



**COASTAL  
FIRST NATIONS**  
GREAT BEAR INITIATIVE

# Geographic Response Planning





## Protecting Our Coastal Communities and Ecosystems

First Nations of the Pacific North Coast are working together, and with federal and provincial government agencies, to support the development of an effective marine response regime to protect our environment, communities and way of life.

Our Nations have undertaken a host of collaborative initiatives that aim to limit marine accidents and spills throughout coastal waters, and improve response capacity when incidents do occur. We know from firsthand experience that when shipping accidents occur in our territories, First Nations are often the first to respond.

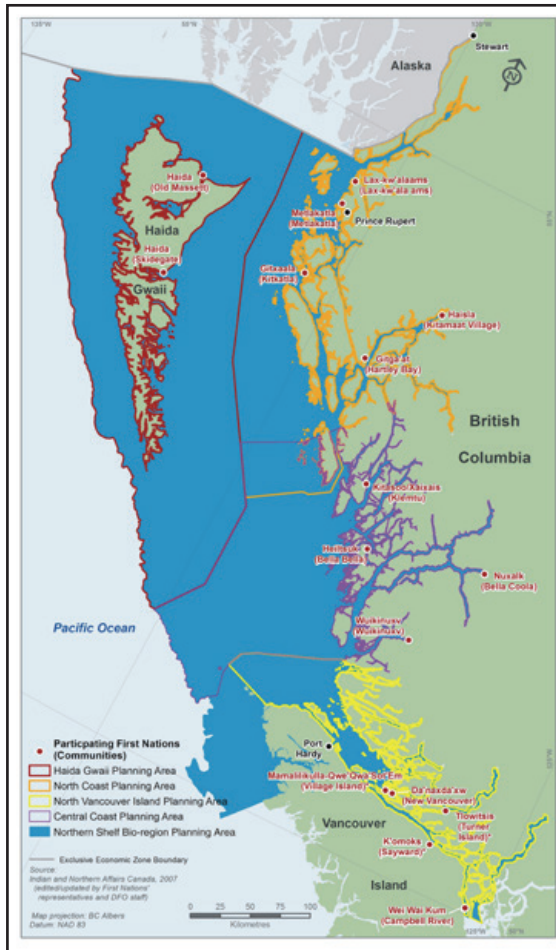
## Reconciliation Framework Agreement

In June 2018, First Nations and federal officials made a joint commitment to work together to protect and manage the Pacific North Coast. The historic agreement, called the *Reconciliation Framework Agreement for Bioregional Oceans Management and Protection*, provides a framework for integrated and effective planning.

As co-leaders in this long-term collaborative effort and as partners in the Marine Planning Partnership for the Pacific North Coast (MaPP) initiative ([mappocean.org](http://mappocean.org)), coastal First Nations are actively enhancing marine response preparedness, while building response capacity in our coastal communities.



Hereditary Chiefs and leaders, including Heiltsuk Chief Councilor Marilyn Slett, Kitasoo/Xai'Xais Chief Councilor Douglas Neasloss and other leaders from the Central and North Coast, joined Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Minister of Transport Marc Garneau and other federal representatives in Prince Rupert on June 21, 2018, to announce the Reconciliation Framework Agreement to work together to protect the Pacific North Coast.



## Objectives

Through collaborative planning, our Nations will...

- **improve** regional planning and coordination to prepare for marine spills and other incidents;
- **clarify** roles, processes and responsibilities for all agencies involved;
- **increase** capacity through improved equipment, vessels and training;
- **build**, test and refine marine response plans;
- **enhance** collaboration with federal and provincial governments; and
- **share** information and knowledge, including areas of ecological and cultural significance.



## Geographic Scope

The geographic response planning initiative aims to create integrated response plans for a vast coastal region along the Pacific Coast—extending north from the Campbell River area on Vancouver Island to the border of Alaska at Stewart, BC, and including Haida Gwaii. First Nations along the coast have agreed to coordinate planning with provincial and federal governments within four sub-regions: Haida Gwaii, North Coast, Central Coast and North Vancouver Island.





