

Great Bear coast MPA network: Opportunity and pathway

This overview of collaborative marine planning and conservation efforts on the north Pacific coast of Canada is presented by Chief Danielle Shaw of the Wuikinuxv Nation.

Context and opportunity

Along the north Pacific coast of Canada, Indigenous Nations are working with the governments of Canada and British Columbia to advance a globally significant conservation and stewardship initiative across a 102,000km² marine bioregion. Our conservation model includes a network of marine protected areas (MPAs) scaled to meet conservation targets of 25% by 2025 and 30% by 2030, embedded within comprehensive marine spatial plans to support sustainable economic activities and deliver tangible positive returns for nature and people.

This model is rooted in deep Indigenous and local knowledge as well as academic science. We are also developing new ocean co-governance approaches to guide implementation and long-term management. Our engagement in all these processes flows from our Indigenous rights, title, and stewardship responsibilities that date back millennia.

Success factors and challenges

The completion of the MPA network and co-governance arrangements will be the culmination of decades of collaborative effort. This is ground-breaking work in ecologically robust marine conservation and multi-use marine spatial planning. Several factors contribute to the success of these efforts:

- Our governance structures enable the Nations to work together at a regional scale. While each individual First Nation is a distinct sovereign authority and rights-holder, we collaborate at policy, technical, and strategic tables to advance a powerful agenda for change.
- We have complementary structures to support bilateral and trilateral government-to-government engagement between the Nations, Canada, and BC. Investing in developing these institutional structures enables us to work effectively together.
- Our Nations have cultivated deep relationships with partners and supporters within and beyond Canada, including NGOs and philanthropic foundations. These partnerships bring funding and in-kind resources to the region, and connect our Nations with leaders and practitioners around the world.

While these structures and partnerships help us define shared goals and sustain collaborative efforts, the process has not been easy. We face two distinct, but connected, sets of challenges:



- Existing systems typically aim to manage individual species or sectors, and prioritize extraction and profit. In contrast, Indigenous approaches emphasize holistic ecosystem-based stewardship and people-place relationships. Designing new collaborative stewardship approaches requires changing policies, regulations, and monitoring and enforcement systems in order to transition to new, forward-looking management regimes that can protect nature, restore abundance, strengthen human well-being, and promote climate resilience.
- We continue to encounter institutional barriers and resistance to change within government systems. Indigenous rights and title are recognized and affirmed by the Canadian Constitution, and both Canada and BC have enacted legislation to align the exercise of their respective authorities with the implementation of UNDRIP. The necessary shifts in institutional cultures will take time to unfold, and must be driven by clear political leadership backed by tangible action.

We tackle these twin challenges through work at multiple levels: with policy and technical staff to analyze options, assess costs and benefits, and design and advocate for new approaches; with political leaders, to align our shared visions and build political will; and with allies and supporters, to ensure that our work benefits everyone.

The path forward

The context for all our work, and the overarching challenge we face, is urgency. Our communities are facing the loss of coastal and marine ecosystems that are central to our families, culture, and economic aspirations, and that are tied to the health of our planet and our common future. We will not let that happen.

As one avenue to accelerate our progress, some Nations are stepping up to declare protected areas under their Indigenous authorities. One example is the recent declaration by the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation establishing the [Gitdisdzu Lugyeks MPA](#). This action will help deliver immediate protections for a vital ecosystem, while also offering a real-time, practical testing ground for new solutions. Efforts like this can speed our collective progress at home and share lessons with other jurisdictions. Our Nations welcome this local action into our collaborative regional MPA network process in the spirit of partnership, leadership, and action. We look forward to the shared work ahead.