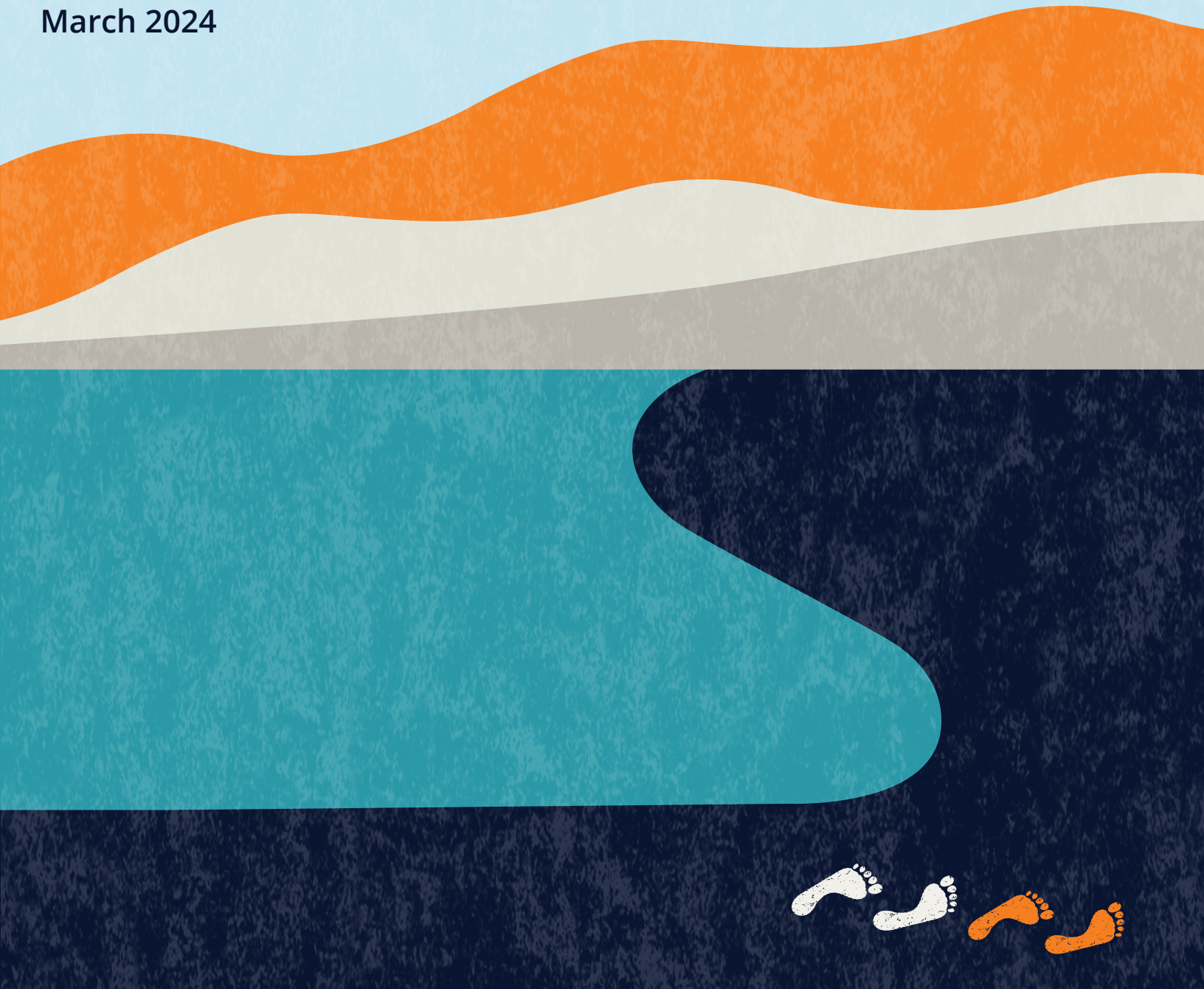


# WE WALK TOGETHER

Exploring Connection to  
Land, Water and Territory

**FINAL RESEARCH REPORT**

March 2024



# We Walk Together

## Final Report

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Health through wellness

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We thank the Stó:lō, Lil'wat7úl (Lil'wat), and Lake Babine Nations for welcoming us into their territories, and their Elders, Knowledge Keepers, youth, and mentees for sharing a wealth of First Nations Knowledges with us.

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We honour the participants who passed away while the project was underway: Knowledge Keeper Samù7 (Wayne Smith) of Samahquam Nation, Knowledge Keeper Adaga (Barbara Hanuse) of Wuikinuxv Nation, and Corrine Dixon, a valued project team member.

We would also like to acknowledge the Nations, communities, and families who have experienced unprecedented grief and loss since this project began. The last three years (2020-2023) have been difficult for First Nations in BC as a result of COVID-19, the toxic drug crisis, extreme weather events, and the discoveries of unmarked mass graves at former residential schools in BC. We acknowledge the profound significance of these events and the impacts they are having on First Nations communities, survivors and Elders. We see your grief, and continue to hold you in our hearts.

Finally, we note that this report builds on information from existing documents, including findings from the Stó:lō gathering published in the *International Journal of Indigenous Health* in 2021 (Stelkia et al., 2021) and the First Nations Population Health and Wellness Agenda (PHWA) (First Nations Health Authority and Office of the Provincial Health Officer, 2021).



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## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The vision for the We Walk Together project originated from a story shared by Dr. Evan Adams about an experiential learning journey that he and other Indigenous physicians were taken on by Knowledge Keepers in Hawaii. On this journey, the Knowledge Keepers guided the physicians in forming a connection with and deep understanding of the land through silent observation, teachings, storytelling and song. Taking lessons from Dr. Adams' experience, the We Walk Together project team approached Knowledge Keepers and youth on their traditional territories as humble learners seeking to learn and experience the significance of land on wellness.

For Indigenous Peoples globally, connection to land, water and territory has been identified as a central determinant of health and wellness (Richmond, 2015). The We Walk Together project gathered and brought together First Nations people in BC, including Knowledge Keepers and youth, to explore and understand the connection between having a close relationship with land, water and territory and having optimal health and wellness. The goal of this project is to inform the development of a new health indicator based on First Nation Knowledges. The hope is that this indicator will enable the FNHA and the Office of the Provincial Health Officer to monitor and track the progress of strengthening First Nations in BC's connection to land, water and territory in order to be accountable to First Nations in BC and uphold their inherent rights. This indicator will be reported on in provincial population health and wellness reports.

### Background

In 2005, the Transformative Change Accord committed to regular reporting on the health of First Nations across BC, with the aim of understanding how the health status of First Nations in BC differed from the health status of other BC residents. The Transformative Change Accord: First Nations Health Plan (TCA: FNHP) identified seven indicators to track progress, but First Nations health leaders have since pointed out that these indicators focused primarily on illness and disease rather than on what keeps First Nations in BC healthy or well.

In 2016, the FNHA's Office of the Chief Medical Officer (OCMO) and BC's Office of the Provincial Health Officer (OPHO) created a partnership to monitor and report on an expanded set of indicators that better reflect First Nations priorities and perspectives on health and wellness.

One foundational aspect of understanding First Nations health and wellness – connection to land, water and territory – has not been measured in existing health data in BC. In 2017, the OCMO and OPHO were awarded a grant to explore developing such an indicator. They called the project “We Walk Together” to evoke the spirit of the walk wherein Knowledge Keepers guided Dr. Adams and other Indigenous physicians as they talked about their connection to the land, water and territory – and the importance of maintaining this connection for optimal health and wellness.

## Working Together With Communities

Gatherings were hosted on the unceded territories of three distinct First Nations in three of BC's five health regions: Stó:lō Nation (Fraser Salish region), Lil'wat Nation (Vancouver Coastal region), and Lake Babine Nation (Northern region). Land-based activities and sharing circles were used to collect data related to three research questions:



1

What do Indigenous Knowledges tell us about connection to land and water as a determinant of health and wellness?

2

How do First Nations in BC describe the connection to land, water and territory in relation to their health and wellness?

3

How do we gather, uplift, and feature the knowledge and perspectives of First Nations Knowledge Keepers and community members to inform population health at a provincial scale?

We Walk Together participants included a total of 47 Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and youth (eight in Fraser Salish, 28 in Vancouver Coastal, and 11 in the Northern region), as well as study team members. Participants represented 23 distinct Nations across the three health regions.

Following the gatherings, a preliminary report summarizing the findings was drafted and shared with participants. Virtual validation gatherings were then held with participants from the Fraser Salish and Vancouver Coastal regions in 2022 to ensure the findings and themes accurately interpreted their voices, stories, and knowledge, and to capture any missing information. For the Northern region, there was a delay in being able to validate the findings due to the conflicting schedules of the project team and participants. In 2023, the project team was invited by Lake Babine Nation to attend the Nation's health and wellness conference and present on the findings of We Walk Together. This also gave the project team the opportunity to validate the findings in person with participants, which was preferred by the Nation.

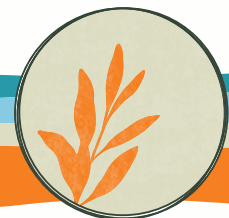
**What We Learned From Communities** - Three overarching themes were identified:



**ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE:**  
Knowledge passed down from ancestors.



**LAND AND WATER WELLNESS:**  
The wellness of the land and water is *our* wellness.



**ACCOUNTABILITY:**  
Taking actionable and reportable steps toward addressing what is shared between First Nations and institutions.

Each theme included sub-themes, and woven through each were ongoing barriers to connection to land, water and territory created by settler colonialism’s genocidal policies and systems – in particular the Indian Residential School System and the Indian Reserve System, which forcibly dispossessed First Nations people of their traditional lands and livelihoods and placed them in remote areas.

## What We Created With Communities

Communities provided powerful insights about the complexity and interconnectedness between land, water and territory and its impacts on First Nations health and wellness. A videographer was hired to document the gatherings for each region. These regional videos were created to document participants’ voices, stories, and experiences. Visual storytelling through film was found to be a way to accurately capture and display the complexity of this interaction and tell the story of the connection between land, water and territory as a determinant of health for Indigenous Peoples. The videos, alongside this report, can be used by communities to facilitate open dialogue with decision-makers and to advocate for change in their regions.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The results from this report will be used to form a foundation for further dialogue and research on nation-based, regional- and provincial-level wellness indicators to measure, track and uphold connection to land, water and territory.



STÓ:LŌ NATION – FRASER SALISH REGION



### 3. INTRODUCTION

BC First Nations came together to reclaim control over their health and wellness through a series of agreements with the provincial and federal governments. These led to the creation of the BC First Nations Health Governance Structure in 2011 (FNHA and First Nation Health Council, 2011). Together, the parties agreed to a shared vision of “healthy, self-determining and vibrant children, families and communities.”

Monitoring progress towards this shared vision requires a new way of thinking about how to measure health and wellness. The seven indicators identified in the TCA:FNHP and monitored over the last 10 years (BC Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit, Union of BC Indian Chiefs, and the Government of British Columbia, 2006) were: 1) life expectancy at birth; 2) mortality rates; 3) status Indian youth suicide rates; 4) infant mortality rates; 5) diabetes prevalence; 6) childhood obesity; and 7) the number of practising, certified, First Nations health care professionals. However, as First Nations health leaders have noted, these indicators reflect a deficit perspective, and do not adequately capture the [First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness](#) – one that recognizes and celebrates the strengths of First Nations identities, cultures and relationships (FNHA, 2012).

One foundational aspect of understanding First Nations health and wellness – connection to land, water and territory – was missing in existing health data in BC. The We Walk Together project aims to inform the development of a new indicator to measure and monitor this missing connection. The project is part of the FNHA OCMO’s population health reporting in partnership with the OPHO.

#### 3.1 First Nations Wellness Indicators

“Indicators are only useful if the process of developing and using them engages the community as a whole in examining what it wants to be, where it wants to go, and what its values are; if the process provides useful and usable information to the community; and if the process increases the community’s knowledge and power.”

(Hancock, Labonte, & Edwards, 1999.)

Indigenous Peoples in BC, Canada and globally have indicated that focusing on illness is a colonial way of viewing peoples’ health status (Fogarty, Lovell, Langenberg, & Heron, 2018). By focusing on illness, we adopt a deficit perspective to health and wellness that can reinforce stigmas and pathologize Indigenous Peoples (Fogarty et al., 2018). Mainstream health indicator frameworks do not recognize and incorporate Indigenous perspectives of health and wellness. Too often, indicators used are restricted in scale, limited in scope, or cannot capture the intangible aspects of cultural and social aspects of Indigenous community health (Satterfield, Gregory, Klain, Roberts, & Chan, 2013; Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Smylie et al., 2006). Instead, we should ask, “What strengths within First Nations should we be sharing with each other and celebrating?”

Wellness indicators support self-determination by giving First Nations control over deciding what constitutes wellness, how wellness is measured, and how the information will be used (FNHA, 2015). When wellness indicators are defined *by* and *for* First Nations, they reflect First

<sup>1</sup>This indicator was never monitored due to a lack of access to data.

<sup>2</sup>This indicator was only reported on once in 10 years.



Nations perspectives, values and world views. Self-determined wellness indicators have the potential to advance the health and wellness of First Nations individuals, families, communities and Nations by informing health planning, priority setting, decision making and evaluation (Smylie, Anderson, Ratima, Crengle, & Anderson, 2006). However, we also have to recognize the limitations of indicators created to measure wellness and acknowledge that they will never be able to fully express the depth or magnitude of intangible values and connections between the human, environmental and spiritual worlds (Donatuto, Campbell, & Gregory, 2016).

Working to capture measures of health and well-being that reflect Indigenous worldviews and perspectives of health and wellness also provides benefits. When done in a good way, this work helps transform the overall conversation around the health of a population, what policies and decisions need to be made to support health and wellness, and how patterns of well-being are changing over time. As Donatuto and others note (2016), the value of health assessment is dependent on who completes the assessment and whether health is defined and evaluated in the right way.

At present, there are no broadly accepted Indigenous models for health based on Indigenous understandings of health (Donatuto et al., 2016). This work has been underway for some time in Indigenous communities around the world, including in BC. It began with the TCA: FNHP, continued through to the PHWA, and now there is work to develop provincial-level indicators that better reflect perspectives of First Nations in BC, including the connection to land, water and territory.

### **3.2 Connection To Land, Water And Territory**

For Indigenous Peoples globally, connection to land, water and territory is a key determinant of health and wellness (Richmond, 2015). Many First Nations knowledge systems see all things as interconnected. This is reflected in the phrase, “All my relations,” which acknowledges the interconnectedness of all things on the earth, including plants, animals, earth, water, air, trees and humans.

Connection to land, water and territory affects all aspects of mental, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being in complex and interconnected ways. Territorial connection is a connection to ancestors; a reciprocal relationship that supports living and healing; a link that grounds one’s identity, laws, language, culture, knowledge and stories; and a gift for future generations. The land provides everything needed to live a life of good health (Colomeda & Wenzel, 2000). Indigenous Peoples draw sustenance, healing, and medicines from the land in many ways. As stewards of the land, Indigenous Peoples have a sacred responsibility to protect and sustain it (FNHA and OPHO, 2020). All of these connections keep Indigenous Peoples mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually strong and resilient. The dispossession and disconnection of Indigenous Peoples’ bodies and spirits from the land as a consequence of colonization has been devastating for them in every way – from loss of traditional economies, livelihoods, and lifestyles to an overwhelming loss of purpose, health and wellness.

It is imperative to shift the mainstream health perspective, which tends to treat the environment as a source of hazards or harms, towards a view of the environment as a source of healing, which reflects a relational perspective (Kimmerer, 2013). This way of thinking builds on the life-sustaining and health-promoting aspects of the land, water and territory connections for the benefit of current and future generations (Kimmerer, 2013). We want to acknowledge, privilege and honour territory, land and water – and our connections to them – in our work as they are integral aspects of Indigenous health and wellness.

