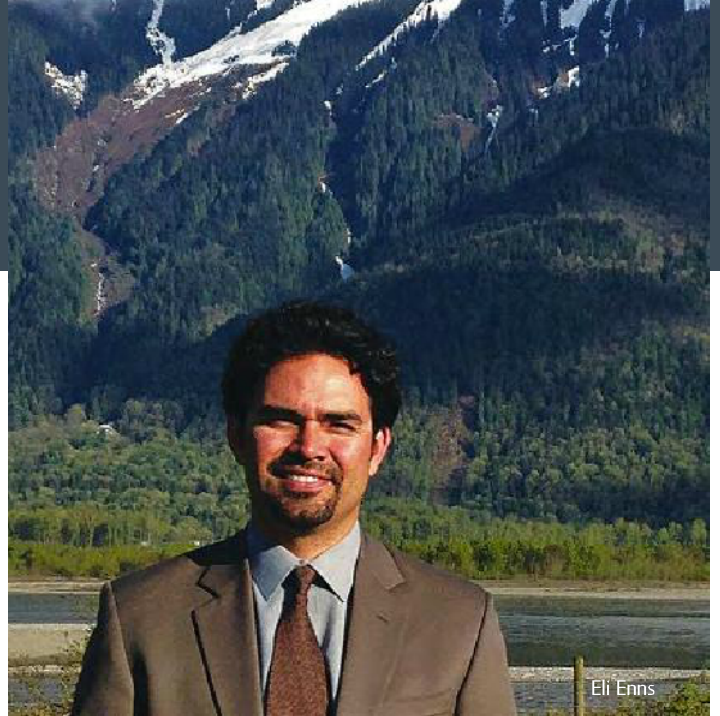




TLA-O-QUI-AHT TRIBAL PARKS:

A DIFFERENT CONCEPTION OF HUMANITY

BY ELI ENNS



At the heart of the Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve on the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, a new model of tribal parks is emerging as a global leader in socio-ecological resiliency.

While recovering from the brink of extinction and simultaneously adapting their age-old ecological governance system to a series of aggressive foreign influences, the Tla-o-qui-aht (a First Nations people and government whose territory surrounds Canada's proposed Pacific Rim National Park reserve on Vancouver Island) have conceived an Indigenous watershed management methodology that marries the old with the new to form sustainable livelihoods that promote environmental security. The keystone is a fundamentally different conception of humanity; it orients individuals within a rich social contract that extends ideas of justice to the environment.

The *Nuu-chah-nulth-aht* (people along the mountain and the sea) express this concept in our definition of humanity, or *Quu-us* – meaning “real live human being.” Real, as opposed to imagined or dreamt. Live, as opposed to deceased or unborn. And human being, as distinguished from any other being on Earth. As *Quu-us* we have access to a full range of emotional language that educates us about ourselves, and our environments. No matter what we are feeling it is okay to feel that way provided we don't become fixated. As *Quu-us* we are a link between our ancestors and descendants, forming circles in time. As links we have a responsibility to manage our natural inheritance with care in consideration of our future generations. Our natural inheritance includes an interconnection of everything from the air, water, cedar and salmon to names, language, songs and even our own natural selves.

This conception of humanity forms the basis of a cultural logic for inter-generational accountability. A little over 100 years ago, on May 15, 1914, the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia met with Tla-o-qui-aht hereditary chiefs on Meares Island. The chiefs demonstrated this mentality in the following passages:

Said Chief Joseph, “Now listen, gentlemen. I am going to tell you what I think – what is in my heart. I am very glad to see you gentlemen here...I am of a good heart to see you here and I am feeling pretty high myself about you coming to see me. I am the Chief here. I am going to tell you what I have in my mind... I have 221 Indians and this place is too small...When there is another generation of people, three hundred

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years from now, there will be no timber for them at all. It is all taken up by...settlers who surround the reserve all round, and pretty soon there will be no room.”

Chief Jimmy Jim spoke next: “I am going to tell you that I am very happy to see you here...There are not old people here now. They are all young people here, but we know all about the old people...That was the time when there was no white people here then. And when I was a boy there were no white men here either...until the Bishop and Mr. Gilliod came. He was the first Agent...Mr. Gilliod used to say to the Indians that there would not be any white people here. They will not come here, it is too wild, he said, and white people would not use this land... It is full here now; this small place we cannot fall any trees for firewood in because it is too small for generations to come. We are holding the wood for the people who come after us.”

These expressions of concern for the welfare of our people and environment, spoken in the community of Opitsaht a century ago, reveal both the resonance and continuity of our cultural logic. Another occasion that was celebrated this year was the 30th anniversary of the declaration of Meares Island as a Tribal Park in April 1984. This was the result of a significant shift that occurred from 1914 to 1984. After the provincial government of British Columbia had condoned the clear-cut logging of the ancient cedar rainforests of Meares, the Tla-o-qui-aht moved from polite protest to direct action in the form of blockades and litigation, that proved successful. The most significant development from 1984 to 2014 is that the Tla-o-qui-aht have transitioned from blockading logging operations to pioneering Tribal Parks as an alternative to the business-as-usual approach to natural resource management.

The Tribal Parks model is the manifestation of a dramatically different social contract based on the humanity concept, *Qui-us*. It extends ideas of justice to the environment we all share and depend upon, and extends this justice through time to the future generations to whom we are ultimately accountable. This social contract is captured in works of art such as the totem pole at left. The crests function as symbolic memory devices that are associated with various knowledge patterns that have been encoded in story. The stories provide a moral education for the listener, guiding their behaviour properly towards others in their human community, as well as other beings with whom they share the environment.

This advanced system of active participation in a social contract ensures that stories with encoded knowledge patterns about natural law are an ever-present visual characteristic of the built environment. Far from being just beautiful art, these crests and stories continue to influence ecological governance applications in modern times, such as our Tribal Parks initiative. They lead to effective management outcomes in educational eco-tourism, renewable energy projects, ecosystem service programs, and value-added natural resource and non-timber forest product sector development – all with a long-term view of climate-change adaptation and what is in the best interests of the future generations coming “three hundred years from now.” ❁

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Tla-o-qui-aht Truth and Reconciliation Commemorative Totem Pole.

PHOTO BY CAMERON DENNISON