

Oil Spills or Earthquakes: Exploring Trans-boundary Ecosystem Alternatives

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A community-based initiative

What does an Inside Passage Alaska State Ferry voyage have to do with the headwaters of the Yangtze River and the surrounding Tibetan/Chinese plateaus? Or a deadly Refinery explosion in the US Puget Sound after cited plant hazards remained unfixed, with the tragic Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico? Coinciding dates seem uncanny; the sinking Oil Rig on April 22 coinciding with Earth Day, and the devastating March Tsunami so close to World Water Day. With mounting human and environmental tolls in the wake of Asian disasters, and the unknown nuclear risks now



facing so many, we need to ask again—could these devastating events have been prevented—are these disastrous consequences truly necessary for the human/environment interactions that we all share?

Amidst this demonstrated global imbalance from earthquakes and oil spills to financial crises in the Spring of 2010, a leap of faith embarked us on a journey to discover alternatives in a systems approach towards some stability. One focus explored opportunities for collaborative community and ecosystem-based solutions.



In these times of economic hardships among local and

regional systems, rural communities came together in demonstrating their investment in sustainable human and ecological interactions. From large ferries to small vessels, along seaways and riparian corridors, within remote villages, to large tourism driven economies, an interest in promoting a cross boundary ecosystem based approach to our common waterways met with overwhelming support. Without an immediate funding source, we were obliged to rely on contributions triggered by community interest, good will, and in-kind services that featured cross boundary support. As the first on board in this collaborative educational effort, Alaska Marine Highway generously provided the all important ferry transit connecting corridors to and from Bellingham, WA. to Skagway Alaska, USA, and crossing into Canada at Prince Rupert. Joining in these international outreach efforts, BC Ferries graciously added travel to and from Haida Gwaii, and the Queen Charlotte Islands promising follow-up this year in outlying areas of Port Hardy.

Such cooperation allows exploration into common wildlife and culturally sensitive areas, to protect our shared endangered and protected landscapes. Greeted by Native guides and overland comrades, Park Service staff, supporting businesses, individuals and community organizations, we extended marine corridors within Alaska, the BC and Yukon Territories to White Horse and the Yukon River with the potential to yield underlying clues in recent environmental disasters and their prevention. Other visits included the Islands of Hoonah, Tenakee Springs, Kake. We were housed by the kindness of local lodging interested in Ecological and cultural tourism. Housed by private B&B's with interests in promoting ecologically based alternatives in eco-and cultural tourism on their small islands, and joined by the nearby historic mansions and restaurants, I was locally invited to explore ghosts of spirits past, float glacial fed rivers loaded with eagles, kayaked into riparian wetlands, witnessed bird, bear and wolf gatherings and collected Red Ribbon seaweed with Native American elders defining generations of oral histories between water and people. This low impact introductory study to assess and query the potential for ecosystem awareness and applied strategies initiated a community based collaboration within the Inside Passage of US and Canadian waterways and beyond

Traversing our human and ecological connections along international waterways and marine based Alaskan villages with ferry connections between two countries, we found the ongoing development of the newest open container shipping port in North America, at Prince Rupert, BC. An isolated Pacific port, by 2020, the Prince Rupert Port Authority expects 44 million shipping containers to pass through this West Coast port, with 2011's capacity for two million containers now being transported through these international waters surpassing travel times experienced coming through Long Beach and Los Angeles, the busiest ports in the United States.

Touting deep water holding capacity, easy road access for transferring goods like coal, oil and gas, and a struggling resource dependant economy interested in promoting local jobs, this rural and ecologically diverse region welcomed its newfound role as the main link for the ever increasing water transport traffic to and from North America and China since the \$170 million port opened. An in place Canadian/US Rail system within the City borders dating from WWII is readily available for transport of goods (not passengers)

directly to (not the closest city, Vancouver, BC) but Chicago, IL. With at least 50 locomotives and 2,200 railcars dedicated only to Prince Rupert, CN Railway invested \$30 million in the port itself and \$25 million so it can double-stack containers on its cars through to Chicago, expanding the transport of these commodities throughout North America and beyond.

International Effects?

The transformation of sensitive wetlands and flowing rivers into Shipping canals from such rivers as the Yangtze and Mekong lead towards this marine based conduit within the Inside Passage of US and Canada. China, while so geographically set apart from Puget Sound marine highways has increased these shipping accessible waterways leading to the Prince Rupert port. This has included the systematic dynamiting of sensitive areas along Tiger Leaping Gorge, at the headwaters of the Yangtze River and altering mountainous regions laden with history and local culture strewn across agricultural communities dating back centuries. Recent earthquakes rippling within this part of the Seichuan Province resulted in devastating human and ecological destruction destroying fragile fauna and flora, along with the lives and livelihoods of those who inhabited these regions. Could the activities that have shifted our byways and riparian zones towards economic development and trans-border commerce have contributed to such natural disasters?.