### 3.3 Project Background

This research project builds upon a unique partnership between the FNHA's OCMO and BC's OPHO to establish a new set of First Nations population health and wellness indicators to be measured over the next 10 years.

In 2006, the TCA: FNHP laid out a plan for collecting seven health indicators through partnership with First Nations and the province of BC (BC Assembly of First Nations et al., 2006). In 2016, at Gathering Wisdom VIII, the OCMO and OPHO announced the addition of 15 new health and wellness indicators that better reflect First Nations in BC's perspectives on health and wellness: 1) education (graduation rates); 2) food security; 3) adequacy of housing; 4) cultural wellness (traditional language, traditional foods, traditional medicine/healing, sense of belonging to one's community); 5) experience of cultural safety and humility when receiving health services; 6) avoidable hospitalizations (ambulatory care-sensitive conditions); 7) decision-making and human and economic capacity; 8) ecological health; 9) level of physical activity; 10) number of children with healthy teeth (no cavities); 11) smoking commercial tobacco; 12) healthy infant birth weights; 13) alcohol-related deaths; 14) serious injuries requiring hospitalization; and 15) self-reported mental/emotional well-being.

The 15 new indicators were developed using a Two-Eyed Seeing approach by a working group composed of FNHA and OPHO representatives based on information gathered at many regional FNHA tables focused on wellness (Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2015). They embody a strengths-based, wholistic perspective that recognizes the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of health within the social and environmental contexts in which individuals and communities seek to live in health and wellness.

Co-development of indicators is a significant part of health governance for First Nations communities. It paves the way for relevant, meaningful data collection that strengthens the ability of First Nations to make decisions on their own health and wellness, further enhancing self-determination as a mechanism for improving health outcomes.

Existing data sources, including the Census, First Nations Regional Health Survey, Canadian Community Health Survey, and administrative data, were identified as ways to measure most of the 15 new indicators, however, some are not yet measured in the mainstream system, including self-determination and connection to land.

The PHWA included a placeholder for measuring connection to land, as well as a commitment to define a measure of this critical concept by 2022 (FNHA and OPHO, 2020). The We Walk Together project was initiated to address this need.

## We Walk Together Project Goal

The goal of this project is to work in partnership with First Nations in BC to explore the connection between having a close relationship with the land, water and territory and having optimal health and wellness. The findings generated from this project, including the invaluable First Nations Knowledges gathered, will then be used to enhance First Nations population health and wellness monitoring systems. The aim is to collaboratively create an indicator that captures the connection to land, water and territory as a determinant of health for inclusion in the PHWA. In order to reach this goal, the following research questions were created to generate knowledge on First Nations in BC's connection to land, water and territory.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1 What do Indigenous Knowledges tell us about connection to land and water as a determinant of health and wellness?
- 2 How do First Nations in BC describe connection to land, water and territory in relation to their health and wellness?
- 3 How do we gather, uplift and feature the knowledge and perspectives of First Nations Knowledge Keepers and community members to inform population health at a provincial scale?

## 4. METHODS

### 4.1 Research Methodology

We Walk Together employed an exploratory, qualitative methods design rooted in a Two-Eyed Seeing approach, offered by Mi'kmaq Elders Murdena and Albert Marshall (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012; Marshall et al., 2015). Two-Eyed Seeing refers to learning to see from one eye of Indigenous ways of knowing and from the other eye of Western ways of knowing, and using the strengths, gifts and insights from both to gain a more well-rounded perspective (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012; Marshall et al., 2015). Participants' oral traditions and experiential knowledge were documented.

### 4.2 Study Setting

All of what is now colonially known as the Canadian province of BC is located on the traditional territories of First Nations Peoples. Most of the land was never legally surrendered or subject to treaty negotiations, and some First Nations in BC continue to live on their traditional territories, which may include both urban and rural areas. However, the relationship First Nations have with the land has been disrupted by historical and ongoing colonialism, which continues to undermine First Nations' self-determination, dispossess them of their lands, and inflict environmental degradation (Elsley, 2013; Greenwood, & Lindsay, 2019). Presently, the FNHA operates regionally in the boundaries defined by the provincial government, including the Interior, Fraser Salish, Northern, Vancouver Coastal, and Vancouver Island regions. Three regions had the capacity and interest to participate in this project: Fraser Salish, Vancouver Coastal, and the Northern region.

BELOW IS A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF EACH FNHA REGION:



#### FRASER SALISH REGION - HOSTED BY STÓ:LŌ NATION

FNHA's Fraser Salish region of southwestern mainland BC serves 32 urban and rural communities with a population of nearly 10,000 registered First Nations people. One of the Nations in the FNHA Fraser Salish Region is Stó:lō Nation. "Stó:lō," the Halkomelem word for the Fraser River, is also used in their self-identification as "People of the River" (Carlson, 2001; Schaepe & Miller, 2007). The Stó:lō refer to their traditional territory with a Halkomelem word, "S'ólh Téméxw" (Carlson, 2001). Mobile hunter gatherers within the S'ólh Téméxw depend on the land and waters, harvesting through fishing, foraging and hunting. Participants from eight distinct Nations participated in the project: Sts'ailes, Katzie, Soowahlie, Lummi, Tzeachten, Skwah, Matsqui, and Skowkale.



### VANCOUVER COASTAL REGION – HOSTED BY LIL’WAT NATION

The 14 First Nations in FNHA’s Vancouver Coastal Region and three sub-regions (Central Coast, South Coast, and Southern Stl’at’imx) are unique in their culture, traditions, geography, and context. The registered First Nations population in the Vancouver Coastal region is close to 19,225 people, representing approximately 15.3% of the First Nations population in BC (*Addressing Racism Review*, 2020). This includes urban and away-from-home First Nations and on-reserve residents in Vancouver, Richmond, the North Shore, Coast Garibaldi, Sea-to-Sky, Sunshine Coast, Powell River, Bella Bella, and Bella Coola. All 14 distinct, unique Nations in Vancouver Coastal were represented at the regional We Walk Together gathering.



### NORTHERN REGION – LAKE BABINE NATION

FNHA’s Northern region is home to 55 First Nations communities, nine Tribal Councils, and 17 distinct linguistic groups. Just over 53,500 registered First Nations people live in the region, representing 35.6% of the First Nations population in BC (FNHA.ca, n.d.-a). Lake Babine Nation was selected for involvement in this project based on consultation with the regional office about what would work in their region.

## 4.3 Engagement With First Nations In BC

### Technical Advisory Committee

The Principal Investigator (PI) invited community members with close ties to community, as well as health directors with community knowledge about the Knowledge Keepers and youth of their communities, to join a Technical Advisory Committee that included the First Nations Health Directors Association (FNHDA) Planning and Reporting Committee; FNHA Regional Engagement Teams such as the Executive Directors, Director of Regional Engagements and Community Engagement Coordinators from each of the regional teams; and representatives from the FNHA’s Research and Knowledge Exchange (RKE) and Office of the Chief Medical Officer (OCMO) teams, as well as the Office of the Provincial Health Officer (OPHO).

The Wellness Research Coordinator organized bi-weekly meetings with each regional engagement team to introduce the vision of the We Walk Together research project. Following initial meetings, the regional engagement teams collectively identified locations to host a one- or two-day gathering that represented their regional story. The FNHA Community Engagement Coordinators from each region met with Health Directors and Health Council members from multiple Nations to identify Knowledge Keepers and youth who carry extensive First Nations Knowledges regarding connection to land, water and territory as a determinant of health and wellness.

The Technical Advisory Committee appointed a regional engagement team member as a co-lead for each of the regions, alongside the Wellness Research Coordinator, to plan and coordinate the We Walk Together gatherings.

### Local Planning Committee (LPC)

Planning for each gathering benefitted from bi-weekly meetings with stakeholders, who led the development of the agenda, identified Knowledge Keepers and community members to participate, and planned local and culturally appropriate activities. The LPC was made up of community leadership, community staff, and FNHA regional engagement team staff from the three host nations: Stó:lō, Lil'wat, and Lake Babine.

### Elder Advisors

The PI and research team members were asked by the FNHA's Board of Directors to present the We Walk Together project to the Elder Advisors for the First Nations Health Council (FNHC), FNHDA, and FNHA. Elder Advisors Wickaninnish (Cliff Atleo) from Nuu-chah-nulth Nation, Sulksun (Shane Point) from xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nation, Siyamex (Virginia Peters) from Sts'ailes Nation, and Syexwáliya (Ann Whonnock) from Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) Nation all shared stories and teachings relating to connection to land, water and territory.

### Research Analysis and Methods Committee (RAMC)

A sub-committee was formed to support the work of data collection, transcription, and analysis from each gathering. The committee was made up of equal representation from the FNHA's OCMO and RKE teams, and included both First Nations and non-First Nations staff members. It met weekly to discuss themes that emerged from each regional gathering, develop an analysis framework, and perform the analysis.

## 4.4 Participants

We Walk Together participants included First Nations community members within the three regions, with a special focus on recruiting youth, Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Youth (broadly defined, as per the community's definition) contributed by bringing their unique lens to the discussions and by facilitating relationship-building and knowledge exchange. The youth also had the role of "helpers" to the Elders and Knowledge Keepers, who hold extensive cultural, historical and spiritual knowledge of Indigenous Peoples in BC and have the ability to translate this knowledge into meaningful applications towards systems transformation. The Knowledge Keepers and Elders are the ones who carry us forward and remind us of our teachings and how we must be humble, inclusive and respectful of our cultural and traditional practices. Overall, 48 community members (eight from Fraser Salish, 28 from Vancouver Coastal, and 11 from the Northern region) participated, with additional study team members present as well. Recruitment and participation was slightly different in each region, reflecting community priorities and decision-making as well as cultural protocol. The research team approached regional FNHA staff to plan and implement regional land-based gatherings in partnership. Each region took a slightly different approach in terms of the communities and Nations who participated.



### STÓ:LŌ NATION GATHERING

For the first We Walk Together gathering on S'ólh Téméxw territory, the FNHA Community Engagement Coordinators identified five First Nations Elders and Knowledge Keepers, as well as four First Nations youth, to participate in the gathering. The FNHA Regional Traditional Wellness Specialist visited Elders and Knowledge Keepers in their homes to invite them to participate, bringing offerings of tea and tobacco. The Community Engagement Coordinators met with youth in person and invited them to the gatherings. The youth provided verbal confirmation that they would like to participate in the study. In total, four First Nations Elders and four youth participated, representing eight of the 32 First Nations communities in the Fraser Salish region.



### LIL'WAT NATION GATHERING

The second gathering was hosted by Lil'wat Nation. A call-out approach was initiated by the FNHA Community Engagement Coordinators, Traditional Wellness Coordinator, and Regional Health Liaison. An invitation letter and registration form was shared amongst all the health directors and council members in the region. The Health Directors and Council Members identified one Knowledge Keeper and one mentee who wanted to share stories and exchange knowledge on how their connection to land, water and territory influenced their health and wellness. Each of the 14 Nations in the region were represented by two participants, for a total of 28 participants at the Vancouver Coastal gathering.



### LAKE BABINE NATION GATHERING

The Northern gathering took place in Lake Babine Nation, with seven of the Nation's Knowledge Keepers and four mentees from the community. Lake Babine Nation's cultural system is centered on Bah'lats (the potlatch), which involves four clans: Lakh Ja Bu (Bear), Gilantan (Caribou), Lakh Tsa Mis Yu (Beaver), and Jilh Tse Yu (Frog). Lake Babine Nation's LPC advised that inviting Knowledge Keepers and youth from each of the four clans was important, as each carries extensive knowledge about connections to land, water and territory in relation to health and wellness. The LPC assisted the WWT team with inviting participants to the gathering.



## 4.5 Data Collection

Data collection took place during three land-based learning gatherings – one in each participating region. Each gathering included cultural and land-based activities appropriate for the time of year, land and Nation.

Sharing circles were used to discuss connection to land, water and territory with participants. Sharing circles are a well-established community-based Indigenous research method. They are relational, reciprocal, based in community protocols, and create space for action-oriented knowledge-sharing (Bagelman, Deveraux, & Hartley, 2016; Baskin, 2005; Wilson, 2008). Participants sit together in a circle, incorporate spirituality through prayer and/or with the presence of medicines or sacred objects, and follow cultural protocols of sharing. Each person has the opportunity to tell their stories in relation to the research topic without interruption, comment or question (Baskin, 2005). According to Baskin (2005), using sharing-circle methodology also, “creates room for [a] healing component,” recognizing that many research topics can elicit strong emotions.

### Land-Based Methods

Use of land-based methods in research are rooted in understanding that Indigenous Knowledges are held in the land (Greenwood & Lindsay, 2019) and are generally wholistic and based on observation or experience (Absolon, 2011). Recognizing the diversity of Indigenous Peoples around the globe, “land as teacher” is nevertheless a common element of many Indigenous worldviews. As this research explored connection to land, and recognizing that Indigenous health is also intrinsically tied to land, collecting data through engagement in land-based activities was strongly aligned with the goals of the project.

Each region facilitated various land-based activities with the project team that allowed for a deeper connection to and understanding of the land, water and territory. These activities included taking medicine walks and river baths, fishing, canoeing, dancing, drumming, ice fishing, trapping, netting, smudging, and brushing.



### MEDICINE WALKS

Medicine walks are nature walks facilitated by a guide in which you consciously slow down, take in your surroundings, and listen and learn as the guide teaches you about how plants can be used as medicine. These teachings include taking only what you need and identifying which plants can be used to ameliorate certain health issues.

### RIVER BATHS

River baths are cleansing ceremonies where individuals bathe in a river to cleanse themselves both physically and spiritually. These ceremonies allow for individuals to achieve physical and spiritual connectedness.

### TRAPPING, NETTING AND ICE FISHING

Trapping, netting and ice fishing are traditional ways that First Nations Peoples avail themselves of traditional foods from the land.

### SMUDGING

Smudging is a ceremony for purifying or cleansing the soul. It involves burning medicines found in nature including cedar, sage, tobacco and sweet grass.

### BRUSHING

Brushing is a cleansing ceremony to clear the mind, body and soul. Traditionally, an Elder will use cedar branches to brush off any negativity from participants.

An interview guide was developed by the research team and investigators to help facilitate discussions with participants. This guide included the following questions:



- 1 How does connection to land, water and territory influence health and wellness (mental, physical, spiritual and emotional)?
- 2 What facilitates, strengthens or improves connections to land, water and territory?
- 3 What is preventing, inhibiting or reducing connections to land, water and territory?
- 4 How is this knowledge passed on to youth and future generations?
- 5 What signs or signals do you look to, to know or understand the strength of connection to land, water and territory as an individual or as a community?<sup>3</sup>

Participants were asked to keep questions/reflections in mind as they explored and interacted with the land, and to raise them during the sharing circle. Research team members also kept the questions in mind while taking notes and interacting with participants.

Data was recorded using video and audio where appropriate (approximately 90% of the time), and later transcribed verbatim by the FNHA project team. The WWT team sought direction from participants regarding which sacred activities could not be filmed or otherwise recorded. In addition, multiple study team members took extensive field notes during the cultural land-based activities. Each community participant received an honorarium (\$400 per day), according to recommendations from the LPC. Details of data-collection activities in each of the three regions are presented below.

### STÓ:LŌ NATION – FRASER SALISH REGION

Data was collected through the sharing-circle component of a one-and-a-half-day land-based gathering in June 2019. To support ongoing relationship development and trust-building between participants and researchers, the first day of the gathering involved a welcoming ceremony in the Coqualeetza Longhouse, an informed-consent protocol, a bus tour to four sacred sites in the area, and an evening dinner with traditional Stó:lō dancing. The second day took place outdoors at Shxwhá:y Village Lake within Stó:lō/Ts'elxwéyeqw traditional territory, where an official welcome from Shxwhá:y Village Chief Councillors was followed by a sharing circle. Participants and researchers then paddled together around a lake in two traditional canoes as part of the process of building trust, to hear the participants' histories and to promote opportunities for hearing teachings about the importance of canoeing and the waterways to the Stó:lō. The day ended with reflections from participants and researchers and a travelling song performed by the youth participants.



