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**Parks Stewardship Forum** 

## Title

One Beat in the Infinite Heart of Haida Gwaii

**Permalink** https://escholarship.org/uc/item/91z0b2bf

**Journal** Parks Stewardship Forum, 39(1)

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# Publication Date 2023

**DOI** 10.5070/P539159896

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BOUNDARY THINKING TRANSFORMED MIKE WALTON, GUEST EDITOR

## **One Beat in the Infinite Heart of Haida Gwaii** Nang <u>K</u>aa Klaagangs *Ernie Gladstone* and Brady Ruyin Yu

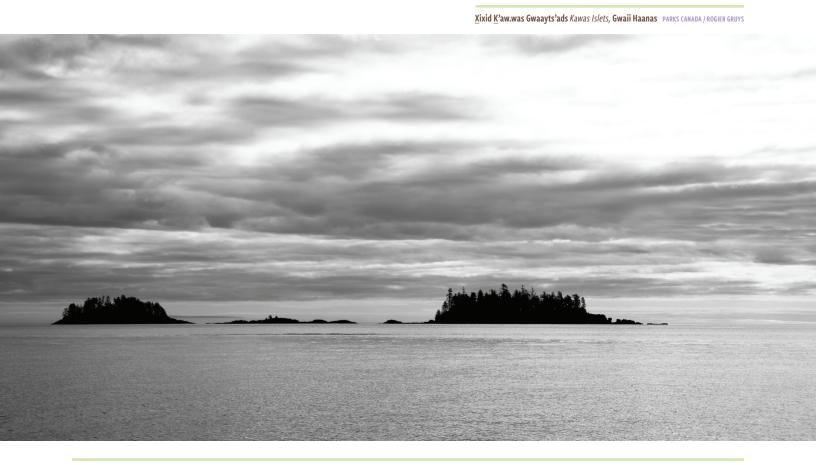
#### THE "NOW" OF OUR TIME

There's a phrase in Xaayda Kil, the Skidegate dialect of the Haida language, that describes the horizon when you can't tell where the ocean ends and the sky begins:

#### "Kuuya kaagan ad siigaay Gud gii ts'ahlsgiidan" Sky and sea glued together

Which is to say that the distinction between even the most immutable of boundaries can be blurred. As we approach the tipping point to catastrophic climate change and the world sits precariously at the edge of a potential shift away from respectful co-existence towards intolerance, what lessons can the examination of these liminal spaces offer us?

For decades, people have looked to Haida Gwaii for some of these lessons. Take October of 1985, for example. The Haida drew a line in the sand to uphold Haida Law and put a stop to unsustainable logging in the place we now call Gwaii Haanas, or *Islands of Beauty* in <u>X</u>aayda Kil. The lifespan of that line would see it transcend its beginnings as a physical barrier on a logging road to become a metaphorical boundary between colonization and a return to nationhood, a political boundary on a map, and eventually a legal boundary described in law.



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M. WHELAN

Gwaii Haanas, the southern portion of the Haida Gwaii archipelago, is now protected from mountain top to sea floor under Haida and Canadian law. We took steps together—Haida and settler—to extend the power of that line to create protections for the land, sea, and people of Haida Gwaii. Today, the shared Haida–Crown governance and decisions being made here have rippling impacts for Indigenous Peoples across North America and beyond. That simple, ephemeral line in the sand is now a thing of dynamic permanence and salience.

By examining the actions that Haida have taken, and looking for the invisible, deeper forces that have shaped social realities, we hope to add to a decolonial discourse of system dynamics and social innovation to inform the next steps towards climate action and respectful co-existence. The hope is to unsettle the idea that conflict and co-existence are antithetical, because Haida have always leaned into conflict as a catalyst to explore differences and come together.

In the "now" that is ours in this time, we're in desperate need of Indigenous-led climate justice. Linda Tuhiwai Smith spoke of the need to decolonize systems thinking and practice in order to build the kind of world that we want.<sup>2</sup> Melanie Goodchild proposed a way to return to an Indigenous pursuit of "wisdom in action" by co-developing meaning to put the soul back into systems change.<sup>3</sup> This is at the heart of Haida efforts to take care of Haida Gwaii.

