

A Tale of Two Island Communities: Visits to Research Partner Communities Eskasoni, NS on Cape Breton Island and Tla-o-qui-aht, BC on Vancouver Island

This summer I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to visit two of the Fish-WIKS partner communities. One right here on the Atlantic Coast, [Eskasoni](#), Nova Scotia, and the other on the Pacific, [Tla-o-qui-aht](#), British Columbia.

First up on Tuesday, July 16, was a 5 hour drive to **Eskasoni**. Lucia Fanning, Chris Milley, and I travelled to [Eskasoni](#) Mi'kmaw (First) Nation just after sunrise to be part of a meet and greet organized by community liaison coordinator Tyson Paul and Fish-WIKS partner Shelley Denny of the [Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources](#) (UINR).



Gathering for the smudging ceremony before boarding the Kaplie'l

This was (surprisingly) only my third trip to Cape Breton ever and the views were well worth the early wake up call. After participating in a smudging ceremony, we boarded [Eskasoni Cultural Journey's](#) vessel *Kaplie'l* and set off for a beautiful day of conversation on the [Bras d'Or Lakes estuary](#). We were joined by Chief Leroy Denny, Elder Dr. Albert Marshall, Thomas Johnson (Executive Director of Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission), Charles Blaise Young (Eskasoni Band Councillor), and guides Kenny Stevens, Richard Denny and our Captain, Lindsay Paul. Throughout the morning, the guides showed us traditional locations along the estuary for hunting, fishing, gathering, and seasonal settlements. Mi'kmaq expertise in [birch bark canoe building](#) is celebrated, but I learned that their canoes were also designed for open ocean travel, navigating as far as the [Grand Banks](#) to fish and hunt!



Eskasoni Cultural Journey gatherers on Goat Island's shore.

Just before we shared a *jakej* (lobster) lunch, Chief Denny drummed and sang for us, a real honour, and an important method of knowledge sharing. We tucked into our lunch, which also included *lu'skinikin* (traditional bread).



Getting ready for our lobster lunch. I had some photos of people with their mouths full...but went with smiles instead.

On our return trip to Eskasoni, I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Marshall. He recalled legends of how the Bras d'Or were formed, the importance of American eels and salmon, and spoke of how as children they weren't allowed to swim in early spring so that they did not disturb the animals in the rivers. There are rivers on Cape Breton that still have salmon returns in numbers above the conservation requirements, such as the Margaree River, and Eskasoni participates in harvests from these areas. They are also stewards of the resource, with Shelley and Tyson conducting research and outreach in Unama'ki (5 Mi'kmaq communities on Cape Breton) and sampling at the smolt wheel during the spring and summer. You can learn more in UINR's report, "[Plamu – Mi'kmaq Ecological Knowledge, Atlantic Salmon in Unama'ki](#)". The Mi'kmaq approach to resource management follows the principles and practices encompassed by *Netukulimk* (a Mi'kmaq world view), which Elder Marshall describes succinctly as "sustainability" in this [UINR video](#).



Elder Dr. Albert Marshall and Chief Leroy Denny enjoying the day (Photo by S. Denny)



First glimpses of Long Beach

Another early morning, August 19th, and I was off to **Tofino**, British Columbia, to join the Fish-WIKS steering committee meeting. The majority of the steering committee was able to make the trip, as did the 4 PhD students (some currently enrolled and others incoming), in addition to all 4 of the community liaison coordinators. [Tla-o-qui-aht](#) First Nations (TFN), a confederacy of 4 Nations, is the partner community in British Columbia. While I've visited Vancouver Island a few more times than I have Cape Breton, this was my first time to the west coast of the Island. In advance of the trip I had been told that Long Beach was an amazing place, and on the small plane from Vancouver to Tofino, we were all glued to the windows as the beach and coastline came into view.



My view of the steering committee meeting.

This steering committee meeting was held in Tofino to give us the opportunity to visit and experience the partner community, TFN.

We were fortunate to have Terry Dorward, Fish-WIKS community liaison coordinator, as one of our hosts. Terry is a man of many hats; he is also a TFN Band Councillor and the project coordinator for [Tribal Parks](#). On the first day of the meeting, Terry had a full day planned for us. First, he invited

Elder, Band Councillor, and master dugout [cedar canoe](#) carver, [Joe Martin](#) to join us. Elder Martin spoke of how diverse the fisheries once were and the negative impact that logging has had on salmon stocks in the territory.



