

Indigenous Food and Cultural Values vs. Large Scale Ski Resort Development in the Highest Alpine Mountains of Secwepemcul'ecw (Land of the Shuswap)

Understanding and Managing Amenity-Led Migration in Mountain Regions

Presentation Paper

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Introduction

The traditional territory of the Secwepemc (Shuswap people) spans 180,000 km² in the southern portion of the interior plateau in what is now known as the province of B.C. Prior to contact with the European settlers in the 1800's, the transfer of energy through traditional land and food systems was based on an ecological model of economy that applied traditional food harvesting strategies and practices including: hunting, fishing, gathering and cultivating culturally important plants and animals in the diverse range of ecosystems throughout Secwepemcul'ecw (land of the Shuswap). The underlying Indigenous eco-philosophy guided their ability to maintain relative ecological stability over thousands of years of participating in the natural world. Secwepemc culture was thereby developed through a strong sense of place and identity in relationship to the land, water, plants, animals and all of creation. This eco-philosophy is best translated through the name "Secwepemc" which literally means: "the people of the land where the water flows from the highest mountains, through the rivers on its way to the oceans" (personal communication, Billy, 2006).

Traditional harvesting strategies followed the seasonal cycles in the diverse range of elevations, landscapes and climatic zones including; alpine, montane parklands, montane forests, intermediate grasslands, intermediate lakes, river terraces, floodplains, and river valleys (Adams Lake and Neskonlith Secwepemc, 1999). Traditionally speaking, river terraces, floodplains and valleys at lower elevations provided milder climates more suitable for semi-permanent winter villages, while the montane parklands, forests and alpine ecosystems were important locations for summer base camps where large amounts of traditional foods were harvested, preserved and secured for winter months. Following the traditional harvesting strategies and practices, the ability of Secwepemc families and communities to respond to their needs for healthy, culturally adapted foods in the present day is ultimately dependent on their ability to protect, conserve and restore the remaining fragments of especially important traditional harvesting areas in sensitive alpine ecosystems.

Many Elders recognize that in-migration and large scale ski resort development are the biggest factors impacting the traditional harvesting areas in sensitive alpine landscape zones. In contrast to the mechanistic worldview inherent in western scientific based resource management that communicates a belief that humans control or "manage" nature, the eco-philosophy guiding the belief held by many Indigenous Elders and traditional harvesters states that "we do not manage the land, we manage ourselves in relationship to the land" (Personal communication, Shaunna Morgan, 2008). In this context, it is necessary to increase cross cultural understanding and sensitivity to the many critical social, political, cultural and environmental concerns facing one of the last remaining alpine zones in an area known to the Secwepemc as Skwelkwekwelt (highest mountains). For the purpose of analyzing the underlying issues and values that are guiding large scale development in the Sun Peaks Ski Resort (SPSR), this paper will focus on promoting social learning and a more balanced approach that involves reconciling indigenous food sovereignty with neocolonialist laws, policies and economic activities that are exerting full control over the last remaining fragments of traditional land and food systems at Skwelkwekwelt.

Current Issues, Concerns and Situations

According to Beavon (1996) in *Measuring the Wellbeing of Aboriginal Peoples: An Application of United Nations Human Development Index to Registered Indians in Canada*, Canada has scored

4th on the Human Development Index (HDI) and is considered one of the best countries in the world to live in. Using the same variables as the HDI, Beavon has appallingly found that Registered Indians living on and off reserve do not share the same high level of human development as mainstream society in Canada. Those residing on reserve have been found to rank 78th, while the average of registered Indians residing off reserve are positioned at 48¹. In addition to epidemic proportions of diabetes and other food related illnesses, Secwepemc families and communities are striving to overcome high levels of stress associated with loss of control, lack of information, and the resulting uncertainty in the dominant culture and economy. Many households live well under the poverty line and have no earned cash income at all. A large proportion get half or more of their meat and fish from the land, and many supplement traditional diets through modern agriculture and food production. To the detriment of their health and cultural integrity, most if not all have become somewhat dependent on the industrialized food system in the mainstream economy (Adams Lake and Neskonlith Secwepemc, 1999).

In addition to the ways in which in-migration has economically marginalized the Secwepemc in their own homelands, Elders and traditional harvesters who have repeatedly expressed opposition to large scale recreational development at SPSR have witnessed in the last 10 years drastic environmental and cultural changes outside of the historical range of variability. The changes have happened in a relatively small amount of time in proportion to the relative ecological and cultural stability that was maintained for thousands of years prior to contact with in-migrants. In the absence of colonial policies, laws or instruments that could: 1) adequately assess Secwepemc cultural, spiritual and health risks associated with the large scale ski resort development proposals in alpine mountain ecosystems, or 2) apply a non-adversarial and restorative approach to resolving the outstanding land claims in traditional land and food systems, the provincial government and SPSR Corporation continues to rapidly expand the size and operation of the resort.

