

# Collaboration Across Cultural Boundaries to Protect Wild Places: The British Columbia Experience

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**Abstract**—Culture counts in the protection of wilderness! Culture can be defined as the shared products of a given society: its values, norms, knowledge, and ideals, as well as its material goods. If history reveals nothing else, it teaches us that the norms, values, ideals, and language of a society are what defines wilderness. What one society calls wilderness, another society calls home. Such cross-cultural differences in understanding what constitutes wilderness over time is well documented in literature. Recognizing the historical variation between cultural groups is an essential first step in building alliances for wilderness protection and management that will endure the test of time. Perhaps the need for bridging cultural differences is no more evident than in the Circumpolar North where norms, values, and ideals have a rich variation among people living in landscapes containing diverse qualities of wilderness.

Less documented in the literature is how to overcome cultural differences and advance a collective vision about protecting unique wilderness ecosystems. An essential step in consensus building is to embrace a collaborative decisionmaking process that favors shared ideals about wilderness protection. One approach being tested in six British Columbia locations, as well as elsewhere, is a collaborative process involving diverse cultural values concerning wilderness. It is timely, therefore, to examine the principles and practices required for such a collaborative process and the nature of the institutional arrangements that are working in northern British Columbia to protect wilderness values. In light of the ongoing changes in the Circumpolar North, lessons learned in British Columbia might assist other jurisdictions seeking to adopt collaborative decisionmaking as a strategy that favors cross-cultural communication and agreement.

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## Introduction

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Many of the great debates on wilderness have argued that it is important to make a distinction between a conservation (ecocentric) and societal (anthropocentric) rationale to protect wild places (Callicott and Nelson 1998; Hendee and Stankey 1973; Nash 1971; Soulé 1998). Historically, participants attending meetings of the World Wilderness Congress have agonized over the precise wording of a “wilderness” definition that eventually would be an accepted definition globally for the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Category I classification (Martin 2001). In defining the character of wilderness, human presence has been a contentious issue. One element of the ecocentric versus anthropocentric debate arises from the desire to curtail almost all forms of extractive and consumptive activities. In the case of legislated wilderness, research began nearly 40 years ago to examine how many visitors an area might accommodate (Wagar 1963), and more recent assessments have been undertaken to examine common problems of wilderness use (Cole and others 1987) as well as recreation conflicts among different types of visitors (Watson 1995). Even provocative management proposals for “no-rescue” zones within wilderness areas have been proposed, which would allow back-country travelers to meet nature on its own terms and to be solely responsible for all risks they experience in the wild (Allen 1981; McAvoy and Dustin 1981a,b; McAvoy and others 1984; Peterson 1987; Wagar 1981). Each of these illustrations highlight the diverse ways in which the subject of human presence in the wilderness has captured or provoked the attention of both the social and natural scientist.

Today in the northern latitudes, human presence is considered in yet another context, that is, recognizing the potential of protected circumpolar wilderness as a homeland for indigenous people. Aboriginal presence in wilderness has now been accepted as an IUCN standard by allowing “indigenous communities to continue

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living in low density and in balance with available resources to maintain their lifestyle” (Martin 2001). Recent legislation in Finland recognizes the value of protecting wildland from development for the benefit of the Sami people (Kajala and Watson 1997). Protecting wildland for the benefit of aboriginal people in British Columbia has directly involved aboriginal participation, not only in identifying new protected areas, but also having representation on the committee that provides management direction for the area. This initiative has been undertaken by means of collaborative management agreements (CMAs). These agreements are not the outcome of new national legislation, nor are they a consequence of a recently negotiated treaty. Government and First Nation representatives, as a result of sharing a conviction that action was required to protect land, water, and wildlife, freely enter into a CMA to actively discuss protection of pristine landscapes and advancement of biodiversity goals.

