



University  
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

**NATASHA OVERDUIN**

BA (Carleton University, 2012)

**“Exploring the role for private actors in water governance”**

Department of Geography

Friday, August 28, 2015

2:00PM

David Turpin Building

Room A136

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Michele-Lee Moore, Department of Geography, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Rosaline Canessa, Department of Geography, UVic (Member)

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## Abstract

Tension between water sustainability goals and continuing economic reliance on natural resource extraction poses challenges for accelerating water governance reform. Robust accountability mechanisms, as well as collaborative, watershed-scale approaches to water governance are needed to enhance decision-making processes and outcomes, especially where high-risk activities like mining exist. Existing scholarship has not adequately explored how to implement such governance principles in resource extraction contexts, where private actors, and particularly multi-national companies (MNCs), are often primarily responsible for community engagement, operations management, and watershed planning. Through empirical investigation in British Columbia's Elk River Valley, this thesis investigates how one MNC shapes water governance at the watershed scale currently, and in turn, how their influence may affect key governance principles and approaches. Along with document analysis and participation in local conferences, interviews were conducted with community members, community-based organizations, local/regional governments, independent consultants, industry and provincial government staff, Indigenous Nation members and scientific advisors, and academic experts. Findings indicate that despite the presence of water quality contamination linked to mining, community-industry relationships are widely perceived as positive, and there are benefits related to the MNCs' involvement in the watershed. This includes capacity building in a community-based water group, who is consequently regarded as making valuable contributions to water governance processes at multiple scales. Additionally, in response to the Indigenous Nations' concerns and leadership, the MNC supported the development of a collaborative cumulative effects management initiative, which gained momentum and attracted government leadership. Findings also suggested that challenges remain for enhancing water governance outcomes when controls and accountability of a private actors' high-risk activities are insufficient. I document how 'social license to operate' is vaguely operationalized and understood by watershed actors as an accountability principle. I argue that social license does not represent a meaningful accountability mechanism because it cannot guarantee efforts to improve ecological outcomes, and it is unclear whether and how its terms can be defined and enforced. This research contributes to the environmental and water governance literature by providing empirical evidence of new approaches to water governance in a resource extraction context. Considering that B.C. is in the midst of developing and implementing a new *Water Sustainability Act*, this research also provides practical lessons for policy-makers and practitioners who are exploring options for implementing alternative governance approaches.