In pursuit of the answers to some of the most pressing questions of our time—"Where do we go next and how do we get there?"—Indigenous activists, academics, and systems practitioners are steering us toward not just bridging divides, but settling into the complex layers of in-betweens and emerging from them together.

## **BEGINNINGS**

Nang Kaa Klaagangs han.nuu dii kiiGa ga. My name is Nang Kaa Klaagangs *The One Who Walks First*, and my English name is Ernie Gladstone. I am of the Gaak'yals KiiGawaay Skedans Ravens and follow my mother who was adopted into the clan. I am the Parks Canada superintendent of Gwaii Haanas and Canada's co-chair on the Gwaii Haanas Archipelago Management Board. I was born and raised on Haida Gwaii as my ancestors were and now my children.

My name is Brady Ruyin Yu. I am a queer, trans, settler of color and have lived on Haida territory on Haida Gwaii for the past nine years. I came here to support the Haida Nation's work to take care of Haida Gwaii while completing my Master's degree. I currently work with Ernie to care for the land and ocean in Gwaii Haanas. My partner and I now raise our children here.

Perched on the edge of the continental shelf to the west, and separated from the mainland by the shallow waters of Siigaay *Hecate Strait* to the east, Haida Gwaii is an archipelago of about 180 islands off the north coast of what is now called British Columbia.

Nang Kaa Klaagangs: Haida Gwaii means *Islands of the People*. It has been the home of my people since our oral histories began. It is here where we continue to live with and are supported by the abundance from the land and sea. It is where Haida and settler families and communities are now intertwined and coexist.

**Brady:** The archipelago is home to rare, coastal temperate rainforest.<sup>4</sup> The biodiversity and landscape on Haida Gwaii are globally significant. The islands are a unique oasis for 1.5 million of the world's



nesting seabirds.<sup>5</sup> It's a delicate balance that is highly susceptible to climate change and introduced species. These are the biggest threats to the islands, with 42 species currently at risk as a result.

Nang Kaa Klaagangs: Haida are not separate from these islands. I feed tsiina *salmon*, <u>x</u>aaguu *halibut*, and k'aaw *herring roe on kelp* from Gwaii Haanas to my kids and the rest of my family. And in turn, I help to take care of that place so that it exists for my kids and their future grandkids to enjoy in the same way we have been privileged to enjoy. They are not just any foods from any ocean.

**Brady:** In the 1800s, smallpox introduced by settlers killed tens of thousands of Haida across Haida Gwaii and beyond. The remaining population of roughly 600 gathered to rebuild in the villages of HlGaagilda *Skidegate* and Gaw Tlagee *Old Massett*.

Then, in less than a hundred years, much of the old-growth forests that sustained life were logged with almost no environmental controls until entire islands were shorn bare, leaving them to form massive landslides along the zigzagging scars of logging roads. The oceans were overfished and polluted. We settlers took away children and attempted to strip away culture.

These are not easy things to say, but we carried out this harm. The system we created surrounds us still today and we continue to benefit from this colonization at the expense of Indigenous Peoples and cultures.

Nang Kaa Klaagangs: But then we rebuilt.

Beginning in the early 1970s, Haida and settlers began to organize to put a stop to the logging that was bringing little return to Islanders in relation to the resources that were being taken. The current concept of Nationhood was formalized, and hereditary leaders came together and formed a sovereign, national government, the Council of the Haida Nation. Protected areas around Haida Gwaii were designated under Haida Law and designated as Haida Heritage Sites, including the area now called Gwaii Haanas in 1985.

In October of the same year, frustration reached a breaking point and young Haida men and women blocked the road at Tllga Kun Gwaay.aay/Athlii Gwaii *Lyell Island* to stop the logging. The tension and conviction were palpable as injunctions were sought by Canada and British Columbia and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) mobilized.



Haida Elders leading the blockade at Athlii Gwaii, 1985 SKIDEGATE BAND COUNCIL



And then the Elders came to sit in their regalia in front of the young people on that line when the RCMP came. This action changed the way the world perceived what was happening.