<sup>3</sup>This question was removed in the Lake Babine Nation gathering. The Research Analysis and Methods Committee agreed to remove this question as participants did not understand it.

## LÍL'WAT NATION – VANCOUVER COASTAL REGION

The Vancouver Coastal gathering included cultural activities and a sharing circle. It was held in August 2019 at the Ts'zil Learning Centre. The first day began with a welcoming prayer and circle of introductions. Representatives from the OPHO and OCMO shared what they were there to learn, and reviewed the informed-consent protocol. After lunch, the group participated in a wellness walk by the river and a river-bathing ceremony. This was followed by sharing reflections and making medicine pouches. On the second day, a sharing circle was held throughout the morning, followed by a closing ceremony after lunch.



## LAKE BABINE NATION- NORTHERN REGION

The Northern Region gathering was held over three days in February 2020. The first day included an opening ceremony at the Margaret Patrick Memorial Hall. The project team shared what they were there to learn, and went through the informed-consent protocols and introductions. On the second day, the group travelled to Donald's Landing for a territory tour, ice fishing and snowshoeing. Elders told stories of significant sites, trap lines, lake travels and use. Youth also shared trapping and netting skills. A debriefing circle was held at the youth centre in the afternoon. On the third day, the group travelled to Tachet for snowshoeing, again followed by a debriefing circle. An evening celebration and gifting for participants was followed by drumming, singing, dancing and the Lahal stick game in an event open to all community members.



### 4.6 Analysis

Analysis of the information collected at the gatherings was undertaken by members of the Research Analysis and Methods Committee (RAMC), which included both First Nations and non-First Nations FNHA staff. Analysis began immediately following the completion of transcription of audio recordings from the first gathering in the Fraser Salish region. Data from the subsequent two gatherings was added as it became available. This process of layering insights as more data from other regions became available allowed the team to build to a higher level of analytical insight. The analysis presented here represents an emerging thematic framework across the three regions, reflecting the overall aim of developing provincial-level indicators of connection to land, water and territory.

In the first phase of analysis immediately following each of the gatherings, each RAMC member began by reviewing the transcript and individually identifying themes. This phase took a “focused-lens” approach, using the questions in the topic guide. Afterward, a collective review of all themes, similarities and differences was undertaken to create region-specific thematic codebooks for the Northern and Fraser Salish regions. A team member with access to NVivo<sup>4</sup> conducted inductive line-by-line coding to identify the themes for these regions, as well as deductive coding using the

<sup>4</sup>NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software.

framework of the four guiding questions put to participants. Themes were collated in a spreadsheet by the We Walk Together Wellness Research Coordinator. Due to time limitations, a different approach was used for the Vancouver Coastal region. Ten significant quotes were pulled from transcripts from the Vancouver Coastal region to help give life to the emerging themes from the Northern and Fraser Salish regions. Together, the emerging framework of themes and significant quotes were brought forward for review and feedback by the investigative team.

In the second phase of analysis, the team returned to the transcripts and undertook thematic coding. This phase took a “wide-lens” approach, letting the data inform the theme generation.

The goal was to create a thematic code book reflecting major themes, sub-themes and definitions across the three regions. The team reviewed the codebooks for each gathering, beginning with the one most detailed and familiar – the North (June-November 2020). Then, the team moved through the Fraser-Salish codebook (December 2020-February 2021), clarifying themes, adding definitions where necessary, looking for any perspectives not currently represented within the North framework – and using those to build a hybrid framework. Finally, the same process was repeated with the Vancouver Coastal codebook (March-June 2021). Audio recordings were also reviewed in this process, as they carried vital information about themes emphasized by speakers made clear from their expression through tone and volume.



The representative quotes below were selected to bring life to each theme through the voices of gathering participants. Pauses, repetitions and filler words were edited out unless they contributed useful meaning or context. The credibility of the preliminary Fraser Salish analysis was assessed by sharing the preliminary findings with members of the regional teams and research team in preparation for publication of a region-specific manuscript (Stelkia et al., 2021). They indicated that the overall framing of the findings resonated with their experiences and represented a coherent account of the complexity of connection to land, water and territory, and its relationship to health and well-being for Stó:lō people.

## 4.7 Data Validation

Validation gatherings were held with participants in each of the regions. The term “validation” is usually viewed in a negative context and with a colonial lens, as settlers have historically claimed the right to validate the thoughts and opinions of First Nations Peoples. However, for this project, the WWT team sought to work collaboratively with participants to ensure that their voices were being amplified the focal point of this research, and that we were accurately analyzing the data into the key themes and messages the communities wanted heard by decision-makers and external stakeholders. These validation gatherings served to empower First Nations communities in BC to teach us what connection to land, water and territory means to them and what impact it has on their health and wellness.

Due to concerns regarding COVID-19, most validation gatherings were held virtually over Zoom with available participants. The LPC from each region helped the WWT team schedule gatherings and provided technical support during the meetings. The purpose of these gatherings was to validate the data included in the preliminary report and to ensure all findings were represented accurately and appropriately. The gatherings also allowed for the collection of additional information from participants that is included in the final report.

The gatherings included participants from each of the original gatherings, WWT team members and executive leads. Each two-and-a-half-hour gathering was scheduled at a time convenient to the region, and had two to three facilitators and a note taker. For some regions, multiple gatherings were held to ensure the majority of participants could attend. The Fraser Salish region had six participants and nine team members participate over two sessions. Vancouver Coastal had seven participants and eight team members participate over two sessions. LBN had 12 participants and five team members participate over one session. All validation gatherings were held between Summer 2022 and Spring 2023. Prior to the gatherings, participants were sent a package that included the preliminary report, agenda for the gathering, and cultural health and wellness supports. At the gatherings, each region was shown their regional video and a WWT team member discussed the main findings and themes from the preliminary report. Participants were then asked to provide feedback and thoughts on the video as well as on the preliminary report. The project team collected feedback by taking/typing notes at each gathering as well from as an audio recording. Feedback was reviewed and collated by the project team, and changes were made to the videos and report where appropriate.

#### 4.8 Knowledge Exchange Tool: Regional Videos

Communities provided powerful insights about the complexity and interconnectedness between land, water and territory, and its impacts on First Nations health and wellness. A videographer was hired to document the gatherings for each regions. These regional videos were created to document participants' voices, stories and experiences. Visual storytelling through film was found to be a way to accurately capture and display the complexity of this interaction and tell the story of the connection between land, water and territory as an Indigenous determinant of health. Each video is approximately 15 minutes and includes a combination of video, pictures, text and music. Based on feedback from participants during the validation gatherings, revisions were made to the videos to improve their accessibility. These revisions, made by the Canadian First Nations Radio System (CFNR), included: adding voiceovers for large sections of text, adding land acknowledgements, and ensuring text remains on screen for a long period of time so that participants can take their time reading.



This project aimed to address a critical knowledge-exchange gap and move beyond traditional academic reporting of research findings by developing a knowledge-exchange tool that can be used to tell the story of the connection between land, water and territory as an Indigenous determinant of health. The videos, alongside this report, can be used by communities to facilitate open dialogue with decision-makers and advocate for needed changes in their regions.

“People need to know how our community breathes and where we came from. Our video shows what we went through and what makes us resilient, and how we are getting through that and how to go forward. We are teaching staff who work at Children and Family Services and staff at other related services that they really need to know where our people come from. It really confirms the direction we are going. There is so much that intertwines between the services the community takes on and education. This would be a great tool for communities who are ready to take some action for their healing. The mental health state in our communities, there is a crisis going on. Some people have not been able to find right ways or appropriate ways to deal with their traumas and that goes for generations and generations.”

– Siyamex (Virginia Peters), Sts’ailes Nation; FS

## 4.9 Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, BC, Canada. The project adhered to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, particularly Chapter 9: “Research involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada” (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014). Community participation was navigated through regional engagement and LPCs as detailed above. Written informed consent was sought from each participant on the first day of each gathering. All audio recordings and transcription notes are stored on a protected FNHA server. This project sought to follow Nation-specific cultural protocols on the three distinct territories where the gatherings took place.



LAKE BABINE NATION- NORTHERN REGION

## 5 RESULTS

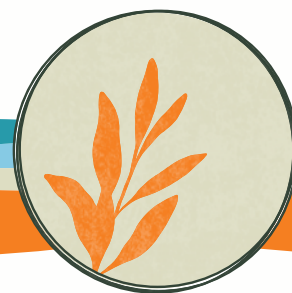
The analysis presented here represents an emerging thematic framework across the three regions. The region-specific analysis from Fraser Salish has been published previously in the *International Journal of Indigenous Health* (Stelkia et al., 2021). Three overarching themes, each with sub-themes, were identified:



### ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE



### LAND AND WATER WELLNESS



### ACCOUNTABILITY

Prior to settler colonialism, BC First Nations were healthy, vibrant and self-determining, with a strong, enduring connection to land, water and territory. They had a reciprocal relationship with the land; they nurtured and cared for it, and in return, the land healed them and kept them physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually well. Culture and ceremony were heavily embedded in their spirits and way of life, with their territories and ancestors being the source of rich ancestral knowledge. This strong, wholistic relationship with the land and water kept them healthy and connected to the Creator. Over time, this connection became threatened due to violent colonial genocide implemented by the Government of Canada and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches. Through the intentional spread of smallpox, as well as theft and destructive extraction of First Nations lands, the Canadian government and its citizens systematically claimed, controlled and colonized the lands, removing First Nations from their lands and eliminating First Nations traditional livelihoods, cultures and ways of being (NCCIH, 2021). Genocidal policies and systems have devastated Indigenous Peoples' determinants of health. These include the Indian Reserve System, which forced First Nations people off onto remote tracts of land; the Indian Residential School System, which forcibly separated First Nations children from their families and communities; and legislation banning ceremonies, such as the potlach, that are vital to wellness. This systemic colonial violence has led to collective experiences of harm, immense loss, grief and sorrow that continue to be felt by First Nations communities to this day. This grief is inter-generational and continues to have profound impacts on the health and wellness of the communities.

Even so, colonial attempts at genocide were not successful. Many First Nations people in BC managed to protect their knowledges, traditions and practices, and many more are now experiencing a cultural resurgence. They are self-determining, standing up in their cultures and ways of life, healing their communities and people, holding the government accountable for their inhumane, illegal and atrocious actions, and reclaiming their rightful roles as stewards of the land to regain their status as healthy, self-determining and vibrant people.

The three major themes provide an overview of the importance of connection to land, water and territory on the wellness of First Nations in BC; the hardships and illness caused by ongoing tensions between BC First Nations' ways of knowing and being and imposed settler colonial approaches; and what is needed to move forward for the benefit of future generations.

Each theme is defined and includes details to illuminate sub-themes. Representative quotes are presented with the name of the speaker, their Nation, and initials of the regional gathering where the words were spoken (Fraser Salish (FS); Vancouver Coastal (VC); and Northern (N)).



## 5.1 Ancestral Knowledge

### ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE: KNOWLEDGE PASSED DOWN FROM ANCESTORS

Participants shared that ancestral knowledge is rooted in relationship to land and territory. This forms the basis for personal and communal identity, purpose, spirituality and ceremony, all of which were felt to be central to health and well-being.

Ancestral knowledge/teachings and First Nations' oral histories are traditionally passed through generations. Participants spoke about learning through stories, on the land, in the longhouse, from grandparents and Elders. They emphasized the importance of intergenerational knowledge transfer and privileging Indigenous Knowledges:

“Elder Richie Malloway used to say to my sister that we are echoes of the old people. So, what we share, we carry it on through the generations because we don't have books ... We don't write things down [we have an oral tradition instead], so when you're a little child you go to the longhouse, and you listen to - and watch - the Elders.”

– Kaxte' (Yvonne Marie) Tumangday, Sts'ailes First Nation; FS

“If it weren't for our medicines our ancestors left behind, I would not be here. My grandmother was about 101 when she passed. I remember lying in bed with her and she'd be telling stories in our language. She was my protector. She left something behind. A teaching of how we have to have respect. Respect for everything we touch, everything we eat. First thing in the morning. Our first touch of our food, thanking the food for the ones that gave up their lives for us, to keep us going.”

– Montah (Beverly Dixon), Shíshálh Nation; VC

“The words that I'm saying, they're not my words, they're the teachings of our ancestors. We need to pass that on. But you want to pass it on in a good way. That's why I said, 'I don't want to talk to you about my hurts and the things that have happened to me.' What I want to talk about is the good things that our people did. Taking them out to the land.”

– Yazhun (John Louise), Tla'amin Nation, VC

Four sub-themes emerged within the theme of ancestral knowledge: cultural protocols and practices, cultural disruption, overwhelming grief over what's been stolen and lost; and cultural resurgence. These sub-themes are unpacked in detail below.



# ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge passed down from ancestors



FIGURE 1: OVERVIEW OF ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE



FIGURE 2: ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE SUB-THEME: CULTURAL PROTOCOLS AND PRACTICES

In this sub-theme, participants shared descriptions of First Nations ways of knowing and being. Nation-based knowledge systems are rooted in the land, and they form the foundations of laws, languages, ecological knowledge, title and rights. Each Nation has distinct and unique cultural protocols and practices that are passed down to future generations. For example, participants in the Northern gathering shared how their feast hall system (Bah'lats/potlatch) is both a governance and justice system, a manifestation and carrier of cultural protocols and practices, as well as a source of strength, identity and social status:



“We Lake Babine Nation people have our own governance. We have our own Feast Hall system.”

– Dinee Tsoh Gees (Richard Williams), Lake Babine Nation; N

“When we catch it, we give it out to the Feast Hall, our potlatch system. So, when we get hired workers that are different clans – as opposed to giving them money ... imagine giving them something [that] you worked for, has meaning to it, came from the land, the old ways.”

– Jason Charlie, Lake Babine Nation, N

“Our Feast Hall system is very strong; Lake Babine Nation’s government systems are the strongest in Canada.”

– Niwh Syalh (Ronnie Alec), Lake Babine Nation; N

Participants emphasized the significance of culture – as medicine, as strength, and as connection. For example, across regions, participants described how singing, dancing and drumming served to strengthen spirit and connection:

“All these things we all need to know, they are medicine. When all the Lake Babine drummers get together, 20 drummers, it’s so powerful, so unique, that’s our medicine.”

– Niwh Syalh (Ronnie Alec), Lake Babine Nation; N

“I realized the strength of the connection to our culture. There was a canoe gathering back a few years in Bella Bella, the Quatwas, and for the first time in my kids’ lives I stepped on the dance floor with them, and the power and the strength of that connection to them, and the singing and the dancing and knowing my husband was at the drum. One of my kids was at the drum, one was beside me dancing and that connection was creating ... was a movement within myself and an awakening. And ... that’s where the strength is, in that connection together.”

– Tiffany Mason, Kitsoo/Xai’xais (Klemtu); VC

An important aspect of cultural protocols that was shared by participants was the role each member of the community had to play in the collective. They shared that performing cultural protocols and practices with others in the community and socializing was a meaningful part of their culture:

My spirit brings me back to a time when I can envision how our people used to work together. How we had women involved in assisting our men to make the decisions. How before everything that we did, every one of us had a role right from when we were born up until when we leave. There was equality, and responsibility for your own contribution towards your village. This was crucial to survival and the harmony of how we work together. Children played, grandparents had a role. When the families would leave to go out and do the hunting, harvesting, the grandparents would look after the children.”

– Joanne John, Lil'wat Nation; VC

Another participant shared how goods such as food and medicines were shared, rather than owned by an individual:

“I mentioned yesterday about the longhouses, and smoking the salmon and living together to do all of that. Things weren't locked up, it was open to be shared. If someone needed it, then they would take some but give something else in return. You know, that's how our Creator really wants us to be.”

