

WE ARE OCEAN PEOPLE: INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN MARINE CONSERVATION

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Siigee & Our Love for K'aaw as Haida People

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Reciprocity is at the forefront of my thoughts regarding Haida principles. It is a relationship of giving and receiving with both the Siigee *ocean* and the freshwater systems. The word “reciprocity” is essentially a mutual dependence; it’s a cyclical relationship which provides everything we need, and in return we have an inherent responsibility to take care of the waters that we depend on for survival—as well as practicing gratitude and giving thanks to the sacred water.

In Haida tradition, it is well known that we must respect all living things—the word in Haida is Yahguudang, which includes not just animals, but also plants and water. Water is needed to carry nutrients through the body, much like the Tsíi.n *salmon* need fresh, clean water to travel up the rivers. In our culture, water is very much a living entity, perhaps not in the reductionist view, which breaks it down into a single molecule of H₂O, but as a system that is teeming with life. Past science has failed to see the

synergistic relationships that exist within our oceans and rivers. An example is the traditional harvesting of k'aaw (herring roe on kelp). For as long as I can remember, enjoying k'aaw with my friends and family has been a delicious social experience. My family in HlGaagilda showed me how to harvest properly, so

▲ Kelp forest, Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve, and Haida Heritage Site PARKS CANADA





▲ *Gaw Masset Inlet* JASON ADDY

not to harm the kelp fronds, tearing the fronds by hand not cutting with tools, to ensure they continue to grow for the next season.

In the last twenty or so years, Haida Gwaii has witnessed serious declines in our k'aaw abundance. There are several factors that have contributed to this decline, including over-harvesting, and not cycling to other harvesting areas. Other factors to consider are global climate change impacts, ocean temperatures rising, and ocean acidification. The ocean is our lifeline, not just as Haida people, but for all life on earth.

My mother *Kuuyang Lisa White*, recalls herself as a young girl traveling down to HlGaagilda from *Gaw* Tlagee to visit relatives with her Xaadaa, *Morris White*—the late chief Iidansuu. She remembers all the houses in the village being covered in fresh k'aaw hanging from their porches to dry during the harvesting time. During her childhood, there was an abundance of k'aaw in the HlGaagilda waters. Today, the harvesting areas for k'aaw are depleted and many of our people out-source their k'aaw feeds from

the Heiltsuk mainland relatives, in the Bella Bella territory.

The herring also spawn in *Gaw* (Masset Inlet). There are stories of our people felling young hemlock trees in the rivers, and the herring would spawn on the

▼ *K'aaw herring roe* PARKS CANADA



“K’aaw is soul food—that’s what we grew up on. It provides complete nourishment. I can feel my body changing as I’m eating it, bringing good health. In general, it connects me to the ocean and somehow feels like a spiritual experience.”

– *Cindy Boyko*

branches. These branches would then be harvested and the k’aaw enjoyed fresh, dried, or cooked. Salal bushes would also be dropped into the waters, and k’aaw was harvested this way as well.

I was taught to harvest k’aaw in the springtime, in late March to April, from my aunt Suudaahl *Cindy Boyko*. As a kid she remembers bringing the fresh k’aaw down to the Skidegate front beach to dry on the hot rocks. The sun would be out for short periods of time, they would collect it when the rain came and then bring it back out again. The rain would start and stop constantly during the spring; they called this “k’aaw dang weather,” and it was used as an indicator that it was time to harvest.

As Cindy reminisces of the abundant k’aaw harvesting days, she shared some beautiful thoughts: “K’aaw is soul food—that’s what we grew up on. It provides complete nourishment. I can feel my body changing as I’m eating it, bringing good health. In general, it connects me to the ocean and somehow feels like a spiritual experience” (Cindy Boyko, January 2022).