"I think a lot of people think we are foolish, sitting here in the rain blocking a road. But we are not. We are at this moment protecting our land. At this moment, we want our Islands back. Why won't the government see it?" Kamee *Ethel Jones*<sup>6</sup>

Haida conviction, bolstered by a campaign that garnered support all across Canada, led to the protection of Gwaii Haanas in perpetuity as one of Canada's first cooperatively managed National Park Reserves and National Marine Conservation Area Reserves, along with the 1985 Haida Heritage Site designation that still stands. These three designations form the basis of the relationship between the Haida Nation and Canada to take care of Gwaii Haanas.

"Drawing a line is easy, it is holding the line that counts." Guujaaw<sup>7</sup>

#### **EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED TO EVERYTHING ELSE**

Nang <u>Kaa</u> Klaagangs: Haida have been living with Haida Gwaii for more than 14,000 years. We know this through histories that have been passed to following generations for thousands of years. These histories find alignment with scientific findings, a more recently developed way of knowing. Today on Haida Gwaii, the boundaries and lines between Traditional Knowledge and Western science are becoming blurred—both are telling the same stories.

Through these stories, we learn about the melting ice and changes in sea levels, and the arrival of the first trees on Haida Gwaii. Recently, pine tree stumps have been found on the Gwaii Haanas seafloor at depths of over 150 meters. To science, these are historical facts, but to Haida, these stories tell us where we come from.

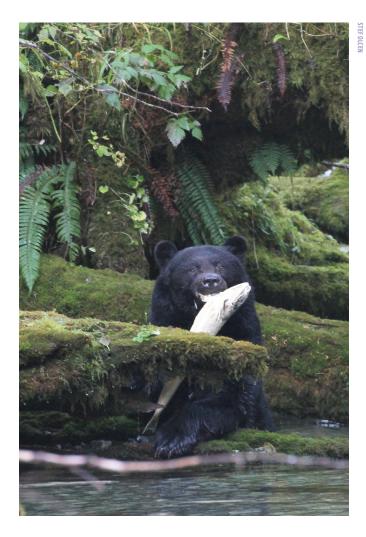
Haida have a saying: "Gina 'waadluxan gud ad kwaagid *everything is connected to everything else.*" Haida are connected to the land, the sea, and the air. We are connected to the living things around us and our lives are intertwined with the cycles of the forest and ocean.

Many of the largest trees come from river valleys where the soils can be most productive, in part because this is where taan *bears*, tsiina *salmon*, birds, and many other beings interact. When salmon stocks are plentiful, their spawning cycles feed bears and birds, and their carcasses are left to fertilize the forest, creating healthier trees. Healthy watersheds and fish streams tend to have large, healthy trees. Healthy trees provide shade for salmon spawning grounds, large dens for bears to winter in, and safe nesting locations for birds.

Brady: I thought I understood this when I first heard this saying of everything is connected. But as we talked about this paper, you kept telling me these examples and these stories. I thought it was about the ecology-that's what I always thought-but I realized two things as we wrote this: (1) I think now that it's not about the overlapping cycles between earth/sky/forest/ocean/trees/salmon/ Haida. It has something to do with the fact that the forest *is* the ocean and the trees and the salmon and Haida. They're not parallel life cycles; we're parts of the same whole; and (2) you weren't telling me what to think; you kept showing me so I could come to know it.

Nang Kaa Klaagangs: Yes. Haida have known for millennia that we rely on the health of the forest to sustain our ocean way of life. The salmon feed our communities, sustain our livelihoods, and bring nutrients back to the forest. The weaving, poles, canoes, and longhouses that tell our stories and transmit our laws rely on healthy forests and trees.

And because we view the cycle as a whole, it is just as important that each of us returns to





(left) Applying copper to the Legacy Pole raised on Athlii Gwaii in 2013. PARKS CANADA / D. KENDRICK (right) Carving the Legacy Pole. PARKS CANADA / B. WOJTASZEK

the Earth. The things we carve or build return to nourish the ground, just as they are meant to, along with the salmon, the bears, and even ourselves when our time on Earth has been completed. Everything is connected and everything will return to nurture the next generations and forms of life.