## Value of Collaborative Agreements

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Considering the historical debates regarding the need for legislated wilderness, the premise that “a joint statement of intent with a dash of collective goodwill” is sufficient to ensure protection of wildland deserves close scrutiny. Such agreements seldom have the force of law behind them, so they raise several questions:

1. Why would government officials support an initiative to create collaborative agreements?
2. What conditions influence the feasibility of this approach to protecting wilderness values?
3. What is the scope of such agreements, what are their characteristics, and what makes them successful?

Are both the conservation and societal expectations associated with wilderness taken into account in such initiatives? Six case studies have been examined and are described to draw general comparisons between them. While the likelihood of success of collaborative agreements may be context specific, there is an emergence of some key practices that can be applied to other jurisdictions.

**Are collaborative models suitable for achieving wilderness ideals?** Underlying this question is the assumption of defining a specific point of view or whose ideals of wilderness will be the point of reference. Over several decades there have been shifts in the dominant rationale to protect wilderness resources. For conservation biologists, “biodiversity” is touted as the dominant value for wilderness protection (Soulé 1998). For a large number of urban dwellers, however, who do not plan to visit the wilderness, there are distinct personal values of wilderness tied to spiritual, aesthetic, and bequest values inherent in wilderness (BCMOF 1994.) For indigenous people, a relationship with the land is one of kinship and social structure, as their traditional territories represent their livelihood, cultural identity, and well-being. Thus, when considering what is a suitable ideal, the answer may lie in knowing just whose perception of wilderness we are talking about.

Wilderness is fundamentally a social construct that varies in meaning within a population and across cultural boundaries. Collaboration is simply a new way to address issues vital to the construct of wilderness in the increasingly dynamic social and political environment of the northern latitudes. Within any province or territory in Canada, the local social issues associated with wildland are of paramount importance, in spite of recognizing the biodiversity objectives of conservation proponents. In essence, achieving many of the biodiversity goals will be dependent on accommodating different world views on the meaning and significance of wilderness. However, wilderness in terms of cultural identity, personal well-being, and survival can differ greatly under such circumstances, and the resolution of such sociocultural differences will require careful attention to a collaborative process for addressing the issues. According to Minnis and Peyton (1995):

When resource managers work within the limits of ecological parameters, they must solve problems, but when they work within the limits and forces of sociological parameters, they must resolve issues.

The sociological parameters facing wilderness in the Circumpolar North can be seen as the need to recognize and embrace the inherent differences in aboriginal and nonaboriginal world views concerning wilderness and resource management. Perhaps the best way to resolve differences and to create a shared vision is through careful collaboration (Gray 1985, 1989; Pfister and Ewert 1996; Selin and Chavez 1995).

In many ways, the importance of biodiversity representation is not an objective in conflict with the sociocultural objective of involving indigenous people. Essentially, it can be argued that the nature of human presence may be a more complex issue because it requires the integration of distinct world views about what wilderness management should achieve. This challenge to collaboration is relevant in the cross-cultural context of managing natural resources in Finland (Hallikainen 1993; Kajala and Watson 1997), in Alaska (Gallagher 1996), and in the Canadian North (Berkes and others 1991; Witty 1994). As stated by Berkes and others (1991):

...self-management is at the core of social and economic health of many native communities, and is tied to larger questions of self-government. Thus, the cooperative management of resources becomes a key issue...in the implementation of principles of environmentally sustainable, culturally appropriate economic development.

In other words, the long-term success for new wilderness designation is to ensure the aggregated values associated with wilderness are protected, regardless of whether or not biodiversity values dominate over sociocultural values in the process. Of course, it is important to recognize problems associated with efforts to address biodiversity criteria in wilderness designation. Generally, such problems are guided by a scientific paradigm to discover the resolution of the dilemma. On the other hand, defining the character of wilderness, or management practices within it, raises more complex issues when future action involves a world view held by aboriginal people. It is increasingly evident that the rights, privileges, and interests of aboriginal people will play an important part in determining the feasibility of protecting wilderness in the northern latitudes. Thus, a collaborative approach has considerable merit.

