

UVic Sustainability Scholars Program

Title: Kitasoo Xai'xais Cultural Compass: Directing Indigenous Marine Stewardship

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Disclaimer

This report is a product of the UVic Sustainability Scholars Program, a partnership between UVic and various on- and off-campus organizations offering internship opportunities to graduate students working on sustainability-focused research projects that advance sustainability in the region. This project was conducted under the mentorship of Christina Service, Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority staff.

Territorial Acknowledgement

I want to start by first acknowledging the land and waters here in Kitasoo Xai'xais territory, located in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest on the Central Coast of Western Canada. The windswept islands to the west and the deep fjordlands and glaciated peaks to the East are the original ancestors who gifted the Kitasoo and the Xai'xais people life here. The Kitasoo Xai'xais people have respected this relationship through the traditional laws and management practices that were passed down to them by heritage and oral history. Ğiàxsixa – Ntoyāxsn to the Kitasoo Xai'xais people for continually upholding this relationship today and for the next generations to come.

Abstract

Invited by the Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation, this project sought to uplift cultural and spiritual indicators into a tool that could be used when interfacing with crown government agencies on proposed marine activities. Through a decolonial literature review, hands on learning in Klemtu, and a Nation-led, relational research process, the work resulted in a draft “Kitasoo Xai'xais Cultural Compass”. The compass provides a decision-support guide that integrates the stewardship guiding principles, biocultural mapping, and photo-voice storytelling to inform co-management. Key insights include the critical role of Indigenous values in marine protected area systems, the need for intergenerational knowledge transfer through hands on learning, and the effectiveness of aligning Indigenous-led conservation practices with western science for holistic marine management. Deliverables include a decolonial literature review on uplifting Indigenous cultural and spiritual values into marine planning, mapped cultural values for Gitdisdzu Lugyek (Kitasu Bay), and a draft rationale guide for future engagement and refinement by the community. By centering these values, the Kitasoo Xai'xais Cultural Compass also serves as a foundation for tracking shifting climatic changes and cultural perceptions as conditions adapt over time.

Acknowledgements

I am beyond grateful to the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority (KXSA), the Kitasoo Xai'xais Guardian Watchmen, Spirit Bear Lodge guides, and community members of Klemtu for their openness to my contributions in their ongoing work. Special thanks to Santana Edgar and Mercedes Robinson for their expertise and collaboration throughout this project. And to mentors, Christina Service, Laurel Sleight, Rosie Child and Evan Loveless for their support. I want to acknowledge the Sustainability Scholars Program, the Lorraine Kennedy Award and UVic Fellowship for funding, which made this project possible.

Introduction

Gitdisdzu Lugyek (Kitasu Bay) is an Indigenous Marine Protected Area within the Kitasoo Xai'xais territory located on the Central Coast of what is now known as British Columbia. Gitdisdzu, pronounced "git-dis-ju" means "people of Disju" in Sgüüxs. While Lugyek, pronounced "Lew-gyek" means "sheltered bay". This area is vital to the Nation's Indigenous cultural practices as one of the last abundant herring spawns on the Central Coast and its proximity and access to the community, Klemtu¹. As climate change threats increase worldwide, protecting Gitdisdzu Lugyek cultural and ecological integrity is a high priority for the KXSA. In 2022, the Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation, informed by the stewardship authority, Chief Councillor and Resource Stewardship Director, Doug Neasloss, and Hereditary Chiefs, declared the area an Indigenous marine protected area. Together with neighbouring Nations, stakeholder groups, and Federal and Provincial governments, the Nation developed the Gitdisdzu Lugyek management plan using traditional management practices combined with robust science. In an act of asserting their inherent Aboriginal rights and title, which they have held for thousands of years, the Nation closed Gitdisdzu Lugyek to commercial and sport fishing² among other culturally and scientifically based zoning restrictions³. Intended to be the first of many Indigenous MPAs in the area that will mirror the National Marine Conservation Area Reserve that is currently in negotiation between Kitasoo Xai'xais, Gitxaala, Gitga'at, Wuikinuxv, Nuxalk, Heiltsuk, Federal and Provincial Governments⁴.

While the Canadian federal agency, Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) agreed to close the area to seine fishing for herring back in 2016, they are still allowing permits for Geoduck harvesting and have not closed recreational fishing entirely within Kitasu Bay. Part of Kitasu Bay, which is in Kitasoo Xai'xais' Indigenous marine protected area, is closed as a rockfish conservation area as per DFO guidelines⁵. Overlapping both is the BC Parks Spirit Bear Conservancy, which does not include the same site-specific restrictions Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation has made within their Indigenous protected area. This makes it difficult for the Kitasoo Xai'xais Guardian watchmen to enforce their restrictions, as the BC Parks designation they currently hold does not include Fisheries Act enforcement nor is there BC Parks signage that upholds the Kitasoo Xai'xais restrictions (see appendix 1).