– Siyamex (Virginia Peters), Sts'ailes Nation; FS

Participants shared how cultural protocols and practices were passed down through generations. Across the regions, participants talked about how these learnings took place during important cultural events such as in the feast hall, but also in everyday environments, such as during meals of traditional foods:

“Ancestral knowledge is blood knowledge. We know it in our bones, our DNA, as well as being passed down to us ... there's a knowing when it comes to ceremony, there's a knowing when it comes to land and territory, animals, weather. I just know. And it's not something I was taught, I wasn't taught these things by my grandparents or my aunts and uncles. Some things you just know because it's blood knowledge. I don't think the greater world knows that. We know our territories, we know our lands, we know our medicines, we know our people. Even if we're at opposite ends of the province, we know our people. There are so many things we can't explain as people because it's in us, our knowledge, and our DNA. The outside world doesn't understand how much land and all of it gives to us and how passionate we are about that. To educate the outside world, I think it's really important for them to know that they can't paint us the way they have been painting us as the same colour with the same brush. Every time I go into a village, I'm really respectful of each village's way of doing things. When I teach ceremony, we teach it and hand it to the people and tell them to make it their own, because there are a way of doing things that we might not be doing. We have our own systems, the way we treat the land and how we gather.”

– Wii Mediik (Marie Oldfield), Kitasoo/Xai'xais (Klemtu) Nation; VC



“Lunch times were my favourite times. I always went to my Nanny’s house. I would have uncles, cousins, my Nanny right there, and that’s where I learned our traditional foods – in my Nanny’s house. How to tsa-pa, which means to dip into grease [in Heiltsuk]. Our table would be covered in newspapers, and none of us would have plates and there would be the fish, the potatoes, all of our seafood, and we would all just have bowls of grease around us that we were dipping our food into. That’s how we ate it.”

– Michelle Brown, Heiltsuk Nation; VC

Cultural protocols and practices served an important function in day-to-day life and across the life course. For example, Appa-Ka (Daniel Peters), a Skatin Knowledge Keeper from Vancouver Coastal, shared how cultural protocols and practices provide a path to wellness and healing for those who have passed and those left behind during times of loss:

“There are natural foods and plants that are offered for healing someone who’s mourning someone’s passing. When we’re laying someone to rest, we do a food offering and we use the wood. We give thanks, prepare a meal, and put it on the stove, on the fire pit – then once we come out of the cemetery, and lay them out to rest, we use cold water and it cleanses us, washes us off, separates us from the loved one who’s gone and our soul. The drumming, dancing, and songs we witnessed, the songs uplift us. They change our frame of mind, they change the soul, change the outlook. And this I’ve seen not only here but at other gatherings.”

– Appa-Ka (Daniel Peters), Skatin Nation; VC

The empowering significance of bringing back culture was highlighted in a story by a councillor in the Northern Region about how he turned to cultural experience and knowledge to navigate a difficult situation. His words emphasize the positive meaning in carrying the knowledge oneself as well as passing it on to the next generation:

“One year, my father-in-law’s boat broke down when we were going across the lake ... I wasn’t sure how we were going to coordinate [the youth camp] because we were used to just going back and forth in a motor boat. We [ended up using] a canoe during the 10-day culture camp we ran, and we just felt just so empowered and proud of this camp and the youth who were involved in it. Because we didn’t just harvest fish, we went hunting, berry picking, and brought in the traditional teachers to tell stories. That was one of the best, successful culture camps that I remember running in my life. I think it’s something that’s needed, and bringing these cultures back to Lake Babine Nation is very important.”

– Murphy Abraham, Lake Babine Nation; N



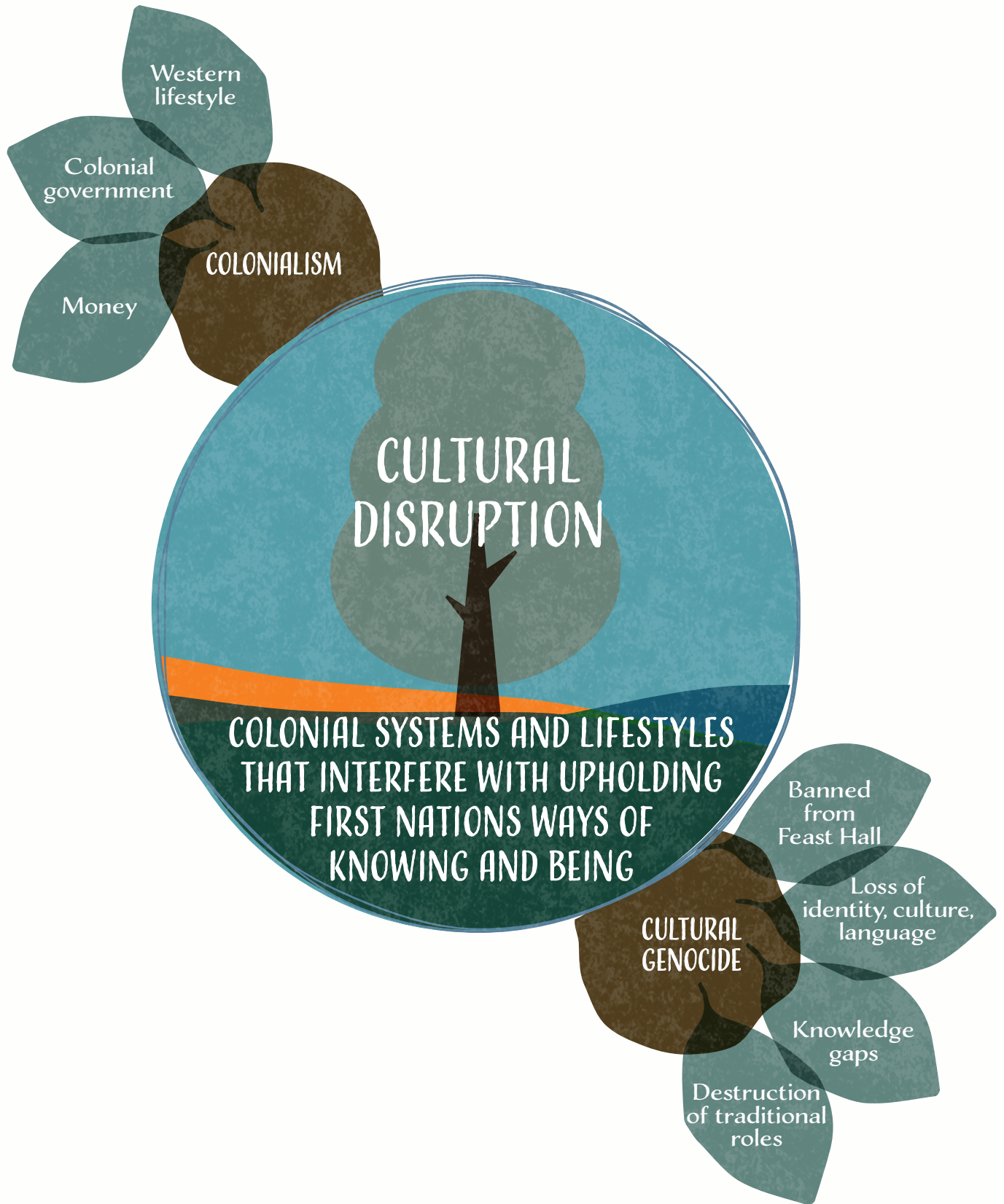


FIGURE 3: ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE SUB-THEME: CULTURAL DISRUPTION

The sub-theme of cultural disruption was understood to mean settler colonial systems and lifestyles that interfere with upholding First Nations ways of knowing and being. This reflects how settler colonial Canadian governments have used and continue to gain and maintain control over First Nations lands, waters, and territories through oppressive and violent political, legal and physical means. For example, the Government of Canada's racist *Indian Act* included provisions that restricted BC First Nations to remote tracts of lands (the Indian Reserve System) and forcibly removed children from their families to live in government-run institutions (the Indian Residential School System). The impacts of these genocidal systems on BC First Nations lives, families, communities, and educational and economic systems have been devastating and are still very much with us today.

“We’ve been silenced too long, been too quiet and let industry destroy our land ... The government doesn’t care. They make lots of money ... The RCMP, they don’t have the right to do this. Look at how many women have been murdered or gone missing, and they don’t care.”

– Niwh Syalh (Ronnie Alec), Lake Babine Nation; N

Cultural disruption was both a strategy and a consequence of genocidal and assimilationist approaches designed to take care of what was then known as the “Indian Problem” (Scott, D.C., 1920):

“I strongly believe in our traditions and our culture. I believe that’s our true medicine and that’s our strength. I think my spirit still cries for it because I can’t understand how (crying) ... they didn’t want us to exist. They literally wanted to wipe us from this world. They tried to strip us from who we are.”

– Nuwacta (Elizabeth Humchitt), Heiltsuk Nation; VC

At the Vancouver Coastal gathering, Gélpcal (Ashley Joseph) described how current settler colonial educational and employment structures continue to keep Indigenous children from connecting with the lands and waters, and from learning about traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and being:

“We start our children off working nine to three [at school] and we take them from the land before they even had a chance to be there. Then we move them on, they graduate, we move them on to nine to five [at a job] and their spirit suffers because we never actually get to learn who that child is and to feed that part of their spirit.”

– Gélpcal (Ashley Joseph), Lil’wat Nation; VC

At the Fraser Salish gathering, Elder Siyamex (Virginia Peters) shared that:

“Everything that happened to us really separated us. [We] became individualized and competitive. They’ve got a new lawn mower, I think I’ve got to go and get a better one.”

– Siyamex (Virginia Peters), Sts’ailes Nation; FS

This was echoed by Maqwes (Gabriel Joe), a Tzeachten youth who shared his fears about the shift from interconnectedness to seclusion:

“We’re all connected as one people, but I see that is changing a lot. People are becoming more secluded, more confined to their own dwellings – they don’t get out as much anymore. I remember as a kid being outside until the street lights came on, that was curfew–street lights. Nowadays, you see kids walking around town at 11, 12 at night–just walking around. Times are changing, it’s getting scary out there.”

– Maqwes (Gabriel Joe), Tzeachten Nation; FS

Taken together, these comments highlight that BC First Nations systems – spiritual, legal, governance, health, education and economic systems – are rooted in connection to land, water and territory. In contrast, settler colonialism, with its explicit and racist goal of securing control over land, water and territory, has contributed to harmful cultural disruption:

“How do we uphold ourselves to our morals and our customs? How do we do that when we no longer walk our land? When it makes us who we are? We’re so connected to Mother Earth, and I believe that we need to get out of that mentality that we’re not at work if we’re not inside that office sitting down behind the desk ready to answer phone calls. The work is also out here doing stuff like this. Interacting. Feeding our spirit. Going out onto the land hunting. Gathering, harvesting, utilizing all of that to go in and take care of our good health.”

– Joanne John, Lil’wat Nation; VC



LIL’WAT NATION-VANCOUVER COASTAL





FIGURE 4: ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE SUB-THEME: OVERWHELMING GRIEF FROM WHAT'S BEEN STOLEN AND LOST

The sub-theme of overwhelming grief from what's been stolen and lost consisted of experiences of overwhelming collective trauma and loss from ongoing genocidal violence – death and mourning, loss of language and culture, and loss of land. Losses reflected the ongoing and cumulative impact of imposed settler colonialism. Participants shared their experiences of reckoning with deep losses and finding a pathway toward strength and wellness.

One Tla'amin Elder shared the compounding toll of loss of family members and loved ones through generations, while also recognizing that many hardships were endured and survived so that those at the gathering could be alive and meeting that day:

“Sometimes it's hard. I have people telling me, ‘How can you be so strong?’ I think back to what our ancestors went through [crying] so that each and every one of us could be here today.”

– Les'pet (Doreen Point), Tla'amin Nation; VC

Another participant at the Fraser Salish gathering spoke of loss in terms of First Nations systems (economies, education, laws, child protection) and lifestyles through settler assimilation, contributing to disconnection and further harms:

“Economic development, lack of education throughout communities, unbalanced First Nations with culture and the white world. Older relatives and Natives passing away, lack of knowledge of culture and Aboriginal law within youth, children in care, jail or mentally unfit, alcohol and drug abuse, this all contributes to preventing Aboriginal people to connect, which leads them to be lost.”

– Tyneshia Commodore, Soowahlie and Lummi Nations; FS

What stood out is that reckoning with these losses and finding a pathway to strength and wellness prompted questions both for the ancestors and future generations:

“If my grandma was here, what would she say? If my great grandma was here, what would she say? They cleared the path for us and they went through so much. We feel bad for ourselves, but they went through harder times. We couldn't even imagine.”


– Kaxte' (Yvonne Marie) Tumangday, Sts'ailes First Nation; FS

“The future of our young people. How is it going to be, how are they going to be? Are they going to be like we are now, or are they going to lead the way? Are they going to go our Nedu way? That's what I'm afraid of, our language, are they going to keep up our language? That's what I think about every morning when I wake up.”

– Jibu (Peter Alec), Bear Clan, Lake Babine Nation; N

Settler colonial harms to lands and people have contributed to a tremendous burden of death within First Nations families, communities and Nations. Participants spoke about cultural protocols connected to land and territory that are carried out when a family member dies. These protocols continue to be carried out in Nations across the province, but can be affected by disconnections from traditional territories and imposition of BC laws related to death and dying.

One participant also spoke powerfully about the limits of cultural protocols that allow family members to mourn and heal, when the scale of deaths reaches genocidal proportions. The deaths that the participant speaks of are not the “ordinary” deaths of human existence, but deaths occurring due to the imposition of harmful settler colonial structures and policies. These deaths contribute to compounding grief and loss through generations that cultural protocols have not been designed to address:



“We mourn for one year, according to our traditional systems, then we say farewell to the deceased, our loved ones, and we move on. We must move on and the drums come out. The family has to smile again and move on. Forever rest in peace. But we’re not doing that today. We mourn way too long. We cry too long. But every time you think of your deceased loved one, it hurts. It hurts for a lifetime. My grandmother, who died at 114 just over 10 years ago, raised me. Her grandmother and her great grandmother left her a story about first contact. Like I was saying, we used to live in harmony before first contact. When the white people first came they gave us blankets as history knows, and we know, because it’s been done to us. The epidemic that we hear about as we speak today, that is exactly what happened to us at first contact when they distributed those blankets. My grandmother said people were dying, children were dying, and our Elders were dying. This story had been told to her by her great grandmother, which is over 200 years ago. Can you imagine the pain? Can you imagine the pain that our people suffered? The trauma? As days went on, months went on, they started burying each other, 20 at a time, every week. Pretty soon it was 30 massive graves. Can you imagine how long it took to get over this event? Holocaust. Can you imagine my feeling today? First Nations Health Authority, how far will you carry this message? Back to your leaders, and back to the government. And will you ever listen to us?”


– Dinee Tsoh Gees (Richard Williams), Lake Babine Nation; N

By sharing the sheer number of deaths of loved ones that participants have witnessed within their lifetimes, participants’ voices again highlight the toll of settler colonialism and the degree to which life in what is now known as “Canada” forces First Nations to forego their land-based lifeways:

“There were 16 of us and there’s only five of us left. A lot of them passed due to different types of cancers. That was the toughest for me, to see family members go. I had three sisters go within a month due to cancer.”

– Namaskas (Andrew Johnson), Wuikinuxv Nation; VC

Participants from all regions spoke about experiencing the loss of language and culture. Some linked this loss directly to the time that they or their loved ones spent at residential schools:



“I’m a residential school survivor. I lost a lot of myself. One main thing is my language. The impact was so great that I never taught my children. I never taught my grandchildren either. That’s always a sore spot for me, because I wanted them to know who they are (crying) and be proud of who they are.”

– Les’pet (Doreen Point), Tla’amin Nation; VC

“My mom and dad went to residential school, nine years each. My dad was in Kuper Island and my mom was in St. Mary’s Mission. They were punished for speaking the language or doing anything in our traditional cultural ways and they were made fun of. I think a lot of us know what happened during that time. So, when my mom and dad got married, they said they weren’t going to teach us all of our language and our ways because they didn’t want us to be punished or made fun of.”

