

CENTRAL COAST FIRST NATIONS TALK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Central Coast First Nations communities say measures to tackle a growing climate crisis must go hand in hand with strengthening Indigenous governance.

A new study published in [Ecology and Society](#) in December asked community members about climate impacts they've seen on marine food resources and how those changes will impact their way of life.

Participants made clear that strategies to manage climate change impacts cannot be separated from a conversation about reconciliation and self-governance, says lead author Charlotte Whitney, Program Director for the Central Coast Indigenous Resource Alliance (CCIRA) and University of Victoria graduate.

"Sometimes academic researchers can compartmentalize climate change," she says. "For First Nations, it's clear climate change adaptation is not a standalone issue."

Fifty Central Coast First Nations members were interviewed for the study undertaken by Central Coast First Nations through CCIRA, in partnership with the University of Victoria. Participants stressed that strengthening Indigenous governance and collaborative management with government were top strategies for dealing with climate impacts.

Jennifer Walkus, Wuikinuxv Tribal Councillor and co-author, says putting aboriginal rights into practice is key to pushing for climate action. Trying to get traditional and local ecological knowledge recognized by government has been a long fight for her community.

"One of our biggest problems is we've been having these discussions on climate impacts for years, but they've never been big on government radar. We first started to push on eulachon in the '70s when they started to decline," Walkus says. "We noticed that the less snow we got, the less eulachon we got."

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Photo by Tristan Blaine

CENTRAL COAST FIRST NATIONS TALK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE *(cont'd)*



"Eulachon are largely a glacial-driven species. They like the cold and we were ending up with less and less glacial water. The elders used to say that when we had winter snow, we'd have a good eulachon year," she explains. "But when we took it to government, we were told we only have anecdotal evidence and we needed the data to back it up."

Dwindling Eulachon runs brought an end to a once bountiful marine harvest in Wuikinuxv. This type of drastic climate impact on traditional food security was a shared concern of study participants. They reported earlier berry harvests and rapid glacial melt, warmer and drier summers, and more intense winter storms.

On the outer coast communities, members of Waglisla (Bella Bella) and Klemtu said they must travel further north to access fish than in previous decades. Across the Central Coast, members were frustrated by the decline of salmon and other cultural resources. As access to traditional food species changes, members worried about the ability of elders to pass on traditional knowledge.

While the issue can be overwhelming, Whitney says "place-based" measures by Indigenous communities demonstrate great potential to protect local food security. She points to community gardens, clam garden rehabilitation, and traditional Indigenous salmon management techniques underway on the Central Coast.



Photo by Tristan Blaine

It will also mean thinking about climate change indicators in new ways.

"We know that marine species are shifting north as the ocean warms," Whitney says, "so what will this mean for fishers who may not be able to travel that distance to fish?"

That could mean introducing harvesting practices for new species migrating into the territories. Participants also suggested a return to traditional practices. "We're in the middle of a climate crisis and a global pandemic, everything is changing. In order to be successful, we have to be able to adapt," says Walkus. "A part of that is trade – it's such a huge part of the culture."

"That idea of reciprocity is so much a part of the potlatch culture. You give away what you have when you have lots. This is something we're going to need to rely on a lot more in the future."

The study offers a horizon scan of Indigenous perspectives on climate change impacts and strategies for adaptation, says Whitney. "Taking those ideas forward and applying them on the ground is, I think, a really exciting opportunity."

As a member of the last generation to witness the large eulachon runs of the '70s, Walkus agrees. "We need to put the management regimes in place so we can manage our territory according to what Mother Nature is going to do."

"The sooner we do something, the more that life in the future will look like something I recognize."



Photo by Tristan Blaine

KITASOO-XAI'XAIS NATION: ONE OF FIRST 10 COMMUNITIES TO RECEIVE COVID-19 VACCINE



Photos courtesy of Tiffany Mason

The Kitisoo-Xai'xais received unexpected but great news in late December.

Kitasoo/Xai'xais Chief Roxanne Robinson and Health Director Tiffany Mason were called to a webinar along with nine other remote First Nations. The First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) announced they would be the [first ten Indigenous communities](#) in British Columbia to receive the Moderna vaccine for COVID-19.

"We were in shock. I think most people were pretty floored. We were not expecting that," says Mason. "Then your mind starts racing...okay we have to start the PR, we have to put out the messaging, and all the planning that comes with it."

By early January, Klemtu was more than halfway through immunizations for their 250 eligible members. Mason says to reach herd immunity – to protect youth and the immuno-compromised ineligible for the vaccine – "seventy percent is our magic number indicated to me by the nurse." The Kitasoo Community School has 60 students under the age of 18 who will have to wait for a youth vaccine still undergoing clinical trials. FNHA will also provide the vaccine to teachers, nurses, contractors and others employed in Indigenous communities.

For those vaccinated, "just the normal sore arm at the site" are the only effects reported so far, according to Mason. She's pleased the community health clinic has been fully booked every day and no vaccine has gone to waste.

"Most of the people were really excited and keen about the vaccine and were ready and willing to book their appointments," she reports, adding that some people called the nurse to ask if they could be the first.

Eighty-year-old elder Thomas (Clifford) Brown led the way as the first member to be immunized. When the EOC posted a notice of the vaccine's arrival on Facebook, he commented, "Excellent report. If people are questioning the safety, I can be amongst the first person to get the vaccine. As a precaution and to show it is safe."

