



Field Verification in the Omineca ESI Study Area

“The Carrier-Sekani First Nations are experiencing increasing restrictions on their ability to meaningfully exercise their Aboriginal rights due to the cumulative impacts of forest policy on our landbase. Identifying critical moose habitat and implementing some of the legislative tools to protect that habitat is a definite highlight of our ESI project team’s work to date.”

– Renel Mitchell, Omineca Team Moose (Tl’azt’en Nation)

## Omineca—Collaboration in Action

Moose is an important value to both the Carrier Sekani First Nations (CSFN) and the provincial government. However, populations in the CSFN’s territory have recently experienced declines, which is of concern to both governments. Over the past three and a half years, Omineca ESI’s Team Moose (including representatives from CSFN and B.C.) has undertaken projects to better understand moose populations and habitat availability. Of the many limiting factors to moose populations, the adequate availability of food, plus snow interception cover and thermal cover, are important for survival in late winter. One of the tools available to assist in the conservation of moose winter habitat is through the identification and legal designation of Ungulate Winter Ranges (UWR). Team Moose collaboratively undertook steps to take advantage of this legal tool.

First, a model was developed to determine where appropriate cover and forage exists on the landscape. In a parallel process, CSFN knowledge holders and B.C. moose biologists were asked to identify and map suitable late winter moose habitat areas from their experience. These three sources provided polygons totalling over 460,000 hectares of potential habitat for legal protection consideration. Of these, almost 300 were selected as preferred UWR candidate polygons through successive rounds of analysis and desktop assessment to ensure they capture the habitat characteristics intended.

The next step was to field verify the preferred candidates to confirm that what is thought to be on the landscape is present. Team Moose developed a methodology and an aerial flight plan that included two field crews (CSFN and B.C. biologist in each, with a CSFN representative) in two helicopters. The aerial survey provided real information about the polygons, leading to some polygons’ statuses being upgraded to preferred and others downgraded or dropped from further UWR consideration. A resulting 281 polygons were verified as beneficial, representing approximately 123,000 hectares.

The last step was to prioritize the best candidates to meet the allocated hectares available under current policy. Team Moose identified 15,000 hectares to be submitted into the provincial UWR process for further review and analysis. The remaining polygons will be considered if future protection opportunities arise through land-use planning.

The process undertaken by Team Moose demonstrated intergovernmental collaboration and shared decision-making from start to finish. Although time and energy intensive, it was an extremely valuable exercise resulting in mutually agreed upon habitat areas for the long-term benefit of moose. This work will be another piece of the puzzle in moving toward both the CSFN and B.C. governments’ mutual goal of ensuring healthy, sustainable moose populations.

## ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVE

### UNDERSTANDING ESI

The Environmental Stewardship Initiative (ESI) is an innovative form of collaboration and partnership between the Province of B.C. and First Nations, designed to produce high-quality, accessible and trusted environmental information. Projects are designed to focus on:

- Ecosystem assessment and monitoring;
- Ecosystem restoration and enhancement;
- Ecosystem research and knowledge exchange; and
- Stewardship education and training.

To date, representatives from approximately 30 First Nations, the natural gas industry, and the federal and provincial governments have participated in meetings and workshops to develop regional environmental stewardship projects and governance structures.

ESI working groups continue to implement demonstration projects and work on collaborative governance to ensure a positive environmental legacy in B.C.

#### Fiscal Update:

To date, approximately \$18 million has been expended in support of ESI projects out of a total allocation of \$30 million.

# NEWSLETTER

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eDNA Training in the Skeena Region

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## Environmental Stewardship Initiative — A Year in Review

The ESI is providing a model for collaboration on stewardship designed to give meaningful effect to reconciliation and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The ESI is now in the fifth year of its six-year mandate. The lifecycle of many ESI projects has reached a point where they are beginning to yield tangible results, enabling the development of recommendations that will shape resource management throughout British Columbia. A few highlights of the year are showcased in this newsletter.

In 2018, ESI commissioned a report, *Investing in the Future*, through Four Directions Management Services. This paper reflected input from ESI participants to identify principle-based recommendations regarding ways ESI could move forward in a manner that aligned with the core collaborative foundation on which the initiative is based. A key takeaway from this report is that success of current and future ESI projects is hinged on the capacity of initiative partners to collaborate and share in the decision-making process in a meaningful way.

Building on this, the ESI is jointly developing an initiative-wide progress/outcomes report designed to assess program effectiveness and measure progress against key project milestones. The results will also be used to inform

recommendations to decision-makers on the priorities for the future of ESI.

