

Special Feature

THREE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW WHEN WORKING WITH FIRST NATIONS

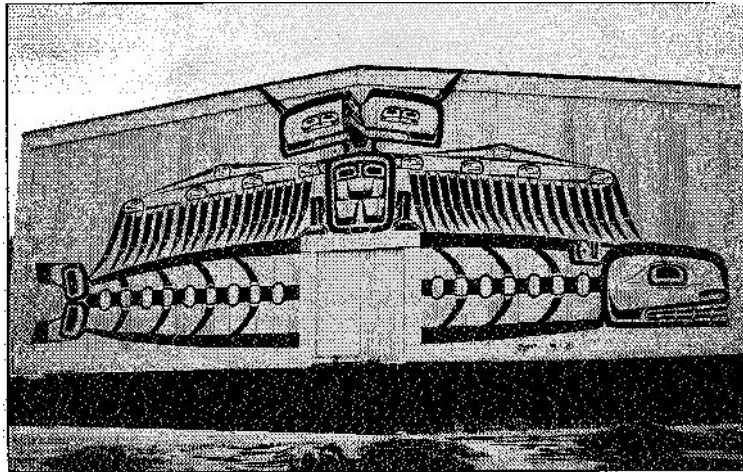
story and photos by Bob Joseph

I have been hearing from many with interests in conservation that they are increasingly encountering First Nations Peoples in their travels. The experiences vary but a common need is emerging to understand a little about First Nations. There are, of course, many more than three things you should know when working with First Nations, but let's start with these three.

CULTURALLY DIVERSE PEOPLES

The first thing you should know is that at the time of contact, North and South America was inhabited by a very diverse group of Indigenous People each with their own culture, values, beliefs, religious views, political organizations, educational systems, lands and resources, and social structures. Geography played an important role in the development of the diversity of the Indigenous People of the "New World." Clearly defined geographic boundaries and the abundance of natural resources like fish, game, and agricultural crops allowed for the development of different cultures that in many cases would go on to develop languages that were unique and distinct.

Today linguist's talk of language in terms of language families, which are broad categories, or languages of common origin. Canada is home to at least eleven distinctive Aboriginal language families and some of the language families are sometimes broken up into more dialects. The Haida



Kwakwaka'wakw big house in Alert Bay, photo Bob Joseph

language family is a stand alone language while the Wakashan language family is broken up further into dialects. Other language families in Canada include: Athapascan, Salishan, Tsimshian, Ktunaxa, Tlingit, Cree, Ojibway, Inuktitut, and Iroquoian families.

It is also important to note that each of the language families in Canada is completely different from one another. If someone from the Athapascan tried to speak to someone from the Wakashan they would have little ability to understand each other. In fact, it would be similar to speaking English to someone who speaks Japanese.

Just as there are distinct language families, it is important to recognize that there is no such thing as a single First Nations group in Canada. First Nation communities are made up of people from many different cultures. This difference can impact your conservation efforts, as they may not all want the same thing. What one First Nation wants may not be what another First Nation wants. How you reach agreements with one First Nation may not be how you reach agreements with another, and so on. Put another way, there is no blanket solution, template, or cookie cutter model that works when working with First Nations.

DEFINITIONS

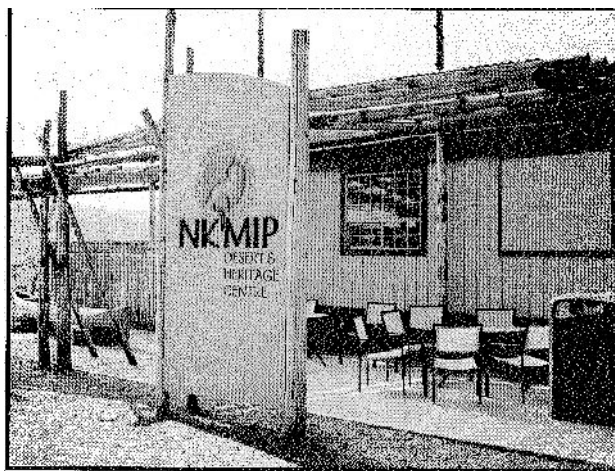
The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people: Indians (now known as First Nations people), Métis and Inuit. These are three

distinct peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. The term "Indian" collectively describes all the Indigenous people in Canada who are not Inuit or Métis. In addition, three categories apply to Indians in Canada: Status Indians, Non-Status Indians, and Treaty Indians. Some people may fit into more than one of those categories. Some people find the term "Indian" outdated and offensive and prefer to identify themselves as First Nations people.

Although the term "First Nation" is now widely used, there is no legal definition for it. A First Nation usually has a governing body that is organized and established by the community. A First Nation can be made up of status and non-status Indians. A First Nation can be made up of one band or include several different bands. The term "First Nations" can and has in many cases replaced the term "Band."

Now that you have a sense of the term First Nation, it is important to decide, after doing some research, if this is indeed who you will be working with and want to work with. For example, if you are securing a piece of land for conservation purposes you may want to know if there is a First Nation or First Nations close by. Your research should also attempt to determine if there are Métis Peoples and perhaps Inuit Peoples near by. If there is only a First Nation close by then that is who you are working with. If however, in your research you discover, Métis Peoples or Inuit Peoples then the definition to use would be Aboriginal Peoples because the Canadian Constitution recognizes all three as Aboriginal Peoples.