This community-based research project aims to uplift the Kitasoo Xai'xais cultural and spiritual values to support the Nation's stewardship authority's goals in protecting this area. What follows is a report from the time I spent working as a co-researcher alongside the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority staff, the Kitasoo Xai'xais Guardian Watchmen, Spirit Bear Lodge guides and key community members to develop a rationale guide of cultural indicators of health within Kitasu Bay. This work comes from the result of many formal and informal interactions, discussions, observations and experiences through the co-creation of a tool to assist the Nation in protecting Kitasu Bay. Ideally, this tool will help to embed Kitasoo Xai'xais cultural and spiritual values into marine protection to support the continued abundance of Mother Earth.

Research Questions

1. How has Indigenous spirituality and culture been formally considered in marine conservation strategies in other parts of the world?
 - i) Are there best practices the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority can learn from?

2. How do the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority want to include cultural and spiritual dimensions in MPA and fisheries co-management?

i) What are appropriate indicators?

ii) What species/places require cultural and spiritual considerations?

Methodology

I am an Indigenous scholar of St'at'imc's and German lineage who was born and raised on Shíshálh territory. At the heart of this project is a belief, shaped by my ancestry and life experiences, that when we care for Mother Earth, she cares for us in return. Her capacity to sustain life far exceeds the current human population; it is our ways of living that are out of balance, not our existence itself. We only need to return to the Indigenous laws to remember how to relate to her again.

I spent 8 months studying Indigenous research methods prior to working in the Kitasoo Xai'xais community. Indigenous research principles defined by Shawn Wilson and Lyla June Johnston, inspired the methodology behind the participatory design of this project. Their teachings have guided my approach, which is rooted in reciprocity, respect and reverence, to see research as ceremony. I honour these principles by positioning myself as a co-researcher, prioritizing the Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation's objectives with an intention to serve the people and territory. This is not a "study" of a Nation, but research that feeds my spirit and strives to uplift Kitasoo Xai'xais laws into policy to restore balance between people and land. In total, I spent 6 months living in Klemtu, with my partner on our sailboat. My intention was to bring my whole self, not just my academic self, to ensure that my time here was not transactional and to not to force my deadlines on anyone. I sought out ways to embody Indigenous research principles by being transparent about what I was doing, trying to be useful through small actions outside of work and by honouring my own ways of connecting to the land and waters. My priority was ensuring that the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority's goals and current objectives directed the ways I could support through my skills, prior experience and research interests.

Methods

Decolonial Literature Review

Once I had a grounded methodology, I started to gather studies for a decolonial literature review. The purpose of this review was to provide a foundation for examples and techniques of other Indigenous Nations and places that have approached similar work which may be inspiring and useful to the Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation's stewardship's goals. I used web of science initially which provided 296 papers and a clear timeline of the work done in formal academia. I read the abstracts of each paper and selected 79 that fell into these key themes which emerged as I gathered the work:

- Indigenous authors and/or strong voices of lived experiences
- Cultural and Spiritual methodologies
- Governance, well-being, kinship and territorial health
- Power Dynamics
- Weaving/braiding of Indigenous knowledges and Western science

I used citation mapping, by reading these 79 papers in more detail, which lead to 29 more papers being included. At the same time, meetings with key staff members of the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority directed specific searches to include Māori marine management, which did not show up in my initial web of science search. I included 3 of these for a total of 111 papers currently.

The literature review framing was inspired by the teachings of Michelle Bishop and Lauren Tynan. Who emphasize a decolonial approach through relationality by clearly stating positionality, which inherently shapes our research. Shifting the focus of the review to an act of reciprocity by honouring those who contributed through their work to serve as a building block, resonated with me more than filling a conventional research gap.

Fieldwork in Klemtu

Determining the Nation's capacity and interest in this project was discussed through preliminary meetings with the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority over many months prior to landing in Klemtu. Christina Service, Laurel Sleigh and Evan Loveless listened to my proposal and research questions and we worked together to find ways this research could fit in the current objectives while at the same time meeting academic deadlines and goals.

As a former diver, I was able to lend capacity to help with training and collecting data underwater. I worked in the field with the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship Authority's dive team and DFO researchers. This involved supporting dive skills training, conducting cucumber and abalone surveys and underwater clean ups.

Drawing on my previous work experience as a BC Parks Ranger, I joined the Kitasoo Xai'xais Guardian Watchmen and BC Parks pilot program. I was able to assist in enforcement scenarios and brainstorming for future projects to assist with compliance and enforcement objectives in Kitasu Bay.

I had the opportunity to join Spirit Bear Lodge guides in their prep for the upcoming season. The lodge is an eco-tourism operation run by the Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation and was developed to provide employment for Kitasoo Xai'xais community members to connect with their ancestral territory and share their knowledge with outsiders. The lodge contributes to conservation by educating visitors and supporting the research being done by the stewardship authority and the Guardian Watchmen.