The adversarial approach inherent in colonial government structures and processes has allowed the SPSR to take advantage of intertribal differences and has failed to recognize or include traditional Secwepemc food and cultural values in decision making matters impacting traditional land and food systems. Decisions are made based on short term neoclassic economic values and models of development, which in turn, has undermined the ability of the most dedicated and committed Elders and traditional harvesters to uphold their sacred responsibility to protect, conserve and restore culturally important hunting, fishing and gathering corridors that have been replaced by expensive hotels, ski trails, golf course and massive municipality scale residential subdivisions. Large numbers of disproportionately wealthy in-migrants are attracted to the facilities and amenities at SPSR and thereby place great pressure on the sustainability of the unique cultural, political and economic fabric of the Secwepemc, as well as the sustainability of biological diversity and fresh clean sources of mountain water for the downstream residents, Secwepemc and non-Secwepemc alike.

While the resort boasts itself on "instituting and following numerous policies to upgrade, protect and conserve water use and ensure the quality of wastewater treatment" (Sun Peaks Ski Resort, 2008), many are still concerned that the highly technological approach that focuses on the 3 R's (reduce, reuse and recycle) fails to address the broader ecological issues and concerns, and alludes to a false sense of security with regards to sustaining adequate qualities and quantities of drinking water. Recent practices of rerouting fish bearing streams for aesthetic purposes combined with consuming large amounts of water for irrigation, snow making and laundry facilities, adds to the pressures of adapting to and mitigating the changes to the watershed brought on by global warming. Attracting wealthy in-migrants from all over the world encourages global airline travel that contributes significantly to high carbon emissions and the rapid rate at which global warming is happening. The lack of regional climate change models that predict changes in snow pack and water levels and the movement of culturally important plant and animal species in or out

¹ For more information see website: http://hdr.undp.org/docs/statistics/indices/index_tables.pdf

of the area, adds to the pressures of maintaining balance in a highly sensitive ecosystem. Introduction of invasive weed species that generally follows in-migration combined with the installation of domestic lawns and gardens where homeowners use large amounts of water and chemical pesticides and fertilizers for cosmetic purposes, adds further pressure to protecting and conserving populations of culturally important plants that provide highly nutritional foods and pure, clean sources of traditional medicines.

Many believe that the ability of traditional harvesters to maintain relative ecological and cultural stability for so many years prior to contact was in part, due to the heightened knowledge, sensitivity, intuition, and perspective gained through the vision questing ceremonies practiced by traditional hunters and harvesters in high alpine or sub-alpine altitudes. For this reason, Skwelkwewelt was one of the most spiritually significant areas where the Secwepemc hunters and traditional harvesters would seek purification through fasting and praying in the vision quest ceremony while overlooking the landscapes for four days at a time every late spring or summer. In contrast to the heightened awareness that was achieved in the vision quests, the mountain range now serves as a playground for the rich and wealthy skiers and recreational users who are either unaware or unsympathetic of the cultural and spiritual significance and the ways in which downhill skiing negatively impacts the local environment.

Tension and conflicts have arisen between traditional harvesters, skiers, SPSR, and the police over what is considered by the traditional harvesters as complete disrespect for Secwepemc food and cultural values under the auspices of the provincial government's current land tenure and management system. Even though land title is being contested under the Nesonlith Douglas Reserve Claim, the provincial government continues to sell land under the fee simple tenure system, at costs outside of the price range that the average local resident could ever afford. In addition, "long term leases, licenses of occupation and controlled recreation agreements are being issued that state that no one, including the Secwepemc, other than the licensee can use the land under lease for any purpose other than what is stated in the terms of the lease" (Billy, 2006).

The blatant non-recognition of Secwepemc title and rights presents many legal challenges for several youth, Elders and traditional harvesters who have no other option than to try to stop the SPSR development through direct action. Over 54 arrests have been laid on protestors since the Skwelkwewelt Protection Centre began asserting their inherent rights and sacred responsibilities in September, 2000. Traditional harvesters who assert their inherent jurisdiction as the original steward of Secwepemc territory, face civil and criminal charges in a court system that is adversarial in nature and has demonstrated a culturally biased tendency to make judgements in favour of corporate interests. Especially when considering applications for interim relief, such as injunctions, the test is one of balance of convenience where the courts are to weigh the interests of the SPSR on one side, and the Secwepemc peoples on the other. Judges often point to the mainstream economic interests such as employment opportunities and potential profits from the development, but fail to take into account the interests of Secwepemc economies. From the perspective of the traditional harvesters, the courts fail to balance Secwepemc economic values (including traditional food harvesting strategies and practices) but instead favours the highly destructive industrial economic activities of mainstream society.