I recall harvesting k’aaw with my uncle, chief Wiigaanad *Sid Crosby* as a kid—it seemed so abundant at that time. When we returned to the village, he would pile it up on boards and tell his whole clan and family to come get some. How the sharing brought everyone together and brought happiness was beautiful to witness. “It wasn’t just about consuming, it was about providing and bringing this k’aaw to be shared and that truly reminded people what was important—it grounded the community. That’s an entirely different aspect of it. Harvesting Haida food really brings people together. This is who we are as a culture, as people, we’re connected to the ocean and

lands of Haida Gwaii. Things like k’aaw reminds us of who we are” (Suudaahl, January 2022). K’aaw is one of the many gifts the ocean provides for us as Haida people. Remembering our history as ocean people during harvests such as these fuels our Haida spirits.

It is critical to follow our Haida traditional laws and values. The guiding principle is ‘Laa guu ga kanhlins—responsibility where we as Haida people “accept the responsibility to manage and care for the land and sea together” (Gwaii Haanas Land-Sea-People Plan 2018). Looking after our lifeline—the sea—is where the Haida guiding principles become deeply important to our culture, our traditions, and our well-being. We must do our best to restore Giid tlljuus *balance*, so that future generations may enjoy our islands as we have, while considering the delicate ecosystems on the land and in the sea. It is important to recognize and respect the protocols of our culture. We can do this through learning from our Elders and many local knowledge holders.

Water is a central part of Haida culture, which has always connected the land and sea. The ocean reminds me of who we are as Haida people; our responsibility to respect the waters and honor the gifts she provides. The gifts are a reminder to us that we must give thanks and protect the waters to ensure a healthy reciprocal relationship. We recognize the importance of Indigenous wisdom and passing the knowledge on to the future generations, so we may take care of the lands and waters while adapting to the changing world.

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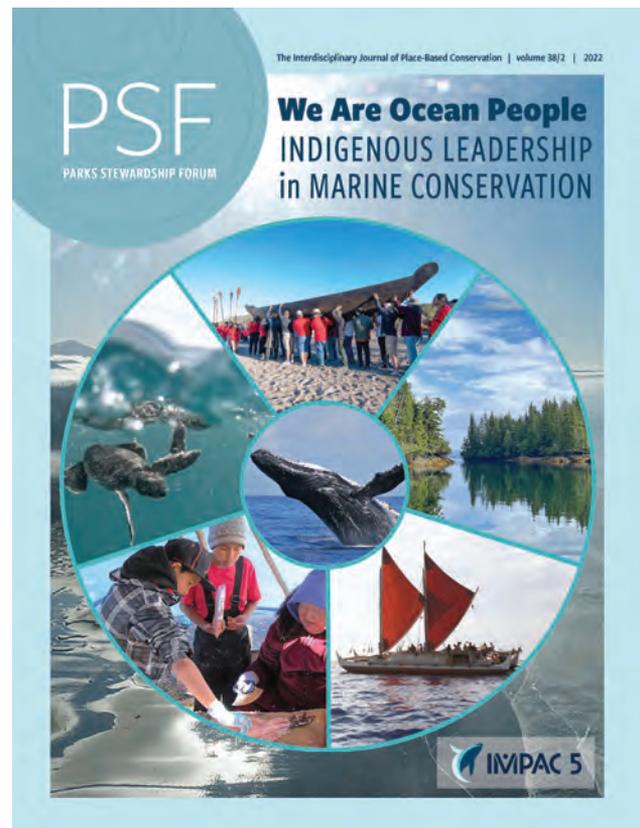
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On the cover of this issue

CIRCLE DESIGN, clockwise from top:

- Northern Chumash ceremony | [ROBERT SCHWEMMER](#)
- Haida Gwaii | [CINDY BOYKO](#)
- The Polynesian Voyaging Society's voyaging canoe Hökūle'a | [NOAA](#)
- Elder teaching youths, northern Alaska | [US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE](#)
- Baby Honu (sea turtles), Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | [NOAA](#)
- Center: Humpback whale, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument | [NOAA](#)

Background: Pacific Rim National Park Reserve | [PARKS CANADA](#)