#### **STEWARDSHIP IN PERPETUITY**

During the mid-1970s, when the fight to protect Gwaii Haanas began, the world had long since entered a colonial, capitalist economy intent on unlimited growth for private wealth. How would you have protected Gwaii Haanas in this time? There were no perfect tools, a situation that still stands.

Nang <u>Kaa</u> Klaagangs: It was important at the time to take action, even with imperfect tools, as waiting would have meant losing the very things that efforts were being made to protect. It meant recognizing that the tools were not as important as the outcome.

Brady: Each of those moves was a new course being charted each time.



Recognizing that without protections, Gwaii Haanas and other parts of Haida Gwaii would continue to be at risk from the increasing pressure of extractive industries, the Haida Nation negotiated management agreements with federal government of Canada and the provincial government of British Columbia that recognize Haida authority and protect the area in perpetuity. Today, the land, sea, beings, and connections to culture in Gwaii Haanas are protected first under Haida Law, then under Canada's National Parks Act and National Marine Conservation Areas Act.

But Gwaii Haanas isn't protected for conservation's sake. It protects Haida values and the relationship that Haida have for the land and waters. The Council of the Haida Nation formed in 1974 primarily to assert Haida Title over Haida Gwaii, and the line at Athlii Gwaii was held in order to uphold Haida law to take care of Gwaii Haanas. As a result, the word "reserve" is appended to Canada's National Park and National Marine Conservation Area designations (in addition to the Nation's existing Haida Heritage Site designation) to indicate that Haida dispute the Crown's claim to these lands and waters.

The Haida Nation is highly strategic in using and adapting existing tools to deliver on its needs. But it is not a perfect situation. Nancy Kimberley Phillips and Wacey Little Light describe the history of Indigenous erasure through the creation of national parks in Canada in their poster for the Graphic History Collective "Conservation' as Colonialism."<sup>8</sup> Protected areas are used to reinforce a *terra nullius* view that argues that Canada was a barren, "pristine wilderness" prior to being colonized. Colonial conservation also largely restricts or prohibits certain activities of people, which notably conflicts with Indigenous models of stewardship that view people as part of the ecosystem.

**Nang Kaa Klaagangs:** We've done archaeology work recently in <u>K</u>'iid *Burnaby Narrows*, an area with the largest intertidal biomass in the world. There's clear evidence of 5,000 years of continuous Haida use and occupation where clams and other seafood were harvested in the narrows. People don't live there anymore and we've severely restricted human activity in the area. What changes have we caused by taking us out of the ecosystem after it evolved with us as part of it for millennia? It's changed visibly, even in my lifetime. We Haida have never seen ourselves as separate from the ecosystem.

Despite the limitations of the tools, the extensive protections in the Gwaii Haanas management plan do have a significant impact. A mix of both Haida and Crown law and orders are used as tools to both create and manage Gwaii Haanas. Populations and ecosystem health flourish within the protected areas, with notable impacts to the whole of the surrounding ecosystem.

#### **BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN "US" AND "THEM"**

Long before it was a commonly understood concept, Crown–Indigenous co-management in Canada was partly defined by the models built here on Haida Gwaii since the early 1990s. At Gwaii Haanas, the governing body is the Archipelago Management Board (AMB), which is made up equally of Haida and Canada members who oversee the management, planning, and operations in Gwaii Haanas. Nang <u>K</u>aa Klaagangs *Ernie Gladstone* and Suudihl *Cindy Boyko* have co-chaired this board on behalf of Canada and the Haida Nation respectively for over 20 years.



Detail of cover of the Gina 'Waadluxan KilGuhlGa Land-Sea-People Management Plan





Suudihl often says this about the lessons learned in her time on the AMB: "The AMB is built on trust and relationships. We couldn't do our work without those things. It's only because we're willing to see through each other's eyes that this works. We learned that we have more common objectives than we think, and in turn we're able to help others see why we need to take care of this place."