Top left: Evidence of planks cut out of the trunk hundreds of years ago. Top centre: blackend from a lightning strike. Bottom left: Fish-WIKS-ers and the Cedar Tree of Life. Far right: Hanging garden

In 1984 TFN's Hereditary Chiefs declared [Meares Island](#) to be a Tribal Park and protected it from being logged. The Tribal Parks were created under the guidance of *Hishuk-ish Tsawaak* (Nuu-chah-nulth world view), meaning "everything is connected, everything is one". We had the opportunity to walk the Big Tree Trail on Meares Island with some of the Tribal Park Guardians. Surrounded by the massive and humbling cedar trees, it wasn't hard to imagine myself to be in another time (I may have mentioned Jurassic Park once or twice). We visited the Cedar Tree of Life, the Hanging Garden (full of traditional medicines), a tree that had had planks cut out of it hundreds of years ago in such a way as not to kill it, and another than was blackened by a lightning strike.



Terry Dorward in his Tribal Parks Guardian uniform

The trail itself is even made of cedar, with the boardwalk being milled, maintained, and constructed by the Tribal Park Guardians using felled trees on the Island.



Left: Fish-WIKS-ers walking the Meares Island boardwalk. Right: Felled cedar being milled on site for boards

We met up with Elder Martin again early in the evening in [Esowista](#), TFN community land on Long Beach, for a Nuu-chah-nulth style Chinook salmon BBQ. He had caught both of the salmon and had them prepared and propped up close to the bonfire to cook. Esowista (which means “clubbed to death”, a not-so-subtle hint of the past history between Nations) was so beautiful. I said, “Terry! This (Long Beach) is your backyard?!” and he replied, “No. It is my front yard!” Following our meal, many of us accompanied Terry and his sister Tammy Dorward (Education Coordinator for Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations) to their dance rehearsal, another important vehicle of knowledge sharing. I didn’t take any photos or video because the group as a whole was not expecting us, but I did find [a video](#) of one of the dances (Serpent Dance).



Elder Joe Martin BBQing the salmon feast.

As a “western” scientist, one new lesson that I took home from both of my island visits was how traditional (for lack of a better term) time scales are defined for indigenous people. For example, there is a beginning, but it was a long time ago, also referred to as, “since time immemorial”. In this case, while speaking with Elder Marshall about how the Bras d’Or Lakes were created, there was a history, a change in the landscape, a new beginning, but without a quantitative time scale attached. Ecologists live to measure changes over time, and in the last two decades or so, a hot topic has been the establishment of “baselines”, or reference (starting) points, for studies, with the notion that this starting point may [slide](#) from generation to generation (i.e. [shifting baselines](#)). What this means is how and when the data is collected influences the interpretation depending on when the data time series begins. For example, if you didn’t know that for your Great-Grandfather, an average nights catch of eels was 1200; you might think that averaging 12 eels in 2013 was a good haul, especially if you were averaging only 2 eels in 2003. This will be an important component to consider as I

continue researching how knowledge in the fisheries is acquired, shared and valued across the country.

While reflecting upon the visits to both communities, I realized that there were many commonalities between Eskasoni and Tla-o-qui-aht. Both are coastal and island communities that fish (including commercial fisheries), are expert canoe builders, harvest wild salmon, and have had their fishing rights upheld in Supreme Court decisions (the [Marshall decision](#) for Unama'ki, [Ahousah et al.](#) for the Nuu-chah-nulth). Sincere thanks to both Eskasoni and Tla-o-qui-aht for their hospitality!



Gooseneck barnacles will be a TFN fishery. (can you spot the acorn barnacle?)

I'll sign off from this postcard with these gooseneck barnacles, a direct result from the recent BC Supreme Court ruling upholding the [Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations fishing rights](#), as Alex Gagne (Fish-WIKS steering committee member and T'aaq-wiihak Fisheries Coordinator) sampled for them in preparation for the "new and emerging fishery" (as defined by the [Department of Fisheries and Oceans](#)) exclusive to the Nuu-chah-nulth.

Everything is bigger on the west coast...even the barnacles!