**What conditions influence the feasibility of collaboration?** There will be a need in the Circumpolar North to consider two general sets of questions about the feasibility of implementing a collaborative model. These pertain to (a) legal-political feasibility and (b) sociocultural feasibility. Some of the basic legal-political questions identified by Borrini-Feyerabend (1996) are:

- Do the laws and regulations have sufficient flexibility to allow for a collaborative decisionmaking body to manage a wildland area?
- Are there planning policies or operational practices in place to address the key management issues and employ a jointly agreed upon conflict resolution process?
- Is there a political willingness to share the responsibilities and obligations of wilderness protection with indigenous representatives whose rights and privileges may be currently defined by customary use of an area?
- Is a partnership likely to strengthen their political capability to ensure the pressures of commercial or industrial exploitation can be more effectively resisted in special places and sensitive areas?

The sociocultural feasibility relates to adopting practices that can value the differences between aboriginal and nonaboriginal culture. What one group may call wilderness, the other group may call home to a way of life. The type of questions that may assist the prospective collaborators assess another aspect of feasibility includes:

- Are the partners informed and knowledgeable about the threats to an area as well as the potential trials and tribulations of collaborating to protect it?
- Are there past practices and trust-building experiences among the partners that can facilitate and support collaborative decisionmaking?
- Are the partners openminded and respectful of different cultural customs, highly tolerant of the ambiguity in the intercultural communication process, and willing to "learn by doing"?
- Are the partners able to agree on a common vision and course of action?

**What is the scope and characteristics of collaboration in northern British Columbia?** In northern British Columbia, these kinds of feasibility questions have been addressed. Beginning in 1992, there was a political willingness to share the responsibilities and obligations of protecting wild places with First Nations for at least two reasons:

1. The initiative was viewed as a government-to-government discussion.
2. The agreements were seen as an interim step within a broader picture of resolving long-standing disputes over land title and unextinguished aboriginal rights to resources in traditional use areas.

More importantly, the sociocultural questions were answered very positively early in the process, and key elements of the cultural conditions may have a sufficient factor to overcome a variety of other obstacles evident at the inception of the collaborative process. As stated by one participant party to the first collaborative agreement (Murtha 1996):

Despite sometimes profoundly different cultural environments, there can be common interests in respect for the natural world, in resource conservation, in sustainability, in sharing knowledge with visitors, in celebrating diversity, in preserving areas from industrial and social impacts for their inherent values, and in employing time-proven resource management techniques. It is these common interests which are providing the foundation for new management partnerships in many parts of the world. In fact, it is no longer unusual for a native society to approach a park agency such as B.C. Parks with a partnership proposal. Translating the ideals and the enthusiasm into a successful reality requires creativity, sensitivity, patience, innovation, and perhaps even imaginative interpretation of rules. A fundamental requirement is a recognition that it is not primarily a technical issue but an attitudinal one—how to accommodate two world views.

The model of collaboration in British Columbia over the years has resulted in a half-dozen signed agreements to protect wilderness values. There have been various examples, like the above-referenced quote, that illustrate the relevance of intercultural communication skills on the part of those individuals negotiating such agreements (Pfister 2000). By joint agreement, six areas covered by agreements were labeled whatever seemed most appropriate—a sanctuary, heritage conservancy area, or memorial park. While one legislative framework (such as, Parks Act) in British Columbia does not have a “wilderness” designation category, it does have policies for establishing wilderness conservation and wilderness recreation zones. Agreements between protected area officials and aboriginal representatives vary according to the circumstances of partners and place, and yet the agreements are essential first steps in a continuing process to establish policies and practices that will protect wilderness character and recognize the importance of an area to the heritage, cultural identity, and well-being of an aboriginal community.