Part of why this governance model works is because the AMB makes its decisions by consensus. The concept of consensus is a glimpse into how Haida perceive opposing forces as part of the same ecosystem. In Haida culture, for an order of formal business to stand, it must be witnessed and accepted by other clans at a ceremonial event called a potlatch. Because it requires this publicly acknowledged acceptance, differences often need to be worked out in advance. The most powerful decisions are ones where the strongest opposing forces are included and can be made to agree. There's a longer-term view of reciprocity in the reliance on others to agree.

In an elegant exercise of synergy, the AMB's whole *is* greater than its parts, and consensus means that each decision is issued in unity and upholds each party's uniqueness and strengths. Fisheries decisions are issued with the full weight of Haida law and the federal Fisheries Act. Similarly, some decisions are only appropriately made under Haida law, and the full AMB stands behind that law and lends its collective weight. There is no "us" and "them" in AMB decision-making.

In this same way, Haida have shown that conflict and co-existence are not opposing forces. Rather, the ability to respectfully disagree and then work through a challenge is a necessary element of strong, lasting relationships. If you consider how this worldview differs from a "majority wins" style of decision-making that dominates settler governance systems, this act of consensus changes everything. And in contrast to the dispassionate truth-seeking

that underlies settler decision-making, there is a considerable amount of *heart* required in values-guided, consensusbased governance.

The blueprint that guides the AMB's stewardship of Gwaii Haanas is the Gina 'Waadluxan KilGuhlGa Land-Sea-People Management Plan, which is founded on Haida values and grounded in Haida Law. The commercial fishing industry was initially opposed to the spatial zoning approach to the plan because it could severely limit the livelihood of its fishers. But they ultimately supported the plan and expressed respect for the process, and the AMB continually seeks the advice from fishers along with other Haida and settler experts. The fishers continue to participate in monitoring the efficacy of the plan and providing advice to the AMB.

It is one of the Haida ways of doing things to draw a line that others might see as a means to exclude, only to have it create synergistic connections that were not there before.

#### THE POWER TO TRANSCEND

There's a foundational concept in systems theory about leverage points, or places to exert change on a social system. The easiest but smallest changes come in the form of limits, like saying you can only take this many fish here and not there. But the most powerful and most difficult changes come from affecting the most complex parts of a system: changing the dominant paradigm and eventually creating the ability to transcend paradigms.<sup>9</sup>

What does it mean to transcend a paradigm? Each of us narrates a story of the universe to ourselves within which we are each centrally cast; we understand "truths" and our role within the story to form a worldview, or paradigm. Changing paradigms might mean jumping the tracks of your worldview into another one. Transcending them means finding your way free of the tracks altogether.

The Gwaii Haanas Agreement begins with two side-byside columns of text in which the Haida Nation and the Government of Canada each assert their sovereignty over Gwaii Haanas. This is followed by agreement on the shared interest in protecting the archipelago and describes the ways in which the two parties will work together to do that. The text allows us to see two parallel paradigms and work beyond them.

This arrangement was unique at the time, and beyond that, it demonstrated the simplicity with which paradigms can be transcended when an honest relationship exists to do so. This isn't to say that the work to get there was easy; it took years of conflict and collaboration to achieve, but the heart of the solution itself—yahguudang *respect*—was familiar ground for Haida.

Following each period of major conflict, by working together across differences Haida have accomplished one more step in taking care of Haida Gwaii, protecting its land, waters, and beings from unsustainable logging.

Time and time again, Haida have shown us that the radical act of getting people to leave the safety of their innately held truths is built upon the universal human desire to be heard, to not face adversity alone, and to have some agency in imagining the future.