The 2010 refinery explosion in Anacortes, Wa. killing seven local workers and spewing unknown pollutants into Puget Sound water and air was only one of the tragic results from documented health hazards and cited disaster prone practices within our increasingly susceptible global environment. With current events in Asia and now on-going nuclear fears from ecological to human health risks, what local and regional crises await in the continuing traffic within our connecting landscapes? With a focus on education and disaster prevention, through this collaborative effort along common ecosystems, we found an overwhelming support to address the challenge of finding out. A community-based network connecting and guarding ecological and cultural diversity within the shared waterways of our mutually beneficial hydrologic systems has begun.

On our journey, Native Peoples along the Marine Highway included Nisga, Haida, and Tlinket long time residents.. Helpful Elders graciously shared traditions of their seasonal Eulachon Fishing and drying, a process of finding natural oils and sustenance in local habitats. Tufted Puffins, Humpback and Orca Whales, Seals, Stellar Sea lions, Black and Grizzly Bear, Aucklets, Sea and River Otters marked the diverse wildlife found along along the Inside Passage. Such community based common ground provides a mechanism for action in these times of global imbalance and a much needed ecosystem based alternative especially useful in disaster prevention.

While traversing the marshlands with a bear hunting guide turned eco-tourist, I stumbled across a two year olds bears tooth hidden within a Prince Rupert strawberry patch. Immediately defining the details of the bear, my knowledgeable

guide stood in awe as he educated me on the age, habitat and circumstances of this valuable find—later, Native born friends filled me in on the symbolism of such a gift from a wilderness intact—what is the meaning? I asked, “leadership”, they suggested—“honor, and luck, good spirit always means good luck.”

***A long time IUCN Commission member for Education and Training (CET) since 1991 and Ecosystem Management (CEM) since 1994, Dr. Susan Toch was recruited and served in the 2010 position of Ecosystem Education/ Awareness Coordinator within our newly formed CEM North American & Caribbean Executive Committee..

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Eco-tourism & Community Coordination

Sitka's secrets—a special visit to St. Lazaria national wildlife refuge Kent Hall and Beverly Minn, (biologists--wildlife and marine bird tour on island)

Sitka bike & hike toured backroads and nature areas.--

"Skil Q'uas" Dick Bellis, Haida Carver and Island Tour Guide, Skidegate, Haida Gwaii, BC

Donald Harford --Ketchikan (showed me around island water systems)

Chris Wilhelm --music and past tour guide

Chilkat Guides in Haines--Eagle Trip along Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve---

RaftAlasks@chilkatguides.com -- Adventure Tours Khutzeymateen Bear tour – great endangered species sightings! 800-201-8377

White Pass and Yukon Route Train, Skagway –wonderful traverse into international ecosystems and history.

Kroschel Films wildlife park, Haines, Alaska

Skeena Valley Exhibitions, rafting Skeena River, Prince Rupert

Haida Heritage Center, Skidegate, BC

Skeena Kyacking--250-624-8311, Prince Rupert, Great dedication and good will.--

Paddled Kloyia Bay wildlife area where bear tooth was found..

Teresa Gaudette--Organized Villiage of KAKE-TAGaudette@Kakefirstnation.org, visited Totums and Native historic areas.and Hiked to Carlana Lake in Juneau

Lodging

Black Rooster Roadhouse, B&B Budget Hostel, Prince Rupert

Fort Seward B&B, Haines, restful, quiet and friendly.

Hotel Halsingland, Haines Historic hotel included great ghost tour
The Guard House B&B, Haines
Eagle Bluff B&B, Prince Rupert (nice people) 800-833-1550
Pioneer Hostel/B&B--nice people
Driftwood Lodge, Juneau
Hillside Haven Guest Suite on Auke nu Bay, Juneau--picked me up, dinner and
last minute room with bath--great people. black sand beach –
Alaskan Northern Sands --Tom & Debbie Williams
Historic Skagway Inn, Skagway--lovely people, great food--cooking and garden
classes. shuttle to transport. "Alaskan Garden Gourmet"
Skagway Home Hostel, Skagway
Primier Creek Lodging, Queen Charlotte City--room and hostel--helped a lot-
concerned about eco problems.BC 888-322-3388
Peter Cook, Lenore Lawrence—especially interested in marine conservation and
community eco actions. www.qcislands.net/premier
Sitka Point Lodge & Fishing Charters, Mike Boles
(lodging in fishing lodge)

Food

Stowaway Cafe--Skagway AK for an amazing locally caught Halibut dinner
--Annamarie Hasskamp, Tim Schaefer
Starfire, Skagway for Healthy Thai food