– Siyamex (Virginia Peters), Sts’ailes Nation; FS

One participant explained the impacts that multiple, compounding traumas had on transmission of teachings from one generation to the next:

“I was just about crying when she was telling me about the trauma of her life. There was just the two of us and she was telling me everything that happened and how it has delayed the teachings from being passed down. After she went over all the rough stuff, she looked at her grandchildren and everything started coming out.”

– Thul-Se-Mia (Amelia Paul), Xa’xtsa Nation; VC


Participants also reflected on modern life, including the lure of screen time and constant communication, and the impact it has on cultural engagement and ways of life:

“Thousands of years ago our ancestors didn’t have these devices, they didn’t have these distractions. We were a lot stronger mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, because we didn’t have all of these things taking away from our culture, our ways of life.”

– C’tičtəna’at (Mavis Pierre), Katzie First Nation; FS



One Fraser Salish gathering participant talked about the loss of ancestral names connected to land. Her words demonstrate how cultural practices, such as naming, are continuing in new ways that make sense in present-day realities:



“We really utilize the culture and spirituality to help the people [where I work now] to be whole and well again. When we say who we are, it’s usually an ancestral name that is connected to land. That’s where we come from and there’s a trend today now that we’re losing all of the ancestral names from the past. And so, we’re coming up with first-generation names and that goes according to the character of a person.”

– Siyamex (Virginia Peters), Sts’ailes Nation; FS

Many participants expressed sadness and grief that so many Elders and hereditary Chiefs have been lost in the community. This goes beyond the loss of family members and extends to loss of sacred knowledge, language, and wisdom relied upon by the whole community:

“We’ve had many hereditary Chiefs that are Elders. We only have, probably about six or seven now. Over 3,000 members, only about six or seven Elders, actual Elders who are over 70. I myself am an Elder and I’m 62. I consider myself a young man still compared to other Elders that I’ve seen.”

– Dinee Tsoh Gees (Richard Williams), Lake Babine Nation; N

Participants also discussed the loss of culturally significant objects, for example a drum or talking stick. Specific losses that participants discussed were the result of fire and theft. It is important to understand that for participants these are profound losses that will be continued to be felt during their lifetime, in the broader context of settler colonial destruction and theft of First Nations cultural items. Destruction of ceremonial items including regalia took place as part of the implementation of bans on ceremony under the racist *Indian Act*. Important ceremonial items and art were also stolen to populate museums and collections across the world. However, there is work being done to repatriate these items across the province.


Experiencing loss of land was both a historical and contemporary experience affecting access to traditional foods and medicines. Participants talked about how historical events contributed to loss of land. For example, one participant at the Northern Region gathering spoke about the colonial merger of two communities for the convenience of the Indian Agent:

“This territory that you’re sitting on is not our traditional territory – 1957 is when this territory came about, and we have to bring our people back to our traditional territory and our traditional ways.”



– Derek McDonald, Lake Babine Nation; N

However, it is important to understand that this loss is not confined to history but is ongoing. The same participant went on to talk about lack of representation within settler governments and institutions in the present day:



“We don’t have anybody out there in Victoria. They don’t want to listen. Things have to be done in a right way, in a good way. There’s a lot more I want to say to the provincial and federal governments, and to the RCMP ... We all have to talk about things in a better way, to be honest about things.”

– Niwh Syalh (Ronnie Alec), Lake Babine Nation; N

Other participants spoke about loss of land in the context of the present-day resource-extraction industry taking place in traditional territories:


“I really worry about all of the loss. The loss of our land, our territory, the increasing demand for oil and all of this in our [Burrard] inlet. It scares me really deeply. Those changes are very, very scary and I worry about their impacts on our environment.”

– Qwenot (Angela George), Səlilwətaʔt (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation; VC

“It’s getting hard to access our resources because of the regulations and rules that we have to abide by. A lot of the areas where people would get their clams have been alienated. The pollution from the mills and the township of Powell River and the sewer system ... so our people are going to the extremes of our territories to access our resources.”

– Yazhun (John Louie), Tla’amin Nation; VC

These larger issues manifested in barriers to engaging in land-based practices and gathering traditional medicines and foods in everyday life:



“I can’t go strip cedar in my own territory, I can’t go bathe in my own territory. If I want to do these things, if I want to heal myself and I want to feed myself and my family, I have to go elsewhere and go to other people’s territory and ask them permission to go on their territory and use their territory so that I may bring things back to my family. I see that as taking my identity, and a part of my healing journey is trying to figure out how to get that back and absorb all the knowledge that I can possibly get from anywhere that I go.”

– Sandra Fossella, Musqueam Nation; VC

Yet, as we see in the next section, the Canadian settler colonial system has not achieved its goal of genocide. BC First Nations are still here and continue to claim and assert their identity and territorial connection.



FIGURE 4: ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE: CULTURAL RESURGENCE SUB-THEME

Cultural resurgence is understood to mean First Nations-led resurgence and reclamation of First Nations ways of knowing and being. This includes engagement with drumming, singing and art (e.g., weaving, beading and carving). Participants shared that the process of cultural resurgence included finding strength, as well as passing knowledge to the next generation (intergenerational knowledge transmission).

For First Nations communities, strength and resilience is rooted within passing on and practising traditions and culture. Resilience rooted in culture supports healing from the past and present addictions and trauma. Elder Siyamex (Virginia Peters) spoke about the strength that came with resurgence of ceremonies and cultural practices in recent decades, and how engaging with Elders was the first step to reinforcing a way of life grounded in their teachings:

“Now that our longhouses are alive again, a lot of those teachings are coming back. When we first restarted in 1970, our community longed for the Elders to come and teach us how to carry ourselves in this kind of life. And it’s so good – once we opened that door, then it started to build up again. So, I think what you’re doing is opening another door and these things will come to pass because the Elders did come – they gave the teachings. Then all the other doors did begin opening with the coming of the gifts that help us to be stronger, and we learn to live by the ‘snoyiuth,’ the teachings, and learn all of the Seven Sacred Teachings too, and this is what we all use.”

– Siyamex (Virginia Peters), Sts’ailes Nation; FS

Other Knowledge Keepers shared both successes and challenges in passing on knowledge of the lands to future generations:

“Traditionally, before, we used to set net and do things on our own, but nowadays all we do is go to the Fort Babine fence and pick up our fish there. So how are our kids going to learn how to set net? That has to come back. I think we should bring all that back to our grandchildren and our children for their own use. If we want to live off the land, we have to teach them the proper way. And also for the Elders, I think we’re next in line for the Elders, and we do need a lot of help with the traditional things we have to teach the young ones. Some of us don’t have the things that we need to teach the kids with, so we rely on the younger adults to help us out. And a few of them are helping, but they also have their own jobs, their own business, and their own families to take care of. We still need somebody to come around and check up on us.”

– Sa Ts’ana Deelee (Mary Ann West), Lake Babine Nation; N







“I started working on developing an art history curriculum for K-12, teaching our history through art. Our children are so tech-savvy that I start off the class with a PowerPoint presentation. So if I’m teaching about symbolism and how to speak through symbols, which would be our pictographs and our petroglyphs, I would start the PowerPoint with little emojis ... and texting symbols, then ask the kids what they meant. For example, ‘What’s a colon and bracket?’ And everyone says, ‘That’s a smiley face!’ Or, ‘What does lol mean?’ They answer, ‘Laugh out loud!’ Then I tell them how this is a language of symbols that their generation has developed, and you can communicate to each other through these symbols. Now if you rewind 1,500-2,000 years, we also had symbols ... pictographs and petroglyphs. I taught them how to create stories through symbols, then moved into crests, what our crests mean and what they represent. Then, into telling stories through totems and teaching them the language of art, including getting them to carve their own paintbrushes.”

– Ximia (Dionne Paul), Shíshálh Nation; VC

“We honour our spirituality. So it’s time we move away from that shame and negativity to something that will really enlighten and make proud the next generations. It seems to me a real loss that I don’t know my language. I’ve become strong in other ways but I still don’t know my language. The kids are learning it, but there are only five fluent speakers left in my community; it almost went extinct but now it’s being brought back. My daughter is one of the people who really went and learned the language and the linguistics so that she can speak it and read it and teach it. My daughter has been teaching it in the school for 20 years, but when they come home from school they have no one to share that language with. I think our connection to the land will help us as people see that our connection to the land means a lot to us, and if we put together everything the Creator gave to us we can carry some dignity and be really proud of who we are.”



– Siyamex (Virginia Peters), Sts’ailes Nation; FS

Nation-based governance systems that are rooted in First Nations laws support intergenerational knowledge transmission and build strength in the community:

“You know, we have a great responsibility to carry those forward and there’s a lot hidden in every single one of those messages and values ... I’m for community development and education and our own ministry systems. We have to believe in our ways and fight for that strong belief so that we’re following our laws. Not the Western laws; our laws trump those laws.”

– Qwenot (Angela George), Səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation; VC



“We are verbal people, culture is only passed down from word of mouth. I was raised by my grandmother and grandfather, and I teach my language and culture to the next generations. My grandparents held onto their culture through residential school. We lost a lot but we also have a lot here still with us. If it’s not spoken, it’s kept in the background.”

– Ay:iye (Stanley Greene), Sts’ailes First Nation; FS

Participants shared that a critical element of cultural resurgence was engaging in traditional healing and land-based healing related to the cultural disruption detailed in the previous sub-theme. In summary, participants’ voices across the regions echoed the message that their connection to land gives them strength by allowing them to know where they belong and how to live on the land. Their languages carry the knowledge of Nations, giving them strength through identity, belonging and purpose.



LIL’WAT NATION – VANCOUVER COASTAL REGION



## 5.2 Land And Water Wellness

LAND AND WATER WELLNESS MEANS THE WELLNESS OF THE LAND AND WATER IS OUR (FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES') WELLNESS.

Participants at the Fraser Salish gathering and Vancouver Coastal gathering described the all-encompassing role land plays for their ways of life:

“So, the first question was, ‘How does connection to land, water and territory influence health and wellness - mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional.’ That question doesn’t make any sense to me personally. That’s who I am. I am the land. I am the water. I am the territory. Part of, parts of me, and the whole of me. There’s no disconnect between me and whatever territory, no matter where I am on earth.”

– Knowledge Keeper; VC

“First Nations have been connected to land for centuries over so many generations. It’s a spiritual connection through the land, through ceremony, through ancestral grounds ... everything in the ecosystem is balanced, and everything is one. Think of First Nations as a part of that circle—of being within that as one ... We/First Nations have depended on the land and everything for centuries ... The land has played a vital role.”

– Tyneshia Commodore, Soowahlie and Lummi First Nations; FS



Lands, waters and territories were described as the foundations for existence, and therefore represented wealth beyond a monetary value:

“We’re really rich. We’re so rich. We’re not rich with money but we’re rich with what we have [gesture towards territory]. Our knowledge, we have so much.”

– Kaxte’ (Yvonne Marie) Tumangday, Sts’ailes First Nation; FS

From this perspective, taking care of the land is taking care of oneself, and in turn the land takes care of the people:



“Growing up, I was taught that as long as the land is beautiful, you’ll be beautiful. So, we have to take care of our land.”

– Qwao’lqwao7 (Archie Manuel), N’Quatqua Nation; VC

“My healing came a lot with our tradition. Our cedar, and our water, our qua-ah. So whenever I feel heavy, or down, I go to the water, the creek. There I go and sit and talk with the cedar tree. If it weren’t for our medicines that our ancestors left behind, I would not be here.”

– Montah (Beverly Dixon), Shíshálh Nation; VC

Participants emphasized that health and wellness journeys are intimately tied to the work of upholding natural laws and maintaining good relations with Mother Earth:

“The roots are all connected underneath. Once the trees, the roots that are holding up the earth are dying ... Once the gas and the oil have been sucked away underneath us, everything will be dry. Then Mother Earth will shake. That’s why we hear a little bit of tremor here and there, because that’s what’s coming. The money is not important. It’s the land, the trees, the earth, Mother Earth. Those are the things that we need.”

– Niwh Syalh (Ronnie Alec), Lake Babine Nation; N

“I find that we’re in reaction mode all the time. We’re always in this place of reaction. We react to this, we react to that, we react to something else - we need to become proactive people. We need to put things in place that make us strong, that we know are right. The laws of the land, the stewardship of the land, we’ve been given these things.”

– Edwin Bikadi, Lil’wat Nation; VC

Discussions in this theme fell into three sub-themes: land and water stewardship, colonial land harms, and knowing the land.



STÓ:LŌ NATION – FRASER SALISH REGION

# LAND AND WATER WELLNESS

The wellness of the land and water is our (First Nations peoples') wellness

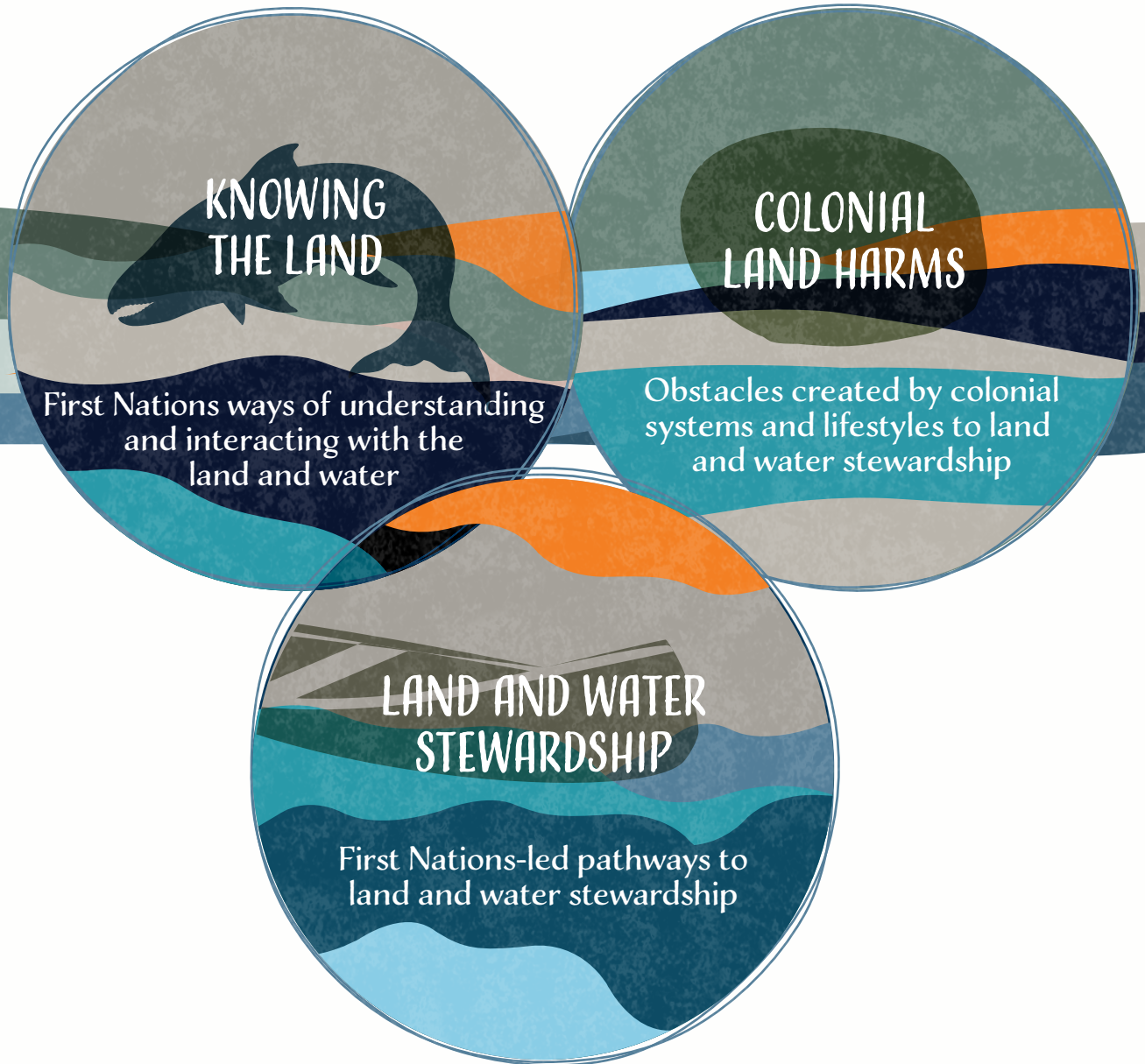


FIGURE 2: OVERVIEW OF LAND & WATER WELLNESS THEME & SUB-THEMES



FIGURE 5: LAND AND WATER WELLNESS: KNOWING THE LAND SUB-THEME

This sub-theme focused on First Nations ways of understanding and interacting with the land and water. Narratives reflected that identity and land were deeply connected for participants at the gatherings – that who they are and where they come from are one and the same.