Six recent agreements, from 1992 to 1996, were not prescribed by a treaty process but entered into as a way to accomplish biodiversity goals, empower aboriginal settlements to realize local benefits from protected areas, and to establish a set of management activities that could be implemented through collaborative relationships. Each of the case studies have unique histories in terms of aboriginal heritage, claims, and traditional uses. They include: Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve (Queen Charlotte Islands), Kitlope Wilderness Conservancy, Anhluut’ukwsim Laxmihl Angwinga’asanskwhl (or Nisga’a Memorial Lava Beds Park), and Khutzeymateen Grizzly Sanctuary and Tatshenshini-Alsek park. Table 1 provides information on four common attributes for each area: (1) activities covered in the Terms of Reference, (2) governance and representation, (3) style of decisionmaking, and (4) special features related to management and integration of western scientific approaches and traditional ecological knowledge of native communities.

In each of the six agreements, the Collaborative Management Committees (CMCs) are co-chaired and take action on items that reach consensus rather than the majority-rule standard. In the last two committees to be established, allowance was made for a majority-rule provision when certain conditions arise. Each of the CMCs have very broad and encompassing authority to manage public and commercial uses, as well as resource protection. All CMCs report to be functioning fine under the Memorandums of Understanding that they have signed, and have been able to advance the goals of the management plans for their respective areas. In terms of the special character of the wildland area, table 2 reveals how important biodiversity objectives have been captured in the establishment of the area. It is important to recognize that these areas would not be protected if the collaborative process had failed to reach agreement and establish working CMCs.

**Table 1—Collaborative Agreements in British Columbia.**

Park	Year signed	Activities covered by Term of Reference	Committee or membership structure	Chair	Decisionmaking style	Special components of the Agreement
Nisga'a Lava Beds Memorial Park	1992	Establishment Planning Development Adjacent land issues Park use permits Operations and development Research Publications Interpretation Planning Operations Management	Open <sup>a</sup>	Cochairs	Consensus	
Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve	1993		Two Government of Canada Representatives, Two Council of Haida Nation Representatives	Cochairs	Consensus	
Khutzeymateen Grizzly Sanctuary	1994	Management of park resources with highest priority given to the grizzly bear population Maintenance of traditional territories Cultural sites Administration Management Park Plan	One Tribal Spokesman for Stewardship, One District Manager for BC Parks <sup>b</sup>	Cochairs	Consensus	Both traditional (native) and scientific knowledge are considered in the management decisions.
Ts'il os Provincial Park	1994		Three Representatives from the Xeni Gwet'in Chief, councilors, and liaison with three BC Parks Representatives	Cochairs	Consensus	Parties will "work together in a spirit of cooperation, respect, and friendship, and to develop a long-term working relationship."
Kitlope Heritage Conservancy	1996	Planning Operations Park use permits Research Publications Interpretation	Three Representatives from the Haisla Nation, three Representatives of BC government, third-party Chair <sup>c</sup>	Mutually selected	Consensus with special provisions <sup>d</sup>	Park established by Order-in-Council under the Environment and Land Use Act <sup>e</sup> .
Tatshenshini-Alsek Park	1996	Planning Management/operations Capital development Use permits/contracts Fish/wildlife harvest Research and publications Interpretation	Two Representatives of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nation, Two Representatives from BC government	Cochairs	Consensus with special provisions <sup>d</sup>	Provisions to facilitate the assumption of operations by Champagne-Aishihik First Nation.

<sup>a</sup>Terms of Reference for membership does not specify number of representatives from the Nisga'a Tribal Council or BC Parks. The committee prefers informality, values continuity of representation, and enjoys a high level of trust among participants.

<sup>b</sup>Gits'iis Tribe entered into the agreement to ensure that the grizzly bears and their habitat was the highest priority of resource management and both parties would work together in the "spirit of cooperation, respect, and friendship."

<sup>c</sup>Board by mutual agreement selects a third-party chair that brings an independent view to the board. Currently the chair of the board is a highly regarded ex-politician who has served as Speaker of the House of Commons. Three representatives can be appointed by the BC government.

<sup>d</sup>Kitlope provisions allow for majority vote in special circumstances, and Tatshenshini-Alsek includes dispute resolution procedures in the absence of consensus. Consultation is to occur in the event the provincial minister chooses to "vary, replace, or set aside a consensus decision" of the committee. Gits'iis Tribe entered into the agreement to ensure that the grizzly bears and their habitat was the highest priority of resource management and both parties would work together in the "spirit of cooperation, respect, and friendship."

