

INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

(PUBLICATION) The Great Bear Rainforest: Indigenous-led Conservation from a Heiltsuk Perspective (May 2021)

SUMMARY

First Nations communities on the central and north coast of Turtle Island have lived in their homelands since time immemorial. While this region is rich in cultural and spiritual traditions, it is also ecologically diverse. Over the past twenty-five years the region has become known as the Great Bear Rainforest and is world-famous for its beautiful peoples, traditions, cultures, ancient rainforests and rich marine life.

For the Great Bear Rainforest's approximate thirty First Nations, the region makes up their traditional territories, and until recently their homelands were threatened with the destruction of their ancient forest ecosystems. What started out as the 'War in the Woods' between environmental activists and industry and the BC Government in the 1990s with First Nations' ongoing assertion of title and rights to benefit from and determine what happens on their homelands, eventually evolved into a landmark and award-winning set of conservation and human well-being agreements. These agreements are early examples of modern forms of Indigenous-led conservation have been driven by First Nations and supported by the BC Government, environmentalists, and the logging industry.

The story of the Great Bear Rainforest, however, is one which actually has many stories. But very few accounts have been told from fully Indigenous perspectives; this document aims to redress the balance from the perspective of the lived experiences of Heiltsuk First Nation hereditary chief Frank Brown. The Heiltsuk First Nation homelands are in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest and have been centrally involved in the region's land use processes since the early days of the 1990s conflict.

As a publication of the Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI), this project is meant to support its member nations and other interested communities in their aspirations to Nationhood, to encourage development of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas and Indigenous Guardians and further emphasize how intertwined they are. The document is a collaborative effort between ILI Advisors Frank Brown and Eduardo Sousa, and both will also produce a video and organize a webinar on the report.

Frank and Eduardo will take the reader on a journey touching on Heiltsuk-centred conservation-based development and ancestral teachings, assertion of rights and reclaiming of responsibilities, the rise of Coastal First Nations – Great Bear Initiative, through to the seeding of the conservation economy on the west coast, the importance and challenges of allyship, and the establishment of government-to-government relationships and protocols.

Along the journey we will find out about lessons learned in helping re-establish Heiltsuk sovereignty over their lands and waters through their governance and Guardians and stewardship programs, and how these lessons can be used by other nations for their own nation-building and conservation-centred economic development aspirations.

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Finally, the Great Bear Rainforest Agreements and the experiences of the Heiltsuk will also be considered as to how the Agreements can be a transferable model for First Nations across the country and possibly for Indigenous Peoples around the world, and how they may apply to international covenants like the Aichi Targets and the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in addressing the twin crises of biodiversity and climate change.

The purpose of this document is to share lessons and inspire other Indigenous nations on their roads to Nationhood through establishing and developing their own conservation and Guardian programs, so please contact us for more information: info@ilinationhood.ca