#### GWAII HAANAS AGREEMENT

BETWEEN: THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, represented by the Minister of the Environment

AND: THE COUNCIL OF THE HAIDA NATION, for and on behalf of the Haida Nation and represented by the Vice President of the Council

Respecting the land area known variously as Gwaii Haanas and South Moresby, and generally referred to herein as "the Archipelago" (described in Section 2 below). The parties agree as follows:

1.0 REASONS FOR AGREEMENT

1.1 The parties maintain viewpoints regarding the Archipelago that converge with respect to objectives concerning the care, protection and enjoyment of the Archipelago, as set out in Section 1.2 below, and diverge with respect to sovereignly, title or ownership, as follows:

The Haida Nation sees the Archipelago as Haida Lands, subject to the collective and individual rights of the Haida citizens, the sovereigny of the Hereditary Chiefs, and jurisdiction of the Council of the Haida Nation. The Haida Nation owns these lands and waters by virtue of heredity, subject to the laws of the Constitution of the Haida Nation, and the legislative jurisdiction of the Haida House of Assembly.

The Haida have designated and managed the Archipelago as the "Gwaii Haanas Heritage Site", and thereby will maintain the area in its natural state while continuing their traditional way of life as they have for countless generations. In this way the Haida Nation will sustain the continuity of their culture while allowing for the enjoyment of visitors.

"Haida" means all people of Haida ancestry.

The Government of Canada views the Archipelago as Crown land, subject to certain private rights or interests, and subject to the sovereignty of her Majesty the Queen and the legislative jurisdiction of the Parliament of Canada and the Legislature of the Province of British Columbia.

By virtue of the above, the Constitution Acts and, more particularly, by an agreement between the Governments of Canada and the Province of British Columbia dated July 12, 1988, the Crown in right of Canada is or will become the owner of the Archipelago and an area within the Archipelago Marine Park Area in order that these lands may constituted as a reserve for a National Park of Canada and a reserve for a National Marine Parks Act will apply. The Government of Canada intends to establish the park reserves pending the disposition of any Haida claim to any right, title or intrest in or to the lands comprised therein.

For purposes of the Government of Canada's authorization and implementation of this agreement "Haida" refers to the aboriginal people of Haida Gvaii with respect to whom sub-section 35 (1) of the Constitution Act, 1982 applies.

1.2 Both parties agree that long-term protective measures are essential to safeguard the Archipelago as one of the world's great natural and cultural treasures, and that the highest standards of protection and preservation should be applied.

#### WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

Nang <u>K</u>aa Klaagangs: We've accomplished what some would have thought impossible for Gwaii Haanas. Haida values guide everything we do here, but we carry out our work by trusting our relationships with our partners.

**Brady:** But the world continues to change. Climate change is here and the dominant paradigm threatens to shift away from a decolonial narrative. With everything Haida have fought for, we're still susceptible to these changing forces.

Those of us engaged in the *heart* work of social change and taking care of what we've been given practice "two-eyed seeing"—to see the world through another's eyes.<sup>10</sup> This empathic change in perspectives outside of our own views allows us to overcome the apathy that most people need to employ as a defense mechanism in order to rationalize the trauma of what we've done, what we're doing, to the Earth. Our defensive walls allow us to distance ourselves from confronting our innermost fears and shame. But those walls have outgrown their usefulness and it's time to move past them.

How do we re-engage our hearts in a system that is so fraught? There is a growing body of research—from both Indigenous and settler researchers—looking at these lessons and decolonizing systems practice to effect social change. And it is important to decolonize our approaches because, as John Borrows suggests, how you fight determines who you will end up being.<sup>11</sup> Melanie Goodchild says that in order to create social change, we need to reconnect with the Earth and begin engaging in spiritual awareness and healing.<sup>12</sup>

The Haida drew a line in 1985. This created a fundamental change in how the people of Haida Gwaii would live and work together to care for the Islands. It showed us the multitude of ways to break down boundaries, borders, jurisdictions, attitudes, and differences in worldview, until we climbed out of the deep pit of the existing system together and into a new world of reconciliation in action. And now we sit at the threshold of the next time.

#### INTO THE NEXT TIME, TOGETHER

Nang Kaa Klaagangs: Haida origin stories tell us where we come from. They tell us we are born and made from all the elements, and Haida are not distinct from the land, air, and sea of Haida Gwaii. This is the reason we do not stop a pole from falling, because it is meant to return to the forest.