The preliminary results of this report indicate tremendous headway toward achieving these goals. Central to ESI’s success is the ongoing shared decision-making that guides collaborative projects and the development of trusted data between ESI partners.

One such project that exemplifies this relationship is the development of a data-management strategy, designed to explore options for determining the most useful, secure manner in which to store and organize data while ensuring compatibility with both First Nations and government values.

To this end, the Data Management Working Group, consisting of First Nation delegates from each of the four ESI Regions and provincial staff from a number of organizations, convened for the first time in Smithers, kicking off with a two-day workshop that focused on “current state” issues regarding data governance and data management as it relates to ESI. The group highlighted several areas of concern and advancements.

Our team looks forward to another year of collaboration and moving toward a stewardship model that reflects the diverse needs of all ESI partner nations and organizations.

## North Coast Region

The North Coast (NC) Environmental Stewardship Initiative (ESI) Regional Stewardship Forum (RSF) areas of focus include both habitat restoration projects and the longer-term, value-based work to address cumulative effects (CE) within the territories of the six participating North Coast Nations: Kitsumkalum, Kitselas, Metlakatla, Haisla, Gitxaala, and Gitga'at.

The North Coast Ecosystem Restoration Project is delivered through Nation-led Indigenous Stewardship Projects (ISPs) with collaboration occurring through shared data, lessons learned, methodologies, and site visits. In 2019/20, a number of new projects have been proposed and are underway, including:

- A dye study on the Skeena River to improve understanding of the distribution patterns of hydrocarbon or other contaminants coming from potential derailment;
- A water temperature study for 10 salmon-bearing streams; and
- A pilot project to develop cetacean monitoring protocol.

To increase efficiencies and align complementary work, the NC ESI has aligned with the NC sub-region of the Marine Plan Partnership (MaPP) to produce an integrated NC CE project work plan for 2019/20 with a focus on co-developing the foundation, assessment, management, and monitoring of four initial values: aquatic habitats – estuary, food security/access to resources and salmon. This work includes Year 3 of a collaborative field-monitoring program on the Skeena estuary, development of a comprehensive data-management system to serve the diverse partner needs, implementation of a community-based survey to inform the current condition of food security/access to resources, a current condition analysis on the Skeena estuary, and foundational work to scope the salmon value.

## Moving Forward

North Coast ESI continues to strengthen the collaborative work on Cumulative Effects and to implement ecosystem restoration projects across the region.



Field Work on the North Coast



Training in the Skeena Region

## Skeena Region

Under the Skeena Sustainability Assessment Forum (SSAF), work continues on the development of protocols to assess five key environmental values: medicinal plants, grizzly bear, fish and fish habitat, moose, and wetlands. The importance of these values cannot be understated as they are sources of health and well-being, foundational to First Nations rights and title, and provide the expression of culture and tradition.

In alignment with SSAF objectives and the five key environmental values, Indigenous Stewardship Projects (ISPs) are also being implemented that provide the opportunity to build the knowledge, expertise, and capacity of participants. Examples of ISPs to date include moose harvest monitoring and stream health assessments.

Highlights from the SSAF during the past year include the recent Data Governance Workshop, Moose Summit hosted by Wet'sewut'en First Nation, and an All-Nations meeting hosted by Hagwilget Village. The Data Governance Workshop builds on Skeena ESI's data-management work to date and was attended by representatives from all four ESI Regions. The Moose Summit was a technical forum that brought together Skeena and Omineca Nations to share information and lessons learned through ESI.

## Moving Forward

The SSAF continues to support protocol development to produce a State of Values Report with the status and trends for each of the five values based on Indigenous perspectives. The State of the Values Report will ensure that decisions are based on trusted environmental data and incorporate Indigenous perspectives.

## Omineca Region

The Omineca ESI demonstration project is changing the way B.C. and the Carrier Sekani First Nations talk about land and resource stewardship. Models have been completed identifying key areas of importance for Omineca ESI's values (moose, forest biodiversity and freshwater, and anadromous fish). Analyses produced indicate that these values in the Omineca region are at risk in many parts of the study area. This collaboratively developed information is informing Immediate Forest Management Measures (IM). IMs are voluntary practices that support the values by avoiding key areas and changing management to implement short-term change on the landscape for the values and preserve options for future protection.

The IMs agreed to by the project team are dependent on the co-operative implementation of IMs by forest licensees. Recognizing this, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between seven First Nations, B.C. and seven major licensees was developed and signed in November 2018. The signing of the MOU represented unprecedented participation.

