

BACKGROUND - HOW NEXWAGWEZ?AN CAME TO BE

Introduction

As T̓silhqot̓in people we have a deep, rich relationship with our land that extends through the past, present and future. As caretakers, it is our right and our responsibility to look after the lands, waters, animals, and people together.

The T̓silhqot̓in have fought to protect and defend our lands – from the Chilcotin War (1864) through 20th century threats from hydroelectric development and industrial logging, to the ongoing 21st century pressures of industrial mining and logging. There have also been dark times for our people, who have endured disease, residential schools, poverty, and other extreme social, economic, and cultural hardships. Throughout these times, our people, communities, and leaders have found strength in our relationship with the land, in our culture, and our way of life. We also draw strength from our triumphs in many of these struggles.

Context and history of the land

The T̓silhqot̓in have consistently maintained and protected our rights to care for the land. In 1989, Xeni Gwet̓in made the Nemaiah Declaration, now a T̓silhqot̓in law, and initiated legal action in the court system. In 1992, Xeni Gwet̓in held a blockade at Henry’s Crossing to prevent the logging of the Brittany Triangle. Twenty-five years after our court proceedings began, in 2014, the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) unanimously recognized our Title over a portion of T̓silhqot̓in territory, and our rights to an additional portion (SCC 2014). That decision was a legal landmark in Canadian history. It signifies a change in circumstances, a new beginning to our work, not an end.

Industrial impacts continue to affect us all. The pressures on the ground are intense. Mining, logging, and road building are all impacting our lands, as are the people who enter backcountry areas without respect for the land, animals, or our traditional ways.

Internationally, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) affirmed many of our rights, and affirmed the importance of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) where development is set to impact Indigenous peoples and our lands. Canada belatedly signed on to UNDRIP in 2016. Similarly, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) declared a new era in Canadian history. The extent to which these processes help us in practice remains to be seen.

Nexwagwez?an – Dasiqox Tribal Park

Together with friends, allies¹ and all T̓silhqot̓in communities, the people of Xeni and Yunešit̓in – after 25 years of legal action to establish recognition of the Crown of our Aboriginal Title and Rights – decided to assert our shared caretaker areas as a Tribal Park.

Our decision to announce a tribal park in our territory emerged partly from our fight to protect Težtan Biny and Nabas from a proposed copper and gold mine. While industrial pressures continued to threaten

¹ Individuals from Friends of Nemaiah Valley (FONV) and Valhalla Wilderness Society initially worked with Chief Marilyn Baptiste to suggest a conservancy area. Elders and other community members of Xeni and Yunešit̓in decided to establish an Indigenous Protected Area, in the form of a Tribal Park.

Dasiqox, the surrounding lands, and the watersheds that sustain us, we decided to name our own vision for our lands and people: Nexwagwez?an – it is there for us.

In October 2014, Xeni Gwet'in and Yunešit'in Governments, together with our Tšilhqot'in National Government (TNG) announced our intention to establish a new tribal park, Nexwagwez?an – Dasiqox Tribal Park, in the heart of traditional Tšilhqot'in territory. After listening to input from Elders and community members over many meetings and gathering, our leaders decided to locate Dasiqox Tribal Park on shared caretaker areas where the headwaters of our rivers come from.

In September 2017, the Dasiqox Tribal Park Initiative (DTPI) became a project on the Tides Canada Shared Platform, which provides governance, human resources, financial, and grant management for leading environmental and social projects across Canada, allowing projects to more effectively achieve their missions. The DTPI Steering Committee is made up of Yunešit'in and Xeni Gwet'in Chief and Council. DTPI advances biocultural conservation through research and education about ecological and cultural values of the conservancy area. Its overarching goal is to support the implementation of the Dasiqox Tribal Park community vision, and ensure the Tribal Park is a place where people, land, waters, and animals can restore, heal and sustain each other.

The land has its own stories. In Tšilhqot'in territory, waters flow and mountains watch over us, while the animals make their own trails. In the midst of all the legal, political, and industrial noise, Tšilhqot'in people take it as our role to listen to the land, and to give a voice to the land, waters, and animals. By establishing Dasiqox Tribal Park, we are taking proactive steps towards our desired future, and asserting what has been the case all along: that ecosystem health, cultural vitality, and a sustainable regional economy are all interdependent.