University of Victoria | Graduate Studies

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

of

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BSc (McGill University, 2015)

"Documenting Indigenous land and sea users' knowledge and observations as social-ecological monitoring: A case study with the Gitga'at First Nation"

School of Environmental Studies

Friday, November 30, 2018
10:00 A.M.
David Turpin Building
Room B255

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Natalie Ban, School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Trevor Lantz, School of Environmental Studies, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:
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Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Asad Kiyani, Faculty of Law, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

Abstract

Indigenous peoples have been monitoring, managing, and adapting to their environments for thousands of years. The academic community and government agencies are increasingly recognizing how Indigenous knowledge can enrich environmental monitoring and inform adaptation in complex social-ecological systems. This masters research grew from a desire expressed by the Gitga'at First Nation's Oceans and Lands Department to formally include the knowledge of Gitga'at harvesters as part of their ongoing stewardship initiatives.

The primary objective of this research was to provide a framework for an ongoing community-based monitoring system based in the observations and knowledge of Gitga'at harvesters. In order to meet this objective, I asked three main research questions: 1. How has Indigenous knowledge interacted with environmental monitoring initiatives, and what are characteristics of effective and self-sustaining monitoring initiatives that engage Indigenous knowledge?; 2. What methods of Indigenous knowledge documentation and communication are best suited to the needs and objectives of the Gitga'at First Nation?; and 3. How does ongoing use and occupancy of Gitga'at territory inform community-based monitoring?

I first conducted a review of the literature on Indigenous knowledge and environmental monitoring to explore the ways in which Indigenous peoples and their knowledge have been engaged in other monitoring initiatives. I found that Indigenous knowledge has been engaged in a number of ways ranging from traditional land-based activities providing holistic social-ecological monitoring indicators, to the employment of Indigenous field technicians for externally-drive monitoring initiatives. Effective projects involved high degrees of community participation or direction; were built on partnerships based on trust and respect for various knowledge systems; used multiple methods to document and communicate Indigenous knowledge; and had institutional links between monitoring and management bodies.

To answer my second research question, I followed a participatory case study approach in partnership with Gitga'at co-researchers. We began with informal interviews with 36 knowledge holders to gauge interest in the project and to establish monitoring objectives. These were followed by two community meetings and 12 workshops to design methods for documenting their observations. We then iteratively designed, tested, these methods for over the course of two traditional harvest seasons. We interviewed 23 participants following the spring 2017

harvest season and 27 after the fall/winter 2017 harvest season. We also conducted 4 semi-structured interviews with department leaders to ensure that the information gathered was meeting the needs of the Gitga'at Oceans and Lands Department, Treaty Negotiators, the Hartley Bay School and the Gitga'at Health Department. Key outcomes are harvest logbooks, and an interview guide to be administered by community researchers following each harvest season.

To answer my third research questions I conducted a conceptual framework analysis on the notes and transcripts taken while designing and testing a monitoring program based in the observations and knowledge of Gitga'at land and sea users. An interconnected set of social-ecological concepts and indicators that are monitored by Gitga'at harvesters emerged. The framework I developed based on Gitga'at understandings of monitoring through use and occupancy of their territory highlights opportunities for Indigenous social-ecological monitoring to enhance ecological monitoring, as well as the importance of maintaining and revitalizing the Indigenous knowledge and harvesting practices.

This research provides the Gitga'at First Nation with foundations from which to pursue ongoing documentation of observations and knowledge produced through harvesting activities as social-ecological monitoring to meet Gitga'at objectives. It also serves as a template for other Indigenous nations that wish to embark on similar initiatives. Amidst discussions of marine and coastal resource co-management in British-Columbia and reconciliation between Canadian and Indigenous societies, the research adds to the literature that re-enforces the importance of Indigenous access to their lands and waters, and the continuation of traditional land- and sea-based activities in order to inform social-ecological monitoring for the benefit of all.