“We’re all reflections of the land we come from. Whether it’s the mountains, or the lakes, or the rivers, or the ocean, we reflect that in our language and how we dress ourselves, and in our understanding of things. Because that all came from the earth.”

– Tsets Waunexw (Gabriel George), Səlilwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) Nation; VC

Participants spoke specifically of how different plants, animals and geographical features have shaped the collective identity of their Nation and are fundamental to their existence:

“To this day ... we’re salmon people. Fish people. So, in the springtime, we go out to Babine Lake. In the fall, we were always in Donald’s Landing doing salmon. Winter time, we set net on the ice. Fall time, we also set net for char and we fish. I help participate in a lot of events to show others how we did things. To me it’s very important that we don’t lose them. That’s the main reason I’m here to hopefully share some of that information.”

– Jason Charlie, Lake Babine Nation; N

Another common message was how these plant, animal, land and water relations offered gifts that allowed participants to take care of their physical, mental, spiritual and emotional health and well-being:

“I have spent time up at the mountain by the creek praying and meditating because that is something I have learnt from our culture is one of the ways to take care of my mental health.”


– C’tičtəna’at (Mavis Pierre), Katzie First Nation; FS



“My family has property and my grandma’s tree is on there. That tree is old, as old as my family. All my siblings, all my family go there when we’re hurt, when we’re upset, when we’re missing our grandma—our matriarch, the one who held us up, the one who held our family together. We go there, all us, we go there on our own time and we go and we talk to her through the tree, and I know some people think that’s funny, but a lot of people go there and they need that. To talk. Maybe we give a tree a hug, to bring ourselves back down to earth and connect back to the land and

where we come from. And that’s what my family does, we go to our grandma’s tree. It’s a cedar tree. We go there all the time. It’s the one thing on the property that hasn’t been touched, hasn’t been farmed, hasn’t been anything—is that tree. It’s the thing that’s standing strong in the middle of everything.”

– Siatlesten (Lakota Julian), Skwah and Matsqui First Nations; FS



“We use the cedar and make tea out of it. When you’re in mourning, you can bathe in it; when you’re hurt or sad or lonely, you can wash your clothes, walls, and furniture with it as the scent of cedar tea uplifts your house. We put the cedar above our door so that when people walk through they have good feelings, and only good feelings come into our house. And like Lakota was saying, we go by the cedar tree and sit on the east side where the sun comes up and ask for strength to carry on each and every day in a good way.”

– Kaxte’ (Yvonne Marie) Tumangday, Sts’ailes First Nation; FS


Knowing the land was something to be grateful for, as well as something to have a sense of responsibility for. This was emphasized by a participant from the Vancouver Coastal gathering:

“I just want to say I’m really grateful that I really believe in our ways, the laws of the land are all really keys. That’s fundamental to everything that we do, in the work that I do.”

– Qwenot (Angela George), Səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation; VC

Participants in the Fraser Salish region expressed that a common belief for Stó:lō people is that everything is interconnected, and this concept was relayed in the word “letsemot.” Knowledge Keeper Siyamex (Virginia Peters) says that “being letsemot” means working together in a really good way to be stronger because the more people can get moving together with a good heart, a good mind, and a good spirit, the more they are able to make things smoother so that we can accomplish more. This interconnection is a part of the spiritual and ceremonial roots that ground Stó:lō people’s ways of living. Well-being is impacted by land for the Stó:lō because of the deep understanding that people are connected to all things, living and not, to maintain the balance of the land, water, territory and self. Importantly, the land was not seen as a distinct entity separate from the people; for them, everything is connected.

Participants shared some of the depth of their understanding about their territories and the reciprocal relationships represented in the land and waters, including the interconnectedness revealed through knowledge of the food chain:



“We are here right now in a young-growth vegetation area – a prime area for rabbits. Wherever rabbits come, the lynx, wolves, wolverines, marten, fisher, and everything follows. Other animals winter here too – there are grouse walking through here right now. See, there’s more tracks in here too, looks like a lynx.”

– Jason Charlie, Lake Babine Nation; N



A gathering participant from the Northern Region spoke of the importance of the connections of tree root systems to the land, including holding the land together and the threat of earthquakes without them. Another from the same gathering spoke about the importance of trees to animal habitats:

“Trees are important, you got the trees in here ... if they overlogged this area, it wouldn’t be like this. The more they logged in these kinds of area, it pushed the animals away.”

– Jason Charlie, Lake Babine Nation; N



These concerns were echoed in relation to the health of waters. This quote highlights concerns about the creation of man-made spawning channels, as opposed to natural rivers, in terms of salmon spawning:

“We have two spawning channels and we went through one of them. There’s another one that’s a couple of hours down the lake. The spawning channel is man-made and they were finding enhanced salmon when their birth place is in the spawning channel. They find them a lot smaller than the natural fish that spawn in the natural rivers. So, there’s big concerns about a lot of things.”

– Gathering Participant, Lake Babine Nation; N



LIL’WAT NATION – VANCOUVER COASTAL REGION

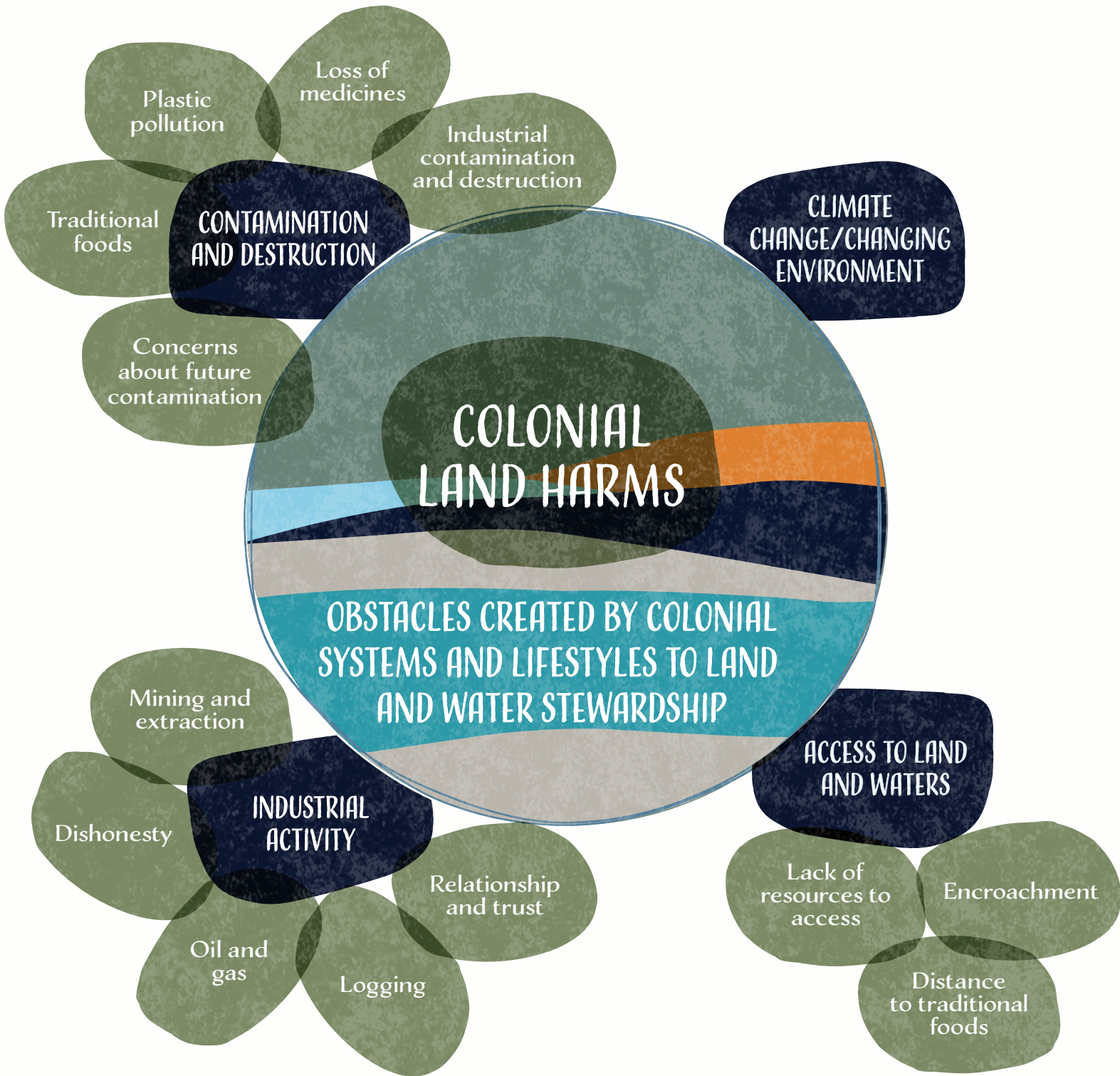


FIGURE 6: LAND AND WATER WELLNESS: COLONIAL LAND HARMS SUB-THEME

Another sub-theme focused on the obstacles to First Nations land and water stewardship created by colonial systems and lifestyles. Participants across regions emphasized the linkages between the health of lands and waters, and the health of people and Nations. For example, in discussing the impact of pollution from a major event on fish, berries, shellfish and seaweed, one participant spoke about both the land and the people weeping together. First Nations Peoples have a spiritual relationship to the land that provides a connection to their ancestors, culture and history. The health of their land and water is not only central to their physical wellness but also to their cultural and spiritual wellness, providing them with a positive sense of self and belonging. Settler colonialism has forcibly displaced First Nations Peoples from their ancestral lands and polluted their territories, inhibited and prevented participation in land-based cultural activities, and negatively affected their health and wellness. The following quote highlights the strong impacts on emotional wellness caused by witnessing settler colonial harms to the land, including both fear and sadness:

“Those changes [heavy industry pollution in Burrard Inlet] are very, very scary and I worry about the impacts on our environment. To me, the heart of health and wellness is our connection to the land, our connection to the water.”

– Qwenot (Angela George), Səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation; VC

As well, current assessments of the impacts of industrial activity on environments are inadequate and problematic. Settler colonial protocols lack a wholistic way of understanding and assessing potential harms to the land and water, and miss or disregard the true impacts on animal and plant relatives.

“Trees are important. The more they log, the more animals are pushed away. Mining or anything like that, impacts the lands, it just pushes everything away, and you will never see anything or catch anything in these areas. That is something we have noticed in our areas, where they have logged, they have done all these kind of studies where they say they do habitat assessments, stuff like that. I think they need to go beyond those buffer zones ... they need to go further.”

– Jason Charlie, Lake Babine Nation; N

Another way settler colonial violence manifested in participants’ lives was through reduced access to land and waters. Participants spoke about the linkages between this appropriation and the extractive industry:

“They took us from our lands, put us on reserves, and took all our trees, now they’re running gas through.”

– Dinee Tsoh Gees (Richard Williams), Lake Babine Nation; N

Another participant mentioned disconnection from land, and therefore traditional foods that feed the spirit, caused by forced displacement and urban development of her lands:

“Myself, coming from the city and being a survivor of residential school, it’s been tough. I envy all of you people from up this way. It’s so easy to go out your back door and get your food. I have to go to the Superstore, or IGA, or one of the big stores down there.”

– Thelma Stogan, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nation; VC

Barriers to accessing land and waters were compounded by jurisdictional issues, with consequences for access to traditional food and medicines.

“We have to sneak around in our mountains at home to do our baths. We have to ask the Forestry [Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development] for permission to do this and that, and sometimes mountain bikers come by or hikers. They’re all over – it’s hard.”

– Tsets Waunexw (Gabriel George), Səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation; VC





FIGURE 7: LAND AND WATER WELLNESS: LAND AND WATER STEWARDSHIP SUB-THEME

This sub-theme addressed First Nations-led pathways to land and water stewardship, which are rooted in First Nations sovereignty, rights and jurisdiction, and governed by First Nations laws and legal systems. The First Peoples of territories throughout BC have the right to steward, use and feel connected with the land. Throughout the gatherings, participants spoke about how stewardship responsibility was deeply linked with gratitude for what the land and waters provide:

“Everything around us—we have to take care of it. Every rock, every pebble, every tree. Be grateful for everything. Every breath that you take. You have to honour that. And the water that nourishes you and cleanses you.”

– Kaxte’ (Yvonne Marie) Tumangday, Sts’ailes First Nation; FS

Mixed with a strong sense of gratitude and responsibility for lands and waters was deep frustration with settler colonial laws that interfere with practising First Nations stewardship over territories. BC First Nations’ territories stretch across every inch of what is known as the province of British Columbia. Reserve borders are a settler colonial artifact that do not represent the ways these territories have been governed and used since time immemorial. The racist Indian Reserve System was created to help control and confine Indigenous Peoples by Canadian governments that wished to take the land as their own. As reflected in the quote below, BC First Nations have been forced to turn to the courts to assert these rights:

“The laws of the land, the stewardship of the land, we’ve been given these things. Satsan (Herb George) won the *Delgamuukw* (legal case) with a team of people from Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en. The *Delgamuukw* case says that oral history is represented through title and rights. If you have an oral history of a time and a place, you can connect those altogether and have title and rights to that area. It took them 20-some years to fight and win that case in the Supreme Court.”

– Edwin Bikadi, Lil’wat Nation; VC

Participants talked about the profound tensions that emerged between BC First Nations ways of being in connection with lands and waters, and imposed settler colonial perspectives that view land as a utilitarian resource:

“We want to bring the people together to clean this lake. We talked about the Granisle Mine just behind us. A little further west is Bell’s copper mine - two open-pit mines. And just recently they were trying to build another one on Morrison Lake, 20 miles from the Bell Mine. I’m glad that the political leaders put a stop to that. Because the lake just can’t take any more of this. We need to protect our salmon stock and the animals. Because everything is connected together. We need to stand for them.”

– Gathering Participant, Lake Babine Nation; N

Unlike settler colonial wealth systems built upon and dependent on extraction, participants reflected relational perspectives where wealth lies in carrying ancestral knowledge and being able to call on that knowledge for the benefit of themselves and others:

“I’m especially grateful for our Auntie and Uncle, our Elders here who’ve downloaded a lot. Invested a lot into me and my mate. We’re really grateful for that, the beauty of that. You know we’re rich for what you’ve shared with us, and it makes me tremble when I think about this to spend the time with those of you.”

– Qwenot (Angela George), Səlilwataʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation; VC

Rather than extracting resources from the land, being in relation with the land was possible through engagement with land-based practices. This is highlighted in participants’ discussion of food security through (re)connecting with First Nations food systems. Participants shared their knowledge of lands, waters, and the inhabitants of both, while fishing, hunting, and gathering traditional foods with the FNHA study team. Collecting and eating foods from the land was understood to have a spiritual component that goes far beyond simple nutrition.



STÓ:LŌ NATION – FRASER SALISH REGION



### 5.3 Accountability

THE THIRD THEME IDENTIFIED WAS ACCOUNTABILITY, I.E., “TAKING ACTIONABLE AND REPORTABLE STEPS TOWARD ADDRESSING WHAT’S SHARED BETWEEN FIRST NATIONS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS.”