So what is the best definition to use? My answer is, "It depends." If you were working to conserve in an area where there is only a First Nation or First Nations then you would be more inclined to use the term First Nation or First Nations. For example, the XYZ Conservation Group is committed to developing relationships with neighboring First Nations to help conserve and protect culturally important values. If however there are First Nations, Inuit and/or Métis Peoples that you would be more inclined to use the term Aboriginal Peoples. For example, the XYZ Conservation Group is committed to working with Aboriginal



Osoyoos NK'MIP Desert and Heritage Centre

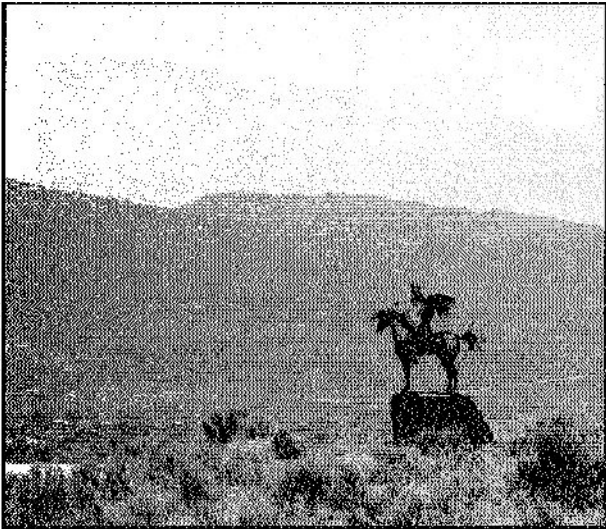
Peoples to conserve and protect culturally important values.

FIRST NATIONS ARE PRO CONSERVATION OR PRO DEVELOPMENT?

The third thing you should know about First Nations is whether they are pro-development or pro-conservation. I'm often asked in my workshops this question. Again, my answer is, "It depends."

The first consideration to explore in the determination of whether a specific First Nation is pro-conservation or pro-development is the discussion about how First Nations started out in North America. Many scholars, until recently, believed that the First Nations People who populated North America did so by way of a land bridge that stretched across the Bearing Sea. The land bridge theory talks about a single wave of migration from Asia at the end of the last ice age being responsible for the population of North and South America. Mention the land bridge theory to First Nations and ask them if they crossed a land bridge and their response would likely be, "No." Instead First Nations would talk about creation and say they did not acquire their lands by walking across a land bridge but rather will talk of first ancestor stories or creation stories.

Creation is an important belief in trying to pin point if a First Nation is pro-development or pro-conservation. From the view point of creation, First Nations were given lands by the creator. These lands were to be used and protected for their benefit and are required for their long term cultural



survival. Cultural survival and the ability of the people to survive for another 10,000 years is the measure of sustainability that First Nations would use in an ideal world and would suggest a pro-conservation belief.

Unfortunately, it is not an ideal world. A look at current socioeconomic conditions within a First Nation or First Nations is the second consideration to explore. What are the key indicators of a community showing? Is there high unemployment or low employment? Are there high rates of suicide and violence because of lack of economic opportunities? What kind of health issues do First Nations have? If a First Nation community is wrestling with poor socioeconomic conditions, and many, but not all are, they may be more inclined to address short term socioeconomic issues through natural resource development. Put another way, the need to survive culturally in the short term can push First Nations to be more pro-development. It is not development at any cost though. First Nations will still weigh their decisions against cultural survival.

WHAT ARE SOME INTERESTS FIRST NATIONS MIGHT HAVE IN DOING CONSERVATION?

Some First Nations are interested in setting aside land for conservation purposes and would be interested in exploring partnerships with conservation organizations. They may want to set a parcel aside for conservation but in doing so may

request continued access to the parcel for traditional purposes, such as, gathering plants or root crops for medicinal purposes.

Other First Nations could be attracted to conserving a parcel of land to protect a sacred site. Bathing pools, first ancestor sites, and other culturally important areas are of cultural significance to First Nations and a conservation group could potentially find additional support from a First Nation or group of First Nations to conserve a sacred site.

Other First Nations dealing with extreme socioeconomic conditions may be interested in proposals from conservation groups that would help address the short term socioeconomic issues as well as conserve strategically important lands. An example of this could be a parcel of land set aside for plant or animal conservation purposes but allowing some limited economic development for the benefit of the First Nation, such as, a low impact Interpretive Centre on a parcel of land providing for conservation and economic opportunities.

Bob Joseph is a member of the Gwa-wa-aineuk Nation. He has provided strategic council and training through workshops and guest lectures at Universities and Colleges on Indigenous or Aboriginal Relations since 1994. Bob can be reached at www.indigenoucorporatetraining.com.

SEMINARS ON FIRST NATION'S LAND TRUSTS AND THE CONSERVATION INTERESTS OF FIRST NATIONS WILL BE HELD AT THE LAND TRUST & STEWARDSHIP SEMINAR SERIES 2006 – CHANGING TIDES MARCH 17-19TH REGISTER BY FEBRUARY 17TH FOR EARLY REGISTRATION DISCOUNT – TRAVEL SUBSIDIES AVAILABLE

INFO@LANDTRUSTALLIANCE.BC.CA