<sup>e</sup>The O.I.C. action authorizes the Minister to recognize a comanaged heritage "conservancy," as opposed to a park. The Park designation, which would be more restrictive, was not preferred by the Haisla Nation in establishing this protected area.

**Table 2—Description of conservation values and First Nation benefits resulting from collaboration**

Park	Conservation values protected within area	Local First Nation benefits
Kitlope Heritage Conservancy	Protects a representation of the Kitimat Ranges Ecoregion and is significant because it fully protects a large intact primary watershed, from glacier to saltwater, together with an excellent representation of coastal temperate rain forest ecology. Kitlope is "typical" in that it supports most species given what is known about northern coastal habitats. Due to the unusually large size (322,000 ha) of the pristine area, it is very significant in terms of biodiversity and other ecological considerations.	Nanaklia Insitute (Haisla) is contracted to manage the area and has hired five Haisla people in Watchmen positions. While only several years old, the board has constructed a base cabin to provide an HQ facility for the watchmen. Four ecotour companies were granted permits to operate in the area in early 1997. Most companies have been based from large sailboats anchored off the Kitlope estuary. In addition, permits have been issued for four guided sport fishing operators and one hunting guide. In 1991, the Haisla Nation opened a Rediscovery Camp for cultural awareness and to build skills and teach self-confidence among native and nonnative youth.
Ts'il os	Protects over 233,000 hectares of undeveloped wilderness and a representation of the Central Chilcoot Ranges Ecoregion. The park's special features include Mt. Tailow, Chilko Lake, Tchaikazan Valley with five glaciers—the largest of which is the only major glacier on the leeward side of the Coast Range. The transition area between the Coast Mountains and the interior plateau includes five of the province's 14 biogeoclimatic zones as well as various sacred, cultural, and spiritual sites of significance to the Xeni Gwet'in people.	The Xeni Gwet'in are seeking to sustain the community of Nemiah Valley through the use and management of the land. Activities they undertake include fishing, trapping, hunting, ranching, and guiding activities. The recruitment, training, and selection of band members to serve as back-country staff is one of the goals of the plan. The management plan makes reference to the role of private sector advertising in fulfilling the visitors' back-country expectations and makes reference to a set of steps similar to a code of conduct set for nature operators.
Gwaii Haanas Heritage Reserve	Protects 138 islands and marine habitat in the southern part of Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte Islands. Area contains Ninisims, a World Heritage Site, with the world's finest display of Haida mortuary poles. Five other historic Haida villages are also protected along with 25,000 km of shoreline that serve as nesting, breeding, and feeding grounds for a diverse population of marine sea life (such as whales, Steller's sea lions, and seals) and dozens of species of seabirds migrating along the Pacific flyway.	Joint strategies have been adopted to assist the Haida to take advantage of the economic and employment opportunities associated with the management of the area. The Haida Gwaii "Watchmen" serve as guardians at five heritage village sites and ensure protection of the natural and heritage values by providing information on Leave-No-Trace techniques for wilderness visitors.
Nisga'a Lava Bed Memorial Park	Protects a representation of Nass Basin and Nass Range Ecosystem. Special features are the fragile volcanic cone and related lava features throughout the park. Park serves as a memorial to over 2,000 Nisga'a who were killed by the eruption. Cultural features include historic Nisga'a villages and supernatural sites. It is intended this Park will be a "flagship" attraction for the provincial park system in the northwest region of BC and complement other aboriginal attractions in the area.	Nisga'a First Nation people are employed as wardens and serve as hosts at the newly opened visitor center. Travel in the backcountry requires a Nisga'a guide for a nominal fee. Visitors can enjoy both the unique volcanic landscape and the aboriginal heritage tied to the language, totems, and ceremony of the Nisga'a.
Klutzeumateen Grizzly Sanctuary	Protects an exceptional representation of a rare ecological system containing a Sitka Spruce rainforest, a productive coastal estuary, a dense grizzly bear population, and a rich salmon river. The 44,272-ha area protects one of the last stands of old growth Sitka rainforests with some of the trees up to 800 years old. The watershed is critical habitat for northern coastal grizzly bears, and has one of the densest concentrations of grizzly bears in British Columbia. Thus, it is an important benchmark for scientific research. The area is also included in the traditional lands of the Gits'iis people—one of the nine tribes making up the Allied Tsimshian Tribes. Each Gits'iis house has stewardship over specific territories that are linked to a wealth of sustenance rights and cultural privileges such as names, crests, dances, and songs.	Gits'iis state that the land has spiritual significance to their people and has provided them with food, medicine, transportation, shelter, and the raw materials for art and cultural items, which is good for trade and barter. They respect the value of the area for grizzly bears and wish to practice traditional activities that do not impact the bears, including not hunting bears. The Gits'iis have never hunted grizzly bears and believe that the soul of a person that died may reincarnate into a bear. Thus, they would never hunt bear for food or sport. The area is managed in accordance with traditional law, and any use other than that allowed by government permit must be referred to the hereditary chief prior to issue.