The previous two sections touched on the tensions between lands and waters as sources of identity, spirituality, and cultural knowledge on the one hand, and the impacts of settler colonialism on these foundations of First Nations ways of life on the other. The overarching message in this theme was the imperative of change: to find a new path of togetherness with settler Canadians and institutions, one that holds up First Nations ways of doing and being in connection with the land. Participants recognized that the status quo is a reflection of unaddressed hurts and a society out of balance with adverse impacts for people, as well as plant and animal relations:

“If somebody’s hurting, it’s because we failed them, and everybody needs to get together and figure out what their spirit is, what it is that we need to give them.”

–Gélpcal (Ashley Joseph), Lil’wat Nation; VC

“It’s like a food chain. When one animal eats it, then he gets contaminated. Contamination down the land from one food to all – we have concerns about that. So, our berries and everything gets affected in one way or another. Water quality, our wildlife, how we survive off this land, are all important to us, and we want to keep going on living in a healthy way but we’re concerned about these things. We want to make sure that the message is being brought across with our concerns.”

– Fred Williams, Lake Babine Nation; N

Participants emphasized that continuing on the current path was untenable, and that individuals must take responsibility and accountability to be the best they can be:

“It’s not just important to know the words, you’ve got to walk them.”

– Ay:iye (Stanley Greene), Sts’ailes First Nation; FS

One way towards accountability was highlighted in the following quote, which reflects the principles of cultural humility and reciprocity:

“When we bring people from outside into our community, like doctors, I think when we’re advertising a job it should say right in the advertisement that since you’re going to be coming to a First Nations community, you should be willing to respect that we have traditional ways you have to be willing to learn – so that you could bring it into your practices and so that our people will have it in their daily lives.”

– Nuwacta (Elizabeth Humchitt), Heiltsuk Nation; VC

Two important sub-themes reflect that during the gatherings, participants gave clear direction to the FNHA via the research team (being accountable to each other) and more broadly, considerations of how settlers and First Nations can move forward together (reconciliation).



# ACCOUNTABILITY

Taking actionable steps towards addressing what's shared between First Nations and other institutions



FIGURE 8: OVERVIEW OF ACCOUNTABILITY



FIGURE 9: ACCOUNTABILITY: BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO EACH OTHER SUB-THEME

The sub-theme “being accountable to each other” reflects the concerns, needs, goals, deep desires and hopes the Knowledge Keepers and youth generously shared with the research team that require action. A representative from each region provided a traditional word that best describes this sub-theme and what it means to their Nation. Vancouver Coastal Health provided two words: “Taow” and “Snoweith.” “Taow” means “to encompass our teachings, knowledge and protocols when we’re in ceremony,” and “Snoweith” means “the spirit of our people and all the teachings.” Fraser Salish provided the words “Yóyes qé,” which mean “working / gathering together.” An overview of this feedback is presented in this section.

One participant in the Northern Region gathering said they hoped the FNHA could take on a valuable role in partnering with Nations on ecological health, recognizing its deep connection with physical health. One example was about the lake and its fish, as this is a vital part of the wellness of their future generations:

“All of our trout we catch, they’re all sick, and it’d be nice for the First Nations Health Authority to help us clean out the lake for our kids, including my daughter and her kids and my daughter’s kids further down the line.”

– Shane George, Lake Babine Nation; N



Others spoke about the changes they were already beginning to see through day-to-day resurgence of First Nations ways and cultural practices. It is important to acknowledge the genocidal attempts to eradicate First Nations culture and spirituality, especially through banning their traditional ceremonies and removing their children from their families and cultural/territorial birthrights and forcing them into the residential school and child welfare systems. Yet, as highlighted by one participant in the Fraser Salish gathering, First Nations have worked tirelessly to maintain identity and self-determination, and this is reflected in the growing number of First Nations-led programs and services. One participant expressed gratitude that the FNHA, as the largest self-determined First Nations health and wellness organization in the province, is working to remove persistent barriers to upholding First Nations perspectives in health and wellness services.

“By the First Nations Health Authority doing this, you’re taking the binds from our people – you’re taking the tape off of our mouths, and the cover off of our eyes, and the bindings off of our ankles. You’re removing those things when you go to our people and want to talk to them and hear what they want to share, and it’s not an agenda it’s what’s coming from your heart – and our people have great love.”



– Kaxte' (Yvonne Marie) Tumangday, Sts'ailes First Nation; FS

Another important perspective shared was that being in a circle talking about connection to land was good for health and wellness in and of itself:

“FNHA, I truly thank you for coming and having ears to listen to what we need and want. Today, I’m not a survivor, I’m a celebrator. I’m now about to celebrate life. Because you’ve given me the tools, the direction ... I have got so many gifts from this circle. Including written material that I can take home and share. So, I’m truly glad to be here.”

– Appa-Ka (Daniel Peters), Skatin Nation; VC



However, not all reactions were positive, with some participants expressing frustration with the time constraints of the research process. Others noted the opportunity to extend this particular effort to gather ecological knowledge to other Nations around the province.



LIL’WAT NATION – VANCOUVER COASTAL REGION

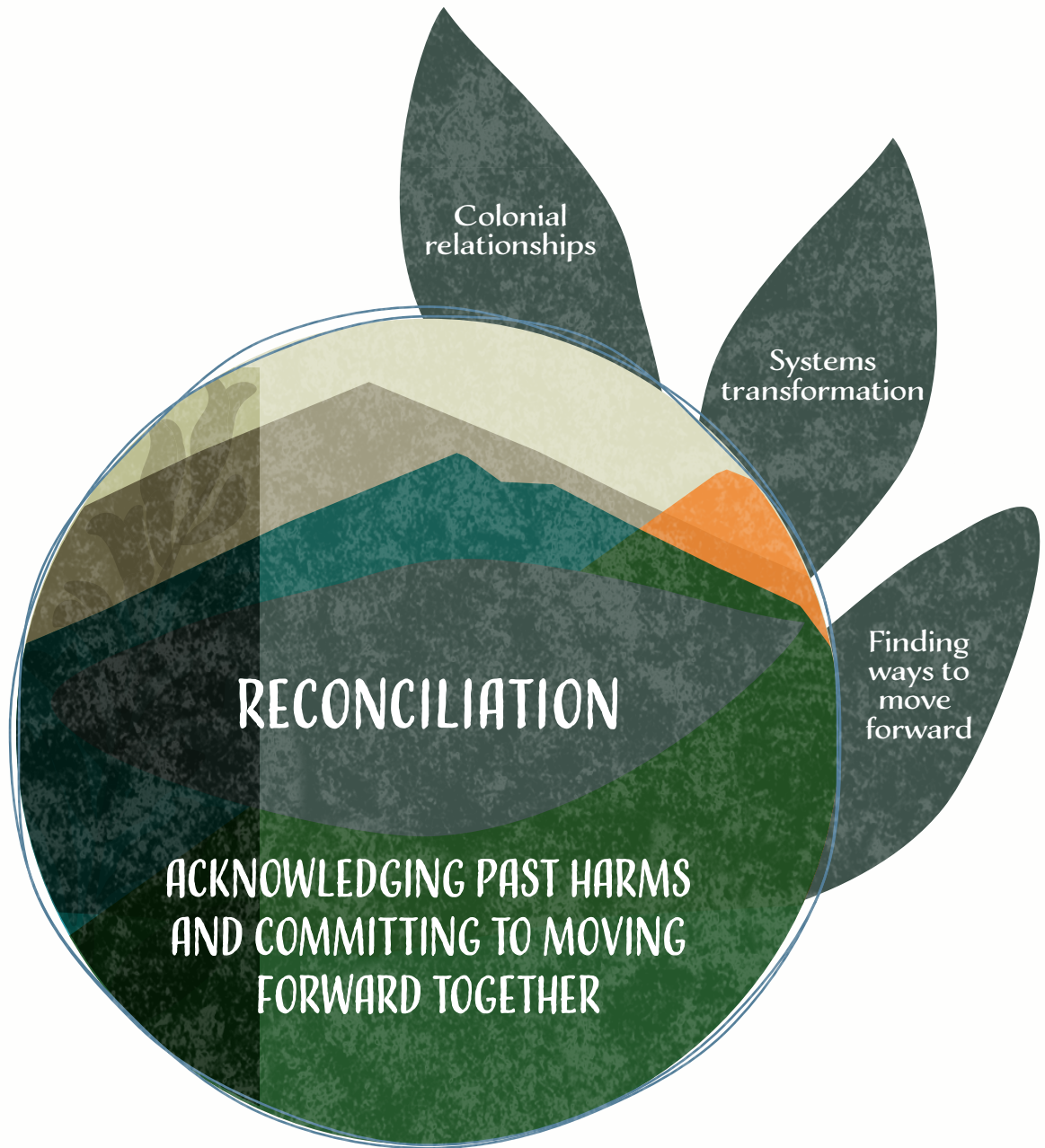


FIGURE 10: ACCOUNTABILITY: RECONCILIATION SUB-THEME

The sub-theme “reconciliation” focused on the importance of acknowledging past harms and committing to moving forward together. Participants reflected that while reconciliation is important, it is not a straightforward path. As Elder Dineetsogees (Richard Williams) highlighted, the understanding of what reconciliation means in practice often differs between First Nations and settler colonial governments:

“Reconciliation, what is it? Can anybody explain what reconciliation is? Live in harmony, reunite, and make amends. We cannot even begin to reconcile with the white people because we don’t know how to live amongst one another. We must have reconciliation here in this Nation before we start reconciling with government. [...] I’ve never seen anybody come to our Nation [after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s report was released] and say, ‘This is the way we’re going to reconcile, do this, do that. This is the way you reconcile and live in harmony.’ I’ve never seen anything. It’s just a word. And now they’re here again, and this time blockades, [saying] ‘We did reconcile with you, what’s the matter with you?’ Reconciliation will need to become a new word for them to back them off. We’ve got to see eye to eye. [...] My suggestion is, find us a way to reconcile, here in the Nation of Lake Babine; you have all these counsellors, psychologists, people who know how to heal. Help us, show us ways, how to start, where to start to a new direct reconciliation.”

– Dinee Tsoh Gees (Richard Williams), Lake Babine Nation; N

Finding ways to move forward requires healing, respectful commitment and deep listening. Participants agreed that community healing from the deep trauma that continues to be felt through generations needs to be done before the relationship with settlers can be healed, and this requires accessible mental health services, not just payments. Participants were also clear that finding ways to move forward together was vital for future generations:

“They started paying us for the wrongs they had done to us. The last payments are still happening, people are still wanting their payment. You will not buy it off us. You cannot buy off us what you put us through. It’s forever embedded. Until we heal, until we look in the mirror and say I have enough. I want to put this behind and move better, build a better future for our grandchildren.”

– Dinee Tsoh Gees (Richard Williams), Lake Babine Nation; N

Participants expressed that there had to be respectful commitment by health system partners, industries, and First Nations communities to collaborate for the health and wellness of the land and people in finding ways to move forward. Participants also noted that to find the way forward, the truths of past and present harms had to be shared, highlighting the importance of communities coming together to piece together their stories and connect:



“I’m a weaver, I’m a beader, and I just told my aunt yesterday that everything I do I want to it to be done right – so if something comes out on my work that doesn’t look right to me, I have to pull it apart. That pulling it apart gives me a better understanding of how to put it back together. I feel like by doing things like this when we come back and we connect, it’s putting that back together but also the stories of the residential schools, the losses of identity. Understanding that bit is a huge part of understanding how we’re going to go forward.”

– Sandra Fossella, xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam) Nation; VC

Listening to First Nations voices is also a requirement voiced strongly by gathering participants. True listening means that voices are respected and recommendations are incorporated and acted upon, rather than interpreted solely by the listener without consultation and confirmation from the speakers. This is critical, not only for both sides to truly reconcile, but also for collective survival into the future:

“We cannot get rid of them, therefore we have to learn to live with them. We have to find proper ways to live with them. Not listening to the First Nations is not the proper way. You will self-destruct and bring us with you. Your destruction is the reason our Elders are standing on highways stopping all of Canada.”

– Niwh Syalh, (Ronnie Alec), Lake Babine Nation; N

Shifting to a wellness system that fosters meaningful collaboration and partnerships between settler colonial systems and First Nations is imperative. The sacred knowledge, teachings, and experiences were generously shared with the expectation of upholding a respectful balance to our Indigenous values and voices. Careful considerations towards gathering First Nations in BC’s voices should always aim to intentionally reform and uphold how health systems acknowledge, interact and respect Indigenous Peoples’ and communities’ needs to address ongoing system inequities and barriers.

“One of the biggest things when we are going to walk together, is accepting each other. Or, if you go to see a doctor, you go to see a specialist for this and a specialist for that, it’s incorporating our specialists. We have healers, we have Knowledge Keepers, we have Medicine Walkers; it’s accepting that and bringing it in and using it all, rather than it being, how do we incorporate this into the Western society, how do we bring our knowledge and push it and shove it into something that’s already been created.”

– Sandra Fossella, xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam) Nation; VC

“I believe that we do need to incorporate our traditional ways into everything we have in our community - including the medical system, the counselling. This needs to be a decision that our community makes together. When we advertise a job for a teacher, a doctor, a nurse, a dentist, everything. I think that once we do that, that's going to really bring true healing to everyone ... because we are going to bring [our traditional ways] back to our people through everything in our community. We need to bring our power and voice back into everything that we run.”

— Nuwacta (Elizabeth Humchitt), Heiltsuk Nation; VC



LAKE BABINE NATION- NORTHERN REGION



## 6 DISCUSSION

### 6.1 We Walk Together findings in the context of BC's changing landscapes

#### BC FIRST NATIONS' RIGHTS: STEWARDS OF LANDS AND WATERS

For millennia, Indigenous Peoples have been stewards of the lands and waters, and have lived in harmony with nature, thriving together. According to Article 25 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* (2007), "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources, and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard." Indigenous Peoples' connection to land, water and territory is vital as it provides the lifeblood and connective tissue of their lives, identities, relations, cultures, and ancestors. This connection is honoured and respected by Indigenous Peoples, and they have the right to maintain, strengthen, and sustain this connection for future generations. The phrase "All my Relations" is commonly used by Indigenous Peoples to represent that everything in the universe, past and present, is interconnected and has meaning. Healthy, balanced ecosystems are viewed and should be protected as restorative sources of healing and strength. The health and wellness journeys of First Nations people are intimately tied to the work of upholding natural laws and maintaining good relations with Mother Earth. For First Nations in BC, strong and intimate connection to lands and waters are the lifeblood of ongoing work to revitalize and heal.

The three regional gatherings with First Nations in BC reinforced the fact that connection to land and waters is an integral component of their collective health and well-being. This connection includes advocacy for and protection, preservation and healing of the land, waters and all the life within them.

We Walk Together participants spoke about laws, histories, teachings and knowledge shared on the land and passed through generations since time immemorial – alive, active, and known today. They emphasized that knowing who you are and where you come from is vital to being healthy and well as a First Nations person. Therefore, First Nations people in BC continue to advocate for the recognition and upholding of their inherent rights to be stewards of the land – land that remains unceded and was never legally surrendered. Yet, the historical and ongoing impacts of settler colonialism continue to disrupt First Nations peoples' connection to land and their health and wellness.

#### DISRUPTION AND DISPOSSESSION CAUSED BY SETTLER COLONIALISM

Settler colonialism in BC is underpinned by over 150 years of environmental dispossession, which has systematically reduced First Nations' access to their traditional territories and all their myriad resources (Claxton et al., 2021; Richmond, 2015). The United Nations' *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* lists five genocidal acts: "Killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group,

and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (United Nations, n.d.). Canada has committed all of these five acts against First Nations people, including through the *Indian Act*, the Indian Residential School System, the Indian Reserve System, Indian hospitals, and the Sixties’ Scoop.

