

Together for Wildlife - Interior Universities Research Coalition Student Research Grant - Interim Reports

ła A'alyaga Laxyuuba Gitk'a'ata (The Territory of the Gitga'at Speaks): Place-based Knowledge, Environmental Stewardship, and Indigenous Law in the Heart of Gitga'at Territory

Student: Spencer Greening

Principle Investigator: Dr. Dana Lepofsky

School: Simon Fraser University

Question 1. What activities have been completed on this project to date?

Spencer has conducted three full field seasons for his PhD project on place-based knowledge, environmental stewardship, and Indigenous law in Gitga'at Territory. This research has resulted in many interviews, and hundreds of conversations about human relationships with the natural world in the Gitga'at's Sacred watershed of Laxgalts'ap (Kitkiata Inlet). As a result, Spencer is currently writing his manuscript on Gitga'at laws and management surrounding the cultural harvests of species within the watershed, with a specific case study on Mountain Goats and Salmon.

To accompany this manuscript Spencer has had several cultural harvests filmed, including a winter Mountain Goat hunt, that will be turned into short documentary on Indigenous methods, laws, morals, and values surrounding Gitga'at hunting.

In both his writing and his film, Spencer pairs his research with interdisciplinary methods: (1) biological/archaeological study, (2) ethnographic research involving community interviews and archival materials; and (3) autoethnographic reflection of teachings, knowledge.

For each case study Spencer is able to blend Gitga'at ecological teachings and archaeological evidence of harvest, with evidence of thousands of years of occupation within this watershed. From studying 2000-year-old fish weirs, to 4000-year-old salmon specimen, and 10,000+ year old stone tools, the Laxgalts'ap watershed has proved to be a Cultural Keystone Place whose stewardship serves as a great example of Indigenous Ecological Management of place.

Question 2. Is the project progressing as planned? If not, why not and what are you doing to mitigate or adjust?

The project is going as planned. As of March of 2023, the final phase of field work took place with the filming of a winter Mountain Goat Hunt. Spencer has been able to uphold community research obligations and goals by incorporating community knowledge sharing and mentorship when possible. Spencer plans to complete his PhD manuscripts by Fall of 2023, and when completed his thesis he will host a community knowledge sharing feast with the food he has harvested.

Question 3. How have you been working with your research partners, including Indigenous communities, to ensure meaningful collaboration and participation?



Spencer has a longstanding research partnership with his community, The Gitga'at First Nation, and within this partnership he has been dedicated to honouring the First Nations principles of ownership, control, access, and possession of research. As such, he engages in knowledge sharing and collaboration with the Gitga'at Oceans and Lands Department (GOLD) on any data collected and interviews conducted. Each step of this project is in collaboration with, or under the guidance of the GOLD Stewardship Director and the Manager of the Gitga'at Guardian program.

Spencer actualizes a community engaged framework through commitments of mentorship and knowledge sharing with community members. He is eager to pass any knowledge he can to Gitga'at youth and continues to volunteer his time with local schools and the larger Gitga'at community.

Question 4. Tell us about one success, one challenge or difficulty and one thing you would do differently if you could go back?

One of the greatest successes of this project has been solidifying his role as a mentor to younger generations. This project has opened doors to pursue further cultural initiatives with the Gitga'at Health Department, where he can continue to blend harvesting and research while teaching youth about cultural conservation practices surrounding those species. Because his research revolves around Indigenous Knowledge, it does not feel fully reciprocal unless it serves the community where the knowledge is derived from. These opportunities help fulfill that reciprocity and mutually beneficial research relationship.

It is well known that the transfer of Indigenous knowledge happens most substantially while learning on the landscape the knowledge is from. One challenge has been conducting interviews with Elders outside of their homes and on the lands and waters we are researching. From the outset of this project, Spencer envisioned the vast majority of Gitga'at knowledge holder interviews taking place in our territories. Out of approximately twenty interviewees, four made it to the field site. This led to new methods to trigger Elder knowledge sharing, such as bringing multimedia footage into a knowledge holder's home and having conversations around footage of the sites and each species, or bringing food from the territory such as salmon, ducks, geese, moose, or mountain goat into their kitchens and sharing a meal with them. This has led to learning how to put more time into what is logistically manageable within his research. Moving forward, Spencer knows there was great success in informal meetings visits, or trips with Elders and knowledge holders. Often, the simple act of tagging along with Elders and knowledge holders in daily life would lead to very relevant knowledge sharing to my project.