## Moving Forward

Over the next year, the Omineca ESI will be looking at the synergies between values that have similar ecological and habitat requirements to support prioritization of areas for protection. The differences that we see between the north part of the ESI study area for maintenance and south for recovery will also be examined. Concurrent with the development of IMs, the project team will be scoring and developing scenarios and recommendations for the terms for a longer-term resource management planning exercise, informed by IM success. The scenario selected by leadership will serve as direction for the resource-management planning process, which will use Omineca ESI analyses as key inputs.



Doig River First Nation Trail Overlooking the Osborne River

## Northeast Region

The Regional Strategic Environmental Assessment (RSEA) agreement between the Province and seven Treaty 8 First Nations (Blueberry River, Doig River, Halfway River, Prophet River, Saulteau, West Moberly and McLeod Lake) laid the groundwork for how the parties will work together in a shared decision-making model under the ESI. The parties are assessing the cumulative effects of natural resource development activities within an area in the vicinity of the Montney shale gas basin. Currently, the identified values supporting the assessment are: old forest/ forest biodiversity, water, moose, peaceful enjoyment and environmental livelihoods. The results and recommendations of the RSEA are expected to inform future natural resource management decisions.

### Methods Pilot

Given the size of the area being considered for an RSEA and the anticipated issues related to data collection and modelling, a smaller pilot area covering the Fort St. John Timber Supply Area was launched in 2018. The objective of the Methods Pilot is to develop and test modelling approaches that assess the cumulative effects of natural resource development activities on the state of the identified values and associated indicators.

A technical team has been formed to undertake the Methods Pilot. Baseline information, indicator selection, and status quo (basecase) modelling are nearing completion. Current products include a consolidated RSEA Disturbance Layer, the Forestry Data Package, and the Petroleum and Natural Gas (PNG) data package.

### Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP)

The Fort St John Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) is a set of strategic policies governing the management of Crown land and resources within the Peace Natural Resource District. A process to amend the LRMP is now underway. More information can be found here: <http://ow.ly/BS3b30pu3SG>

Results from the RSEA (and the Methods Pilot) will be used to inform the LRMP amendment process.

## Moving Forward

Under the RSEA, Treaty 8 First Nations and the Province are working toward assessing and developing management recommendations to inform future natural resource management decisions. Stakeholders and the public will have the opportunity to be engaged on any proposed management recommendations through the LRMP process and other public engagement processes as required.

## Contacts

### North Coast Region

[Bruce Watkinson](mailto:Bruce.Watson@gitxaalanation.com)  
Watkinson@gitxaalanation.com

[Chris Apps](mailto:Chris.Apps@kitselas.com)  
LR.Director@kitselas.com

[James Prsala](mailto:James.Prsala@gov.bc.ca)  
James.Prsala@gov.bc.ca

[Heather Johnston](mailto:Heather.M.Johnston@gov.bc.ca)  
Heather.M.Johnston@gov.bc.ca

### Skeena Region

[David de Wit](mailto:David.Dewit@wetsuweten.com)  
David.Dewit@wetsuweten.com

[Glen Williams](mailto:Malii@gitanyowchiefs.com)  
Malii@gitanyowchiefs.com

[Carley Coccola](mailto:Carley.Coccola@gov.bc.ca)  
Carley.Coccola@gov.bc.ca

[Leigh-Ann Fenwick](mailto:Leigh-ann.Fenwick@gov.bc.ca)  
Leigh-ann.Fenwick@gov.bc.ca

### Omineca Region

[Jackie Thomas](mailto:Jackie.Thomas@saikuz.com)  
Jackie.Thomas@saikuz.com

[Tina Erikson](mailto:Tkreseracher5@nakazdli.ca)  
Tkreseracher5@nakazdli.ca

[Brian Toth](mailto:Briantoth@shaw.ca)  
Briantoth@shaw.ca

[Justin Calof](mailto:Justin.Calof@gov.bc.ca)  
Justin.Calof@gov.bc.ca

### Northeast Region

[Jim Webb](mailto:Jwebb@incentre.net)  
Jwebb@incentre.net

[Roslyn Notseta](mailto:Roslyn.Notseta@hrfn.ca)  
rnotseta@hrfn.ca

[Gary Reay](mailto:Gary.Reay@gov.bc.ca)  
Gary.Reay@gov.bc.ca

[Chris Pasztor](mailto:Chris.Pasztor@gov.bc.ca)  
Chris.Pasztor@gov.bc.ca