The *Indian Act*, a racist and paternalistic federal law, aimed to sever First Nations peoples’ connection to culture, traditions, ceremonies, and territories (Bartlett, 1977). First Nations people were dispossessed of their lands and traditional foods, and their self-determination was quashed. Under this Act, genocidal policies, systems, institutions and structures were created. These included the Indian Residential School System, which forcibly took children away from their families and communities, and attempted to extinguish First Nations identity. Later, when residential schools started to close, the method of assimilation shifted to apprehending thousands of Indigenous children and placing them with white families (starting with the Sixties’ Scoop). Settler colonial governments deemed Indigenous parents “unfit” (codifying the poverty they had been forced into as neglect) and attempted to eradicate the intergenerational passing of culture and traditions. This genocidal method of child apprehension continues to this day with overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the Canadian child welfare system; it is known as the Millennial Scoop (Sinclair, 2016, Choate, 2019). These genocidal acts have resulted in lasting intergenerational trauma, loss of ancestral knowledge, loss of cultural identity, and immeasurable grief that First Nations people continue to grapple with today.

First Nations’ cultural cohesion, ways of life, and land-based healing practices are threatened by settler colonial impacts to the land, which have resulted in profound consequences for their wellness and ancestral knowledge (NCCIH, 2022). The forced dispossession of land and subsequent disconnection from culture have had a lasting impact on First Nations people in BC. These traumatic experiences continue to reverberate through generations, impacting individuals and entire communities to this day.

## IMPACTS OF SETTLER COLONIALISM ON ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE AND LAND AND WATER WELLNESS

Since the We Walk Together gatherings in 2019, several significant and unprecedented events occurred that are reshaping the contours of social, political, and physical landscapes across BC. These events continue to urge us to look at the important lessons about the protective nature of First Nations’ kinship with land, water and territory, calling attention to their critical role in promoting good health and well-being for First Nations people.

The summer of 2021 served as a stark reminder of how settler colonialism has relentlessly attempted to destroy First Nations communities’ lives and connection to ancestral knowledge. Discoveries of unmarked mass graves at former residential schools in BC have confirmed what many First Nations across Canada have known and said for years – First Nations children were stolen from their families and communities due to a settler colonial agenda to dispossess First Nations people from their lands and assimilate them. Ancestral knowledge was stolen from future generations due to a calculated and racist mindset of settlers that First Nations way of life was “inferior and unequal” (Government of Canada, 2008).

The intersection of two public health emergencies, COVID-19 and the toxic drug crisis, as well as the undeclared third public health emergency of Indigenous-specific racism in health care, has also greatly impacted the transfer of vital ancestral knowledge among First Nations in BC. Communities faced and continue to face immeasurable losses, including the deaths of loved ones and disruptions and loss of cultural practices (FNHA, 2022). The passing of Elders and Knowledge Keepers is particularly profound as they are traditionally the carriers of language and ways of knowing for younger generations. These events significantly affected the passing of ancestral knowledge to future generations and are devastating for communities. During the validation gatherings in 2022, a poignant observation was made by a Knowledge Keeper who noted how First Nations people experienced a profound sense of loss, because the COVID-19 pandemic had prevented them from connecting with land and engaging in ceremony in the company of their families and communities. The Knowledge Keeper described this feeling as “another hole in [First Nations people] that needs to be healed.”

What’s more, extreme weather events and environmental destruction caused by the unfettered resource extraction, warming temperatures, and changes in precipitation patterns in BC have led to wildfires, smoke, drought, flooding, and extreme heat. These changes have led not only to physical impacts on First Nations health, such as increased injuries and fatalities, food insecurity, water insecurity, and exposure to environmental toxins (Yusa et al., 2015) but also to mental impacts, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Cunsolo, Willox et al., 2015; Dodd et al., 2018a; Dodd et al., 2018b; Manning & Clayton, 2018). First Nations’ ability to hunt and fish, as well as ability to gather plants for culture and medicine, has been greatly affected. Weather-related emergencies have also caused temporary evacuations from traditional territories, which disconnects First Nations people from their communities and cultures and echoes historical traumas related to forced relocation by the government (Thompson et al., 2014; Scharbach & Waldram, 2016; Bedard & Richards, 2018; Dicken, 2018; Hassler et al., 2019). Many First Nations have called for the climate crisis to be recognized as an emergency that is an urgent threat to First Nations and their way of life (NCCIH, 2022).

Yet, the deep interrelatedness between First Nations and the land continues to provide many First Nations with the resilience to deal with ongoing settler colonial violence. Elders and Knowledge Keepers are sharing traditional values and teachings that contribute to First Nations-led resurgence, resilience and innovation. Advocating for and engaging in land-based activities can support individual as well as community resilience by improving First Nations physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health (NCCIH, 2022). However, a key part of advocating for land-based activities is advocating for the preservation of the land and environment in the face of ongoing climate change and loss of territory for resource extraction.

## BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO FIRST NATIONS IN BC

The federal government offered an apology for the Indian Residential Schools System on June 11, 2008. Because there can be no reconciliation without truth, both the federal and provincial governments have been called on to take accountability for their roles in the attempted genocide against First Nations, and the ongoing destruction of their unceded, traditional territories (Government of Canada, 2008). First Nations perspectives on the interconnectedness of lands,

waters, territories, animals and people are central to discussions of accountability and in the spirit of reconciliation and *UNDRIP/Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA)*, should take the lead in order to support any possibility of climate recovery. Participants of We Walk Together reflected on their personal responsibilities, as well as those of the FNHA and health system partners motivated by the common goal of leaving a better place for future generations. The overarching message, “When the land and water are well, the people are well,” highlights the need for settler society and institutions to shift from violating First Nations peoples’ rights to their lands and ways of being to respecting and upholding these rights. Since the health of First Nations people is inseparable from the health of their lands, waters and territories, it is essential that settler society and institutions be accountable by coming into good relationship and finding a new path of togetherness with First Nations people through ongoing, careful, open-hearted listening and timely, responsive, action to achieve reconciliation and transformation.

Reconciliation is an ongoing process that requires recognition of hard truths, and taking meaningful and intentional actions to build respectful and meaningful relationships with Indigenous Peoples. Progress made toward truth and reconciliation, such as Canada’s signing of *UNDRIP* in 2021 (United Nations, 2007) and BC’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (BC’s *DRIPA* Action Plan) Action Plan, which outlines BC’s commitment to implementing *UNDRIP* (Government of BC, 2022), are significant steps forward. However, this is only the beginning of necessary change, and much work remains to rectify systemic and institutional wrongs. Despite the signing of *UNDRIP* and *DRIPA*, Indigenous rights continue to be violated through the government-supported extraction projects committing violence on Indigenous people defending their lands. Racism and violent acts of forced assimilation serve as a somber reminder to all people that colonialism is ongoing, and although small promises have been made towards reconciliation, there is much more work to be done in BC, as First Nations communities are still fighting for the recognition of their inherent rights to protect their lands and stay connected to their ancestral roots.

## CONCLUSION

Historical and contemporary settler colonialism continues to threaten First Nations ways of knowing and being in BC. The systems, institutions, policies, and practices created by settlers perpetuate genocide against First Nations communities by attempting to assimilate First Nations Peoples and eradicate their cultures. Yet, the We Walk Together gatherings confirm that culture remains strong and that many First Nations individuals have turned to the land, engaging with traditional medicine and language as a way to connect and begin to heal. First Nations use the land to ameliorate and revive their spirits, allowing them to strengthen their connection to their culture. Land-based activities are a vital part of BC First Nations cultures as they offer the ability to share teachings and build intergenerational relationships. Therefore, promoting and expanding land-based programming for youth remains a high priority. Being on the land also provides critical spaces for youth and Elders to envision their hopes for the future and the future health of the lands and waters around them. Maintaining and nourishing the intergenerational knowledge transfer from Elders and Knowledge Keepers to youth is essential for the health and wellness of First Nations Peoples.

First Nations have the right as self-determining peoples to make decisions about their land, water and territory, and to promote and practise activities that will keep them healthy and well. Changing landscapes in BC and the world present an opportunity to amplify First Nations' voices and ways of knowing, especially in relation to the land and health as a solution for all. First Nations' connection to land is far beyond a deep appreciation of nature; it encompasses a profound cultural and spiritual relationship. True partners must be aware of and respect this relationship while also recognizing the inherent value that the land holds. The inherent value of the land that Indigenous knowledge teaches us, also calls on us to advocate for and to recognize the inherent rights of ecosystems to exist and thrive. This time is also an opportunity for leadership at all levels to practise accountability and promote reconciliation by taking a rights-based approach to the development of actions or policies impacting First Nations communities and lands. Together, these actions will help create more wholistic and healing pathways so that First Nations communities can envision and establish a future that recognizes and upholds their inherent right to make decisions about their own lands – decisions that reflect their worldviews, honour their ancestors, and lay the foundation for generations to come.

## 6.2 Towards indicator development

“We are ‘heart connected’ to the land. [Non-Indigenous] people need to be educated when working with our people. We know what the land is. When we say land, we are not talking about dirt, or a plot, or a village. We are talking about plants, water, fish, ceremony, coming-of-age camps, and everything else. It’s in our hearts, in our blood and our DNA. They need to understand how important it is, and that you can’t put a value on it.”

– Wii Mediik (Marie Oldfield), Kitasoo/Xai'xais (Klemtu) Nation; VC

What is measured and presented in reports is inherently political, representing an agenda and making a statement and shaping policy. In the face of over 150 years of colonialism in BC, the continued survival of First Nations, and their languages and cultures, is itself a political act (Claxton et al., 2021). The We Walk Together project and its potential transformative outcomes serves as an opportunity for First Nations in BC to take control of the narrative around what it means to be healthy and well in the context of connection to land, water and territory.

The findings from this report reinforce the integral and complex connection First Nations individuals, families, and communities have with the land and the importance of nourishing it for future generations. Connection to land provides the basis for culture, language, and identity for First Nations Peoples. Many First Nations have been able to sustain and nourish this vital connection to land despite colonial policies and legislation aimed at assimilating them into settler colonial culture, and are experiencing a cultural resurgence in which they are taking back their self-determination, standing up for their cultures and ways of life, healing their communities and people, holding settlers accountable for their oppressive actions, and reclaiming their roles as stewards of the land to once again achieve a status of being healthy, self-determining, and vibrant.

Population health and wellness reporting cannot succeed unless it reflects a population's view of themselves through their own, self-defined, understanding of well-being (Geddes, 2015). Each of the three major themes that emerged across the gatherings – ancestral knowledge, land and water wellness, and accountability – help set the stage for the development of an indicator that may allow us to begin to capture the concept of “connection to land, waters, and territory” as part of provincial health and wellness reporting. The words “help,” “may,” and “begin” in the previous sentence are purposeful as measuring such an all-encompassing part of BC First Nations' worldviews will be inherently incomplete and will remain an “indication” or “hint.” Yet, First Nations people have made clear that monitoring health and wellness is important, because seeing where you are lays a foundation for the path forward.

The We Walk Together project created space with First Nations communities to share their truths, ways of knowing, and essential requirements for health and wellness. This dialogue was vital to restoring First Nations health and wellness and envisioning a future where First Nations individuals are self-determining over their own health and wellness. First Nations made clear that connection to land, water and territory is foundational to their wellness and therefore being able to measure, monitor and evaluate this connection over time is critical. Creating a land-based indicator that is made with and for First Nations will have the potential to inform priorities, decision-making, and planning within communities, Nations, and regions.

Determining a wellness indicator that measures connection to land, water and territory remains a work in progress and will require decision-making by BC First Nations. The initial aim of this project was to collaboratively create an indicator that captures the connection to land, water and territory as a determinant of health for inclusion in the PHWA. In the scope of this work, the project team met with a number of Nations. Further community engagement and research is required to determine a methodology to create an indicator that can be used to measure and monitor this connection by the various Nations across BC. The findings from the We Walk Together will inform future research on the potential development of a system for how Nation-specific indicators can determine and create a composite provincial-level measure. However, there are limitations to the development of population level indicators given the sacred nature of land-based data and the significance of First Nations data sovereignty. Future indicator development that upholds the stories of Nations across BC remains an ambitious goal. The findings presented in this report form a foundation for further dialogue and research on nation-based, regional- and provincial-level wellness indicators to measure and track connection to land, water and territory to further promote the strength and resilience of First Nations in BC.

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# APPENDIX 1: GATHERING PARTICIPANTS

## FRASER SALISH REGION – STÓ:LŌ NATION GATHERING

Ay:iye (Stanley Greene) Sts'ailes First Nation	Maqwes (Gabriel Joe) Tzeachten First Nation	Tyneshia Commodore Soowahlie and Lummi First Nation
C'tičtəna'at (Mavis Pierre) Katzie First Nation	Síatlesten (Lakota Julian) Skwah and Matsqui First Nations	
Kaxte' (Yvonne Marie Tumangday) Sts'ailes First Nation	Siyamex (Virginia Peters) Sts'ailes Nation	

## VANCOUVER COASTAL REGION – LÍLWAT7ÚL NATION GATHERING

Adaga (Barbara Hanuse) Wuikinuxv Nation	Qwao'lxwao7 (Archie Nicholas Manuel) N'Quatqua Nation
Appa-Ka (Daniel Peters) Skatin Nation	Qwenot (Angela George) Səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation
Chadley Paul Skatin Nation	Samù7 (Wayne Smith) Samahquam Nation
Cynthia Robinson Kitasoo/Xai'xais (Klemtu) Nation	Sandra Fossella xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nation
Edwin Bikadi Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation	Sawt (Martina Pierre) Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation
Emháka (Felicity Nelson) Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation	Sesaxwalia (Aggie Andrew) Sk̓w̓xwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation)
Gélpcał (Ashley Joseph) Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation	Shlomish (Allan Jim) Sk̓w̓xwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation)
Holly Joseph Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation	Snxakila (Clyde Tallio) Nuxalk Nation
Joanne John Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation	Thelma Stogan xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nation
Les'pet (Doreen Point) łəʔamen (Tla'amin) Nation	Thul-Se-Mia (Amelia Paul) Xa'xtsa Nation
Michelle Brown Haíłzaqv (Heiltsuk) Nation	Tiffany Mason Kitasoo/Xai'xais (Klemtu) Nation
Montah (Beverly Dixon) Shíshálh (Sechelt) Nation	Tsets Waunexw (Gabriel George) Səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation
Namaskas (Andrew Johnson) Wuikinuxv Nation	Vera Edmonds Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation
Normaline Lester Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation	Wii Mediik (Marie Oldfield) Kitasoo/Xai'xais (Klemtu) Nation
Nuqatsitusa (Faye (Faith) Edgar) Nuxalk Nation	Ximia (Dionne Paul) Shíshálh (Sechelt) Nation
Nuwacta (Elizabeth Humchitt) Haíłzaqv (Heiltsuk) Nation	Yazhun (John Louie) łəʔamen (Tla'amin) Nation
Priscilla Ritchie Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation	Yiktsa7 (Carol Thevarge) N'Quatqua Nation
Qaq-wam (Chris Wells) Lílwat7úl (Lil'wat) Nation	

## NORTHERN REGION- LAKE BABINE NATION GATHERING

Bedey Adneeh  
(Mary Catherine Love Michell)  
Lake Babine Nation

Dean Charlie  
Lake Babine Nation

Derek MacDonald  
Lake Babine Nation

Dinee Tsoh Gees (Richard Williams)  
Bear Clan, Lake Babine Nation

Fred William  
Lake Babine Nation

Jason Charlie  
Lake Babine Nation

Lyle Michell  
Lake Babine Nation

Sa Ts'ana Deelee (Mary Ann West)  
Lake Babine Nation

Niwh Syalh (Ronnie Alec)  
Lake Babine Nation

Jibu (Peter Alec), Bear Clan  
Lake Babine Nation

Shane George  
Lake Babine Nation

Ts'eek'ot (Beverly Michell) (Beverly Michell)  
Lake Babine Nation

Walter Charlie  
Lake Babine Nation





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