Nation-led relational research

Rosie Child, the Lands Advisor, gave me an introduction to Cedarbox, the cultural heritage database. With the addition of a schedule to the research agreement and a confidentiality agreement I was given access to the database. This was critical so that I could include previous interviews of traditional use and traditional ecological data as well as see where more information was needed. Specifically, Rosie directed me to where further data was needed in Kitasu Bay, and which layers I could use for biocultural mapping.

All these relationships and experiences culminated to a collaboration with Milas Santana Edgar, KXSA's marine planner, and Mercedes Robinson, KXSA's research intern. Without their expertise and guidance, this work would not exist. Santana's community knowledge and stewardship

perspective helped to ensure this project aligned with the Nation's broader marine planning goals. While Mercedes technical background and community knowledge helped to bring the cultural monitoring tool to life.

Findings

Decolonial Literature Review

Collectively, the work done in formal academia on Indigenous-led marine protected areas, demonstrates that the integration of Indigenous spiritual and cultural aspects into marine protected areas (MPAs) is being increasingly recognized as vital to shaping effective conservation⁶⁻⁸. This growing body of work shows that when MPAs serve as places of cultural preservation and active Indigenous community participation there are holistic conservation outcomes that honor both Indigenous ways of knowing and western science, which also contribute to climate resilient marine stewardship⁹⁻¹¹.

A primary objective for this literature review was highlighting best practices that could inform Kitasoo Xai'xais marine protection. I skimmed the studies for examples of cultural monitoring in Indigenous contexts and previous frameworks for community-led cultural indicators/health indexes. The Māori papers were the most instructional, one in particular, "Placing Well-Being: A Māori Case Study of Cultural and Environmental Specificity" by Ruth Panello and Gail Tipa, outlined a "Cultural Compass" that was used to determine where community members currently feel the government is in protecting the marine area, and where it should be¹². This concept was fundamental to inspiring our own, Kitasoo Xai'xais Cultural Compass.

Fieldwork in Klemtu

Data collection with the Kitasoo Xai'xais Dive Team deepened my understanding of the need to protect these marine areas. Being apart of the Kitasoo Xai'xais Guardian Watchmen pilot program with BC Parks was fundamental to understanding how their presence here has changed how outsiders interact with the territory. Hearing firsthand from the local Spirit Bear Lodge guides how they approach their work in tourism, revealed the deep spiritual and cultural connections that steward this territory.

Kitasoo Xai'xais Cultural Compass

The intention for the Kitasoo Xai'xais Cultural Compass is to offer direction for stewardship and crown government agencies to determine if proposed or on-going marine activities align with cultural and spiritual values in co-management. Together, Mercedes, Santana and I, developed a plan to create a rationale guide using the Kitasoo Xai'xais Stewardship guiding principles of Loomsk/ xala (respect), Sityaaw/ xvilsistai (reciprocity), Sagayt k'uulm goot/ qatualmla (Interconnectedness), and Gugwil'ya'ansk/ qaul?axa (Intergenerational Knowledge). We drafted 3 or 4 "cultural governance determinants" for each guiding principle. These are questions that can be used as a type of criterion when asking if certain activities will affect an area or species within the Kitasoo Xai'xais territory. For the second part of the rationale guide, we used a biocultural map to supplement the information provided through the cultural governance determinants. This provides a clear visual of how the proposed/ongoing activities physically relate to the cultural and spiritual values. For the third part, we wanted to elevate lived experience, memory, and spiritual

relationships to place across 3 generations of Kitasoo Xai'xais people using a photo-voice. Photo-voice is a participatory research method where community members use a visual aid and a story to share their own perspectives, experiences and knowledge.

Conclusion

Decolonial Literature Review

Overall, this literature review has revealed that Indigenous ontologies rooted in reciprocal relationships with Mother Earth, and axiology's, grounded in respect, responsibility, and intergenerational stewardship, offer proven pathways for sustaining abundance over millennia. Bridging Indigenous knowledge systems with scientific tools and embedding these values into policy moves towards management that upholds both human and ecosystem wellbeing. This shift is not only a step towards reconciliation, but also part of a necessary transformation in how we relate to Mother Earth. She is our relative, not a commodity, and when we behave in ways that support her capacity to thrive, large and diverse populations of both humans and non-humans can be restored.

As climate change accelerates, tools like the Cultural Compass will become increasingly important for guiding adaptive co-management. Cultural indicators can signal early shifts in ecosystem relationships that may not be immediately visible in conventional scientific monitoring, allowing the Nation to respond in ways that honour both ancestral knowledge and emerging environmental realities.

Before this tool can be authorized, it will need to undergo several refinements by the stewardship authority, marine working group and key community members. An engagement session in the fall is being planned where further discussions will lead to further refinements. This is timely as the stewardship authority is in the process of creating many more Indigenous MPAs, which will mirror the National Marine Conservation Area Reserve which is currently being negotiated.

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Appendices

1. Zoning Plan Map of Gitdisdzu Lugeyks from the MPA Management Plan