Furthermore, the Cartesian worldview that underlies neoclassic economics in mainstream society promotes values of individualism, materialism, and mass consumerism that has led to environmental degradation and destructive social phenomena such as privatization, globalization, polarization and in-migration. Global economic activities and the resulting in-migration thereby perpetuates a system that results in the disconnection of humans from their ancestral lands, families and communities, and continues to erode the tribal social structures that promote ethics of cooperation, health, balance, and social and environmental justice. One of the most significant ways in which these destructive social phenomenon are playing out in our daily lives is through the industrialized food system in the mainstream culture and economy.

Strategies

People of all races and cultures are now being challenged to analyze and change the way we respond to our needs for adequate amounts of healthy, culturally appropriate foods outside of the corporately controlled global food system. There is growing recognition by anthropologists, ethnologists, conservationists, and scientists of the valuable contributions made by Indigenous peoples in areas such as; food security, conservation of biological diversity, and adaptation to climate change. One example of this is a study conducted by Victor Toledo at the Institute of Ecology at the National University of Mexico that stresses the overlap between indigenous territories and the world's remaining areas of highest biodiversity (Toledo, n.d.). While traditional harvesting strategies and practices provide important clues and opportunities for social learning and adapting human behaviours in relationship to the land, plants, animals and all of creation, a deeper respect and cross cultural understanding of the ways in which Indigenous peoples interact with traditional land and food is critical.

Indigenous Food Sovereignty – What is it?

The food sovereignty approach is the newest and most innovative approach to addressing the complex issues impacting traditional land and food systems. It has grown out of a social network of Non Government Organizations (NGO's), Civil Society Organization's (CSO's), social movements and many conferences, meetings and discussions that have taken place both within our region and around the world. The concept was developed by a global farmer's movement Via Campesina and was launched to the general public at the World Food Summit in 1996². While there is no universal definition of food sovereignty the most common one referred to in the international community is as follows.

“Food Sovereignty is the Right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies, which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies.”

The food sovereignty approach provides a framework for exploring, analyzing, and describing practical and political strategies for protecting, conserving and restoring traditional land and food systems as it relates to the unique cultures and circumstances of Indigenous peoples. Recent meetings and conferences have provided traditional harvesters with an opportunity to respond to the current situations and concerns in an organized manner following the five central themes that were adapted from the Forum on Land, Territory and Dignity in Porto Allegre, Brazil in March, 2006 (FAO, 2008).

Five Central Themes

- ◆ Food, land and culture.
- ◆ Health and nutritional values of Indigenous foods.
- ◆ Generations and youth perspectives.
- ◆ Indigenous food economies.

² Information taken from the *Food Sovereignty: towards democracy in localized food systems paper* (Windfur and Jonsen, 2005). For more information visit the Nyeleni Forum for Food Sovereignty website address: <http://www.nyeleni2007.org/spip.php?article88>

◆ Strategies to protect, conserve and restore Indigenous land and food systems.

Based on discussions that took place at the 1st Annual Interior of B.C. Indigenous Food Sovereignty Conference in August of 2006, and within the activities of the newly formed B.C. Food Systems Network – Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty activities, four main principles of indigenous food sovereignty (IFS) have been identified³.

- Sacredness – Food is a gift from the Creator; we have a sacred responsibility to nurture interdependent relationships with the land, plants and animals that provide us with healthy, culturally appropriate food, medicines and technologies.
- Self-determination - The ability to respond to our own needs and make decisions over the amount and quality of food we hunt, fish, gather, grow and eat. To be free from dependence on grocery stores or corporately controlled food production and distribution in market economies.
- Participatory - An action that is ultimately based on the day to day practice of maintaining traditional food harvesting strategies and practices for the benefit of present and future generations. A cultural strategy that must be practiced at all of the individual, family and community levels.
- Policy - A strategy for influencing provincial, national and international policies that are negatively impacting traditional land and food systems.

The movement towards Indigenous food sovereignty provides a strategic framework for managing amenity migration patterns that are negatively impacting traditional land and food systems in sensitive alpine landscape zones such as Skwelkwewkwelt. Increasing awareness of the significant role that traditional harvesting strategies can play in conserving biodiversity is a key strategy for influencing policy makers in decision making matters impacting research and development. Through an inter-ministerial approach to forestry, fisheries, rangeland, recreation, and agrarian reform and rural and community self-development, traditional harvesters and political advocates must work together to develop, implement and enforce that will institute policy structures and processes that will :

- 1) adequately assess the cultural, spiritual and health risks associated with large scale ski resort developments,
- 2) support community and ecosystem resiliency, and
- 3) challenge governments and corporations to uphold practices of Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility.

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³ To view the unpublished final Report for the 1st Annual Indigenous Food Sovereignty Conference visit the B.C. Food Systems Network website address: <http://www.fooddemocracy.org/links.php>

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