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Table 2—Con.

Park	Conservation values protected within area	Local First Nation benefits
Tatshenshini-Alsek	<p>Protects 9,455 square kilometers of wilderness in the northeast corner of BC, and it has been designated as a World Heritage site. The designation recognizes the global significance of the area, and the adjacent protected areas in Alaska and Yukon formed the largest contiguous protected area and world heritage site in the world. It is highly valued as a wilderness rafting destination and renowned for its outstanding wilderness qualities—spectacular mountains, massive glaciers, wild rivers, precipitous canyons and forest valleys with bears, Dall sheep, eagles, and Pacific salmon. It is the only protected area in British Columbia to contain an entire intact ecoregion—The Icefield Range Ecosystem. Also located in the area is Mt. Fairweather, BC's highest peak, and the Province's only tidewater glacier—Grand Pacific Glacier at Tarr Inlet. A diversity of threatened or endangered birds are found within the area.</p>	<p>The Tatshenshini-Alsek is part of the traditional territory of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations. Their traditional economy is based on hunting, fishing, gathering, trapping, and trading, which continue to be practiced within the area. The cultural heritage resources are not well known. While some work has been done on early fishing villages, many First Nations caches, campsites, petroglyphs, trail markers, and cabins remain to be located. First Nations reserve rights to provide tours associated with the outstanding wilderness recreation activities, including two of the world's finest river rafting experiences, guided hunting and angling, wildlife viewing, scenic vistas, and the potential for cultural tourism.</p>

## Conclusions

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After reviewing the agreements and talking with the parties involved, there are four general conclusions evident:

1. Protecting and managing for wilderness values in the northern latitudes will be more successful when political/institutional and sociocultural feasibility of a collaborative process has been assessed and incorporated into planning.
2. Implementation of a collaborative agreement has a higher degree of success when participants are willing to think “outside the box” of past practices. For example, policies and practices of protection must recognize that aboriginal relationships and rights are essential for aboriginal livelihood and cultural survival.
3. Areas examined vary noticeably in terms of habitat and wilderness character protected within their boundaries.
4. Collaborative models adopted and implemented in British Columbia are at the embryonic stage of their evolution, but they do illustrate what can be accomplished in the absence of a specific “wilderness act” of the type found in other North American jurisdictions.

Thus, the innovative frameworks for collaborating for protection and management of wildland in British Columbia are showing promise for accommodating aboriginal and nonaboriginal world views of wilderness. The collaboration models will vary in terms of structure, representation, and range of issues that are considered. But in each case trust has been built among partners so that there can be enduring working relationships on the CMCs. Perhaps the lessons learned in these situations can stimulate participants in other jurisdictions to be creative and innovative in collaborating across cultural boundaries for the benefit of the scientific and human values associated with wilderness protection and management.

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