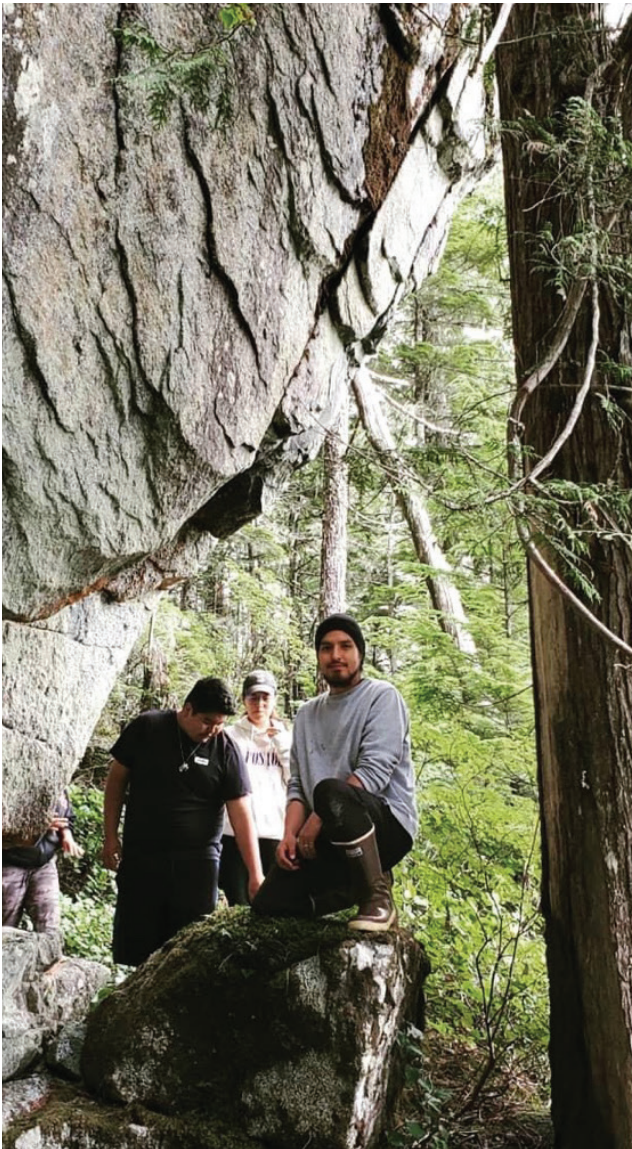


Photo credit: Doug Neasloss

NUXALK NATION GETS CREATIVE IN EFFORTS TO PREVENT COVID-19



Coastal communities are getting creative in their efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Nuxalk Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) launched a mask contest in early September at the Bella Coola Consumers Co-op Grocery Store to encourage local shoppers to do their part.

"Even though we had no positive exposures in the community at the time, we were thinking for the coming fall that it would be prudent for everyone to get used to the idea of wearing a mask in public," says Jessica Miller, Emergency Management Coordinator for the Nuxalk Nation.

She says the Co-op food store agreed to take the names and numbers of all community shoppers who took part. Everyone wearing a mask while shopping was automatically entered into a weekly draw for a \$100 gift certificate from a local store in the Bella Coola Valley. Miller says the EOC purchased gift cards from the Coop grocery, the local gift shop Kopas Store and Mountain Valley Organics.

"We're trying to encourage people and give them a little prize for participating. Hopefully the prize and sharing the prize winner photos will generate a more positive approach to COVID-19 safety measures," explains Miller.

"We are in this together and we wanted to give thanks to everyone for being safe."

The contest turned out to be popular. From the first week to the third, the number of participants wearing masks doubled from 50 to 100. "We posted a picture of the prize winners on social media and there was a lot of positive feedback. I see our contest winners as community role models," she says.

One of Miller's favourite winners was Abby Andy. "I love that Abby won. She's seven and was wearing a mask with her family crest on it."

The contest is on a brief pause as the EOC deals with the first confirmed cases of the virus in the community. "Our approach is to implement enhanced safety measures at this time. We are so pleased and thankful that everyone is taking it seriously and doing their part," says Miller. "We're doing everything we're supposed to be doing and then some. At the end of the day, Nuxalk is going to take care of community members and make sure they get the services they need."

The Nuxalk have shared their contest idea with several other CFN communities. "I think that especially after going through this for six months and going into our seventh month, there was understandably some complacency after a while," acknowledges Miller. "We are in this together and we wanted to give thanks to everyone for being safe."



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