



FIRST NATIONS OF THE GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST

*“For we do not
own this land
so much as
this land
owns us.
The land is part
of us, and
we are a part
of the land.”*

HAISLA NATION,
THE KITLOPE DECLARATION



First Nations petroglyph

The mountains, forests, fjords and waterways of central and north coastal British Columbia make up some of the world's most spectacular landscapes. But while these lands are wild, they are not an unpeopled wilderness. The Great Bear Rainforest and the archipelago of Haida Gwaii echo with the history and presence of coastal First Nations.

First Nations' history in this region extends beyond human memory. Archaeological evidence dates settlements from the end of the most recent Ice Age, more than 10,000 years ago. First Nations' oral traditions connect modern communities with the mythic time when the Ancestors donned the personae of plants, animals, humans and both natural and supernatural forces to participate in the creation of the world.

Today the region remains home to First Nations peoples whose histories, identities and spirituality are inextricably linked to the lands and waters of the rainforest.

The coastal First Nations are not a single people. Each First Nation has distinct traditions as well as unique circumstances and aspirations. At the same time, their languages, oral histories and ecological knowledge reflect the shared philosophies that underlie a deeply-rooted ethic of conservation and a millennia-old commitment to the sound stewardship of coastal ecosystems.

Main photo: Petroglyphs of the Git Ga'at Nation
Photography by Ian McAllister / Raincoast.org



The Great Bear Rainforest and the archipelago of Haida Gwaii are entirely encompassed by the traditional territories of coastal First Nations.

FIRST NATIONS OF THE GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST

The following First Nations have territories entirely or primarily within the Great Bear Rainforest and Haida Gwaii:

Da'naxda'xw
 Gitga'at
 Gwa'Sala-Nakwaxda'xw
 Haisla
 Haida
 Heiltsuk
 Gitxaala Gwa wa aineuk
 Kitasoo/Xai'xais
 Kwiakah
 Kwicksutaineuk
 Lax Kw'Alaams
 Mamalilikula
 Metlakatla
 Nuxalk
 Que'Qwa'Sot'Enox
 Tsawataineuk
 Wuikinuxw

LANDSCAPE AND HISTORY

First Nations' traditional social and political institutions are closely entwined with the marine and terrestrial environments. Within traditional governance structures, hereditary leadership embodies—and is inseparable from—specific responsibilities for the stewardship of traditional territories.

Traditional social structures were also closely entwined with the rhythms of the natural world. First Nations people moved from place to place, following a seasonal round. In the spring, summer and fall family groups traveled widely over their territories to harvest and process resources, setting up seasonal villages and camps at key locations for hunting, fishing, berry picking, clam digging and root digging. Along with these gathering activities, coastal First Nations also cultivated plants and shellfish.

During the winter months people gathered in large villages in coastal, riverside, or lakeside locations. Feasts and potlatches united families and friends to witness and affirm political, ceremonial and cultural events. Potlatches featured songs, dances, art and ceremonies that encode stewardship practices and connect people with their territories.

Traditional governance, social and stewardship structures were severely disrupted by non-Native settlement and the imposition of colonial laws. Today, coastal First Nations are recovering from this legacy. They are also working hard to overcome some of the most severe social and economic challenges in Canada. First Nations are re-establishing traditional governance and stewardship structures, and strengthening their connections to their territories once more.

Aboriginal people now make up slightly over half of the population of the Central Coast, and approximately one-third of the populations of the North Coast and Haida Gwaii, which is also known as the Queen Charlotte Islands. The total population of these First Nations is estimated at 18,000 to 20,000. Of these, 7,000 to 8,000 people live in small communities that are accessible only by sea.

Of the 45 dialects once spoken in the region, many are nearing extinction. The preservation and revitalization of these languages are central to cultural renewal in many First Nations communities.



For thousands of years the First Nations livelihoods and cultures have been tied to the health of the seas.

RIGHTS AND TITLE

Across most of British Columbia, including the province's central and north coast, no treaties were signed between European settlers and indigenous peoples. For generations, First Nations have fought for political and legal recognition of their aboriginal rights and title. The past decades have seen important legal landmarks recognizing and affirming aboriginal rights and title in Canadian law.

First Nations continue to protect and assert their rights and title throughout the Great Bear Rainforest and Haida Gwaii. Some are involved in modern treaty and self-government negotiations with federal and provincial governments aimed at resolving longstanding questions about title to lands and resources, and at renewing First Nations' jurisdiction over their communities and futures.

First Nations bring a strong vision of conservation and stewardship to all land use planning discussions. They are also exploring a broad range of business ventures—forestry, fishing, ecotourism and other businesses—that blend the strengths of traditional practices with the innovations of conservation economies. Such ventures support a central tenet of First Nations' traditional knowledge: the land and the people care for and sustain one another.

First Nations are determined to uphold their conservation and stewardship vision. Their success in advancing this vision through new relationships with government and industry provides clear evidence of the tremendous potential that now exists to secure the future of the peoples and ecosystems of the rainforest.

COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES

Through a range of negotiations, many new collaborative initiatives have emerged. Examples include

- Co-operative management agreements that unite traditional knowledge and scientific expertise in decisions about the conservation and management of protected areas;
- Watchmen programs that bring together First Nations and government agencies to guide and monitor activities on the land and at sea;
- Partnerships between First Nations and resource management or eco-tourism businesses to incorporate First Nations' knowledge and interests into economic development activities.



The clear-cutting of timber has impacts on every aspect of life in the Great Bear Rainforest.

THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST

The Campaign for the Great Bear Rainforest is designed to help ensure a healthy future for 21 million acres of coastal temperate rainforest and prove that conservation and community can co-exist. The private, philanthropic funding raised by the campaign helps drive the commitment of government funds to support land use agreements and will also support First Nation commitments to conservation outcomes.

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LAND USE PLANNING PROCESSES

For the past several years, coastal First Nations have been engaged in unprecedented government-to-government discussions about land use within their territories. First Nations' participation in land use planning processes is grounded in the historical and ongoing exercise of aboriginal rights and title.

First Nations' commitment to protect both their lands and their communities gives rise to four interconnected goals:

- protection and restoration of ecosystems, as well as protection for specific sites and species that have particular traditional or ecological significance;
- protection and maintenance of First Nations' cultures, including a recognition of First Nations' stewardship responsibilities;
- development of ecologically sustainable economies that will sustain vibrant indigenous communities within healthy ecosystems; and
- restoration of responsible resource management.

MOVING FORWARD

The loss of the Great Bear Rainforest could mean the loss of some of the oldest and richest cultures of the Western Hemisphere. The stakes are immense. But so is the potential for lasting solutions. This is a time of great change, a time of renewal and opportunities for respectful partnerships that draw on the best of both traditional and modern stewardship practices.

The future of the coastal rainforest cannot be separated from the future of coastal First Nations. Conservation here must be more than a wilderness agreement. To be successful, conservation must protect ecosystems, respect First Nations' cultures, and strengthen local economies and communities.

A coalition of four environmental non-governmental organizations—Greenpeace Canada, Sierra Club of Canada-British Columbia Chapter, ForestEthics and Rainforest Action Network—has engaged with a diverse range of stakeholders to work towards consensus for the long-term preservation of the Great Bear Rainforest. These groups have also been working with a coalition of Canadian and U.S. philanthropic foundations to support conservation and community development opportunities.

Tides Canada Foundation is assisting in the Great Bear Rainforest project by leading the Canadian fundraising initiative to help ensure the successful implementation of the historic land use agreements. Tides Canada Foundation and The Nature Conservancy are working together to raise funds for this initiative in Canada and the United States.