## After Nathan E. Stewart: Preventing Future Spills



**The 2016 grounding of the *Nathan E. Stewart* in Heiltsuk Territory was an environmental, economic and cultural disaster that is still being felt today. The tugboat spilled more than 110,000 liters of diesel and other fuels into Heiltsuk waters, affecting ancient clam beds and many other marine species that community members depend on for both income and sustenance.**

**Although the Nation had long warned of the threat of spills, says Chief Councillor Marilyn Slett, the devastating event was a wake-up call when it came to emergency response preparedness. “We waited for hours for a team to arrive, only to have them deploy defective equipment, in**

**unfamiliar conditions, without safety gear or training for volunteer responders,” she recalls. “As our community’s economy, environment, and way of life hung in the balance, we promised ourselves this would never happen in our territory again.”**

**For the Heiltsuk, the incident provided both lessons learned and a renewed sense of commitment to building an effective response planning regime for the Central Coast. The *Nathan E. Stewart* spill made clear the pressing need for coastal communities to have emergency response plans in place. Perhaps more significantly, the incident demonstrated how important it is for communities to have the resources and equipment to initiate a response.**



## Benefits

By planning with other agencies in a non-emergency setting, coastal First Nations can determine the most effective way to come together during a real marine emergency.

If an incident were to happen today, this planning will help to...

- establish **strong relationships** that set the stage for **collaborative problem-solving**;
- elevate our baseline of **knowledge** and capabilities in **data collection**; and
- create a solid foundation for **sound** decision-making and **effective** action.





## Queen of the North: A Community Responds



**In Gitga'at Territory, Hartley Bay is far from any services for emergency assistance from external agencies—a reality that has instilled a strong ethic of self-sufficiency within the community and a shared commitment to help others whenever needed.**

**Those characteristics came to the fore in 2006, when BC Ferries *Queen of the North* sank just south of Hartley Bay in the middle of the night. The entire community of about 200 people mobilized to minimize fatalities and ensure the safety of survivors, and they were collectively awarded with the Governor General's Commendation for Outstanding Service for their initiative and selflessness.**

**That same resourcefulness is at the heart of Gitga'at efforts to improve its marine response capabilities through the Gitga'at Emergency Response Team, established in 2015. "The team was created in response**

**to the potential for increased industrial activity in the Douglas Channel and surrounding waterways, which has the potential to increase the likelihood of marine accidents throughout the area," says team manager Roger Sterritt. "We're providing a holistic approach that helps to maintain public safety and mitigate emergency incidents by consolidating our emergency response services into one unit."**

**The response team is still building capacity through training and other resources, says Sterritt, and regional planning initiatives will surely play a role in future efforts. It's critically important, he adds, to be prepared for inevitable marine incidents—whether they're major accidents like *Queen of the North* or any small environmental spills in Gitga'at waters.**



## Geographic Response Strategies: Working with Communities

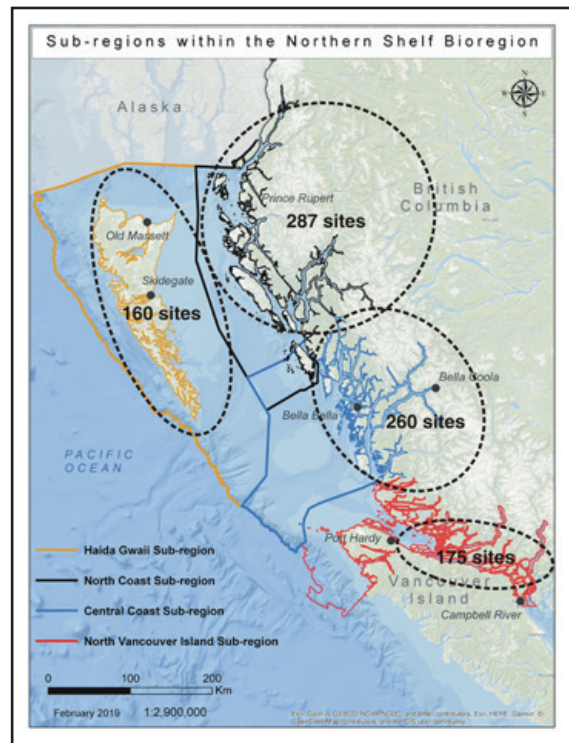
Our Nations are developing **Geographic Response Strategies (GRS)** that provide local communities with tactical response plans for protecting their sensitive natural and cultural resources **before** accidents occur.