"We checked in with him to see if he was serious and he was," Mason says.

Some members shared posts explaining why they were getting their shots. "One member was really, really keen on getting the vaccine because his Mom lives in Vancouver in long-term care,"

she says. "Before the pandemic he would go down every other month to visit her, so he's not seen her for several months."

For a community under lockdown whose members have not been able to gather or celebrate for a long time, the Moderna vaccine comes as a welcome relief. Mason says one big benefit of the vaccine has been the lifting of the community atmosphere. The second immunization will be administered within 28 days of the first. The next step, she says, will be to meet with the community health nurse to look at what restrictions might be eased, "whether it's travel or household bubbles or community gatherings."

In addition to its remoteness, Mason says Klemtu was chosen because it had nursing staff available to administer the vaccine over the holidays. The impact a COVID-19 outbreak could have on its small population was also a factor – as well, the community's lack of access to timely medical care. "If someone needed to be medi-vacc'd out of here, it would have to be either by helicopter or on rare occasions, the Coast Guard."

The Kitisoo-Xai'xais Health Director admits she initially had questions for the provincial health authority.

"Why us first? We asked FNHA because we knew we would get that question from the community. Especially with the history of First Nations and the experimental healthcare that took place in our past. That was my only hesitation."

"But when I was able to sit and logically think about it and consider everything we've lost and missed out on over the year, it just made sense," she says. "We didn't have this opportunity to fight a pandemic and protect ourselves from a pandemic in the past, but at this point we do."

What would Mason say to those who may have concerns?

"Our grandparents and ancestors have lived through not being able to potlatch and celebrate together," she says. "Take the opportunity to push through the hesitation, or the fear, for the benefit of community, our families."

HEILTSUK RADIO: BRINGING COMMUNITY TOGETHER



When Nicole Carpenter was recruited to be the Program Coordinator for Heiltsuk Radio 95.1 FM last August, she knew it was the job for her.

"I love to engage with my community," says Carpenter who is building Heiltsuk radio programs and audiences from the ground up with Technology Coordinator Gordon Humchitt.

"We want to bring everyone together during this time when we can't be with one another, but we can all be together around our radios."

Community radio has brought members of Waglisla (Bella Bella) closer during months of lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions. The station was launched in 2019 by students who wanted to broadcast songs in the Háitzaq̓ɫa language to their community.

"The kids were composing songs at that time and singing public songs – like the herring song about all the different ways we eat herring," explains Carpenter. "They used it when we won the closure of the herring fishery here in Bella Bella and we like when they sing it."

Sharing Heiltsuk music, language and cultural ceremonies over the airways is bringing comfort to a community that has had more than its share of loss in the past year. When pandemic restrictions prohibited large gatherings, Carpenter began airing funeral services for members to listen to at home and in their cars.

"In 2020 when I started, we had quite a few deaths that were non-COVID related. The COVID restrictions were getting tighter and tighter and only 10 people were able to attend funerals," Carpenter remembers. "We like to gather and we like to support each other. It's really hard when we can't right now."

As many as 70 cars join a bereaved family in "drive-bys" through the community that replace funeral gatherings, she says. The processions start when the radio broadcast begins.

"When we have funerals here, especially when it's a Chief, they usually fill up the halls with everybody in town. We started doing this and it really does feel better."

Carpenter pre-records the service with the minister and creates a program based on the family's wishes. She puts together eulogies,

poems, Heiltsuk songs, hymns, messages from community members and has started including raven and eagle sounds.

"When I do a service it takes a lot out of me. I feel everything, I can hear it in their messages," she says.

"I like to make people think that they're in church when I put the program together. So that we're all sitting together, doing the same things we usually do when we're comforting a grieving family. Just so they know they're not alone."

Heiltsuk Radio brings distant family closer in times of loss as well. Carpenter provides a recording to the grieving family to share with relatives in Vancouver and other far-off places. "Our families are big and for us to be able broadcast funerals and services and share this with them is quite nice."

Carpenter believes community radio also has an important role to play in providing accurate and dependable information. Listeners tune in to 95.1 FM for public health messages and COVID-19 protocols, including band store rules and travel restrictions. "I want people to say, I heard it on the radio, instead of Facebook."

She aims to uplift people's spirits after months of being unable to gather. "Friday nights, we play popular end-of-the-week music. On Saturdays, we plan to have comedy nights and concerts to make you feel like you are out."

"Eventually when we do come out of COVID, we'll be going to basketball tournaments, and maybe even feasts and potlatches." Carpenter hopes to share these ceremonies with Heiltsuk who may never have been to the community. Plans are underway to start streaming programs so that both community and off-reserve members can listen online.

"Our children in care are the ones I'm excited to reach. The ones who don't even know this place, they don't know anyone here," she says. "Maybe it will start their language journey. Because the radio is meant to teach our language and share our stories, to share the culture."

Carpenter hopes Heiltsuk music radio will give her community the support it's provided her family in a difficult year.

"I think our songs and our stories are really powerful and guide us in ways we don't even know about," Carpenter concludes. "I think the music reminds us of when we were all together."

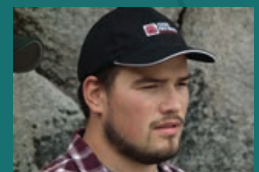


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