**Brady:** Maybe respecting the cycle is as important as its parts. Just as the wave returns to the ocean, we could view our return to a connection with the land and sea and each other not as an ending of a way of life, but a beginning.

One of the pitfalls of settler colonialism is that it often takes a short-sighted view of time and temporality. For settlers, the understanding of "now" is usually limited to what is immediately before us, so we take from the Earth without any thought for history or tomorrow. But there are forests on Haida Gwaii that existed well before first contact with Europeans, and Haida oral history tells of id kuuniisii *ancestors* who witnessed the arrival of the first trees.

The forest feels the birth of each salmon in its streams because, as Charlie Bellis said, "Salmon are creatures of the forest.





They're born in the forest and it's in the forest that they die." The heart of the forest tells age-old stories hundreds of years in the making, and, in the same breath, it tells stories of the instant a heart begins to beat inside the red-orange jewel of a salmon egg.

For Haida, the "now" of our time is one beat in the infinite heart of Haida Gwaii. But for us whom the Supernaturals have coaxed into being, we have been given a finite number of heartbeats in a lifetime. If we look to the Haida examples of leaning into liminality—the blurring of lines, the spaces between—how will you use the space between your heartbeats to participate in a just future?

The answer most likely lies not in a linear, singular path, but somewhere in our relationships with each other; in our ability to create ethical space to right past wrongs, to take on the grief together for the harm we've inflicted on the Earth and each other, and to transcend our respective paradigms towards a new reality and coexistence together.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Haawa *thank you* to those who held the line at Athlii Gwaii, and the brave people who challenged their beliefs, stood with us, and took actions, big and small, to get us to where we are today. Haawa, also, to Suudihl *Cindy Boyko*, Guujaaw, Hl<u>G</u>aagilda Xaayda Kil K'aalang *Skidegate Haida Immersion Program* (SHIP), Arnie Bellis, and the Jones family for permission to use the quotes in this article.

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#### **ENDNOTES**

- 1. HlGaagilda Xaayda Kil K'aalang.
- 2. Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies.
- 3. Goodchild, "Relational Systems Thinking."
- 4. Pojar, Klinka, and Meidinger, "Biogeoclimatic Ecosystem Classification in British Columbia."
- 5. Harfenist, "Seabird Colonies Background Report for the Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte Islands Land Use Plan."
- 6. Jisgang, Athlii Gwaii.
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- 8. Phillips and Little Light, "Conservation' as Colonialism."
- 9. Meadows, Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System.
- 10. Bartlett, Marshall, and Marshall, "Two-Eyed Seeing and Other Lessons Learned within a Co-Learning Journey of Bringing Together Indigenous and Mainstream Knowledges and Ways of Knowing."
- 11. Borrows, Canada's Indigenous Constitution.
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The Interdisciplinary Journal of Place-based Conservation

Co-published by the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, and the George Wright Society. ISSN 2688-187X

#### Berkeley Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversit



This article is published in Volume 39, Number 1 of Parks Stewardship Forum, 2023.

Parks Stewardship Forum explores innovative thinking and offers enduring perspectives on critical issues of place-based heritage management and stewardship. Interdisciplinary in nature, the journal gathers insights from all fields related to parks, protected/conserved areas, cultural sites, and other place-based forms of conservation. The scope of the journal is international. It is dedicated to the legacy of George Meléndez Wright, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and pioneer in conservation of national parks.

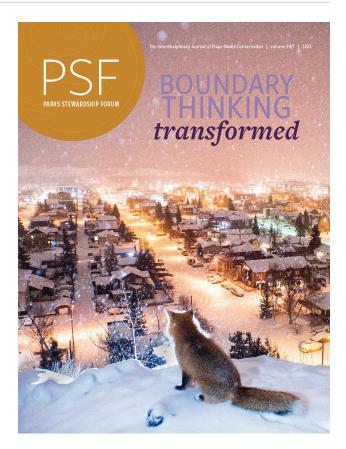
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The journal continues *The George Wright Forum*, published 1981–2018 by the George Wright Society.

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On the cover of this issue A red fox on the clay cliffs above the city of Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. PETER MATHER