Through multi-day workshops with local Elders, harvesters and community members throughout the coast, GRS planners assist the community in identifying **Areas of Concern (AOC)** that may be sensitive or vulnerable to impacts from oil spills or other marine emergencies. The AOCs are based on the following criteria:

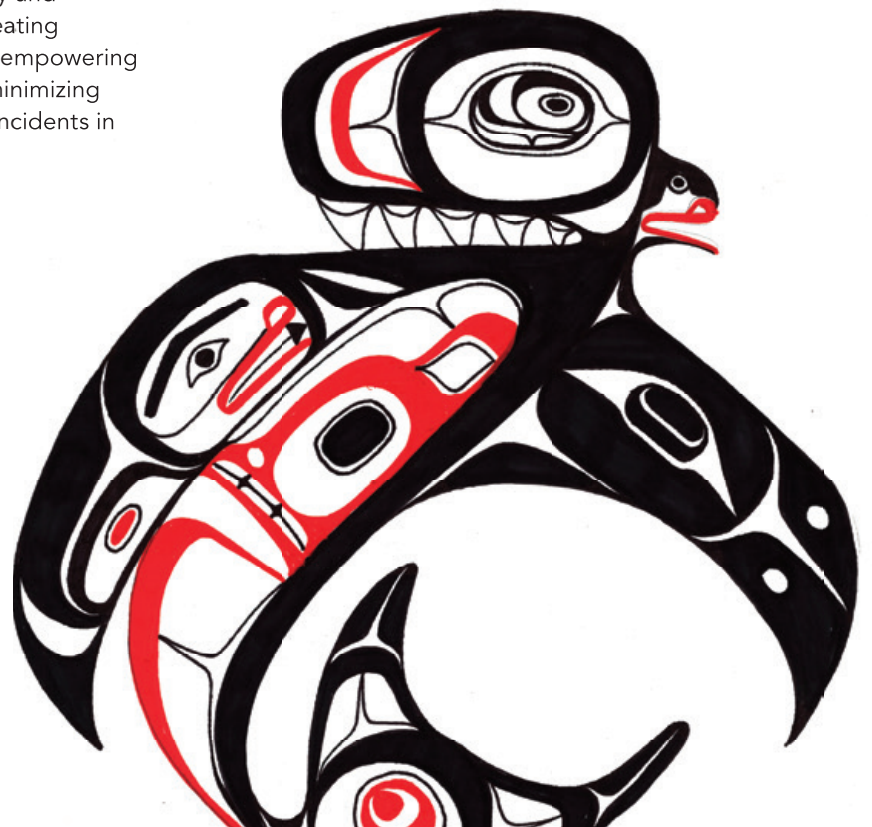
- **sensitivity** to impacts, given ecological, cultural and other local factors;
- **vulnerability** to impacts, due to proximity of shipping traffic, ports or other risks; and
- **feasibility** of protecting coastal sites, based on access to equipment and staging areas.

The AOCs help to prioritize planning and field work to develop site-specific tactical plans that show first responders how to deploy equipment to protect high-value resources at risk from oil impacts. GRS are used around the world to support community response capacity, and they will be an important tool for our Nations to prioritize efforts to improve response capabilities, including adding new emergency services, training and equipment.

The community-based work to identify and prioritize these areas is essential in creating effective response plans, and it's also empowering communities to play a crucial role in minimizing impacts from marine spills and other incidents in their territories.



As of May 2019, Nations had identified 882 preliminary AOCs across the planning region. As this process continues, additional sites may be added, and these will inform the development of GRS planning efforts to protect high-priority resources throughout the Pacific North Coast.





## Looking Forward

First Nations along the North Pacific Coast are committed to working collaboratively with our federal and provincial partners in building an effective regional response regime in our territories.

**Photo Credits:** Hannah Bregulla, Gitga'at First Nation, and April Bencze

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