

# **Tsimshian – Nisga'a Boundary Experience**

**BCTC Governance Forum  
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- **In 1996, two nation groups of people, the Tsimshian Nation and the Nisga'a Nation signed a Memorandum of Understanding.**
- **MOU is to define the relationship and supporting processes regarding boundary definitions, natural resources and common development activities.**

- **long history alongside each other: a base language, much of our culture and a boundary.**
- **7 Tsimshian communities' lower portion of the Skeena River, Terrace & Prince Rupert down to Klemtu**
- **4 Nisga'a on the Nass River and coastal area**

- **Other neighbours include the Gitksan, the Wet'suwet'en, the Haisla, the Heiltsuk and the Haida.**
- **It is in our interest to ensure favorable relations with our neighbours.**
- **Both Parties are participants to treaty making in B.C. – this was a strong catalyst for a greater level of agreement amongst us.**

- **Mutual boundary definitions are a component of treaty**

# **Approaches to the MOU**

- **prepared and conducted research, including oral history and compiled summaries**
- **agreed any process should be on a government to government basis – through our Hereditary Chiefs**
- **administration of each nation was the facilitator for meetings, the steps to be followed, logistics, etc**

- **starting in the '80's and early 1990's**
- **involved much culture and ceremony**
- **oral exchange of our histories (adaawx) and the attachments to key boundary points**
- **We reminded each other of our history together**
- **Many efforts – no success!**

- **strike a smaller Committee of Chiefs with technical support to find a solution**
- **Again, no success and more time passed by**

- **a technical level of recognized leaders within each nation. There was effort to strike a formal ‘compromise’ for treaty purposes**
- **map with a fixed boundary line that could be presented to government as indication of a secure border ... but ‘on the side’ another agreement saying that map is not binding and a process will continue.**
- **This approach saw interest but no agreement.**

- **Finally, in early 1996 the executive officers of each nation came together to say we want to try once more**
- **set aside several days to meet at Kitsumkalum in September of that year**
- **very cordial meeting but with a sense of determination. Joe Gosnell and Bob Hill were respective leaders**

- **After much opening dialogue and exchange of ideas and other common interests there was understanding and tone for an agreement to be struck .....**
- **but only if we could capture the mood and the language shared earlier in the session**

- **work group of senior resource people was identified and tasked with the gathering of thoughts and the capture of a solution.**
- **Edmond Wright, Harry Nyce Sr., Mel Bevan and myself (probably others as well) formed this work group.**

- **We compared notes,**
- **drew on other documents amongst us – especially the Northwest Tribal Treaty Agreement of 1991 which was signed by most of the Nation groups of Northern B.C.**

- ***We, the signatories to this Treaty are of one heart in the advancement and protection of our common interests identified in the following principles:”***
- ***“We shall continue to enter into bilateral and multilateral relationships with each other to strengthen and assist in settling matters and common concerns regarding our respective cultural identities, traditions, diversity, equality of our peoples, and our common boundaries according to our traditional laws”...***

- **We reached agreement to proceed! – which was a draft initialled by both Parties.**
- **On November 7, 1996 the agreement was signed – but not without much ceremony**
- **Tsimshian Tribal Council annual assembly in Prince Rupert; estimate well over 2,000 people in attendance**

- **Drums, dancing, ceremonial robes led the respective Chiefs and leadership in,**
- **banners or flags of each nation with leaders assembled in a circle of the auditorium for all to see,**
- **Into that circle, a very old, nearly forgotten ceremony ‘the gawagani’ was performed with warriors of each nation challenging and jostling with their opposing warriors ending with them laying down their staffs signifying peace is in place.**

- **Those Chiefs who had been on opposite sides of the room then crossed the floor and intermixed with the other nation as further indication and ceremony of agreement.**
- **two nations matched each other drumbeat by drumbeat and dance for dance, what a sight**

- **After many years of effort we had success!**
- **There was joy and happiness.**
- **It was an agreement amongst Nations, crafted by those Nations!**

# **Lessons Learned**

- **Must be a will from all the parties involved;**
- **Know your history and your culture;**
- **Explore options, no one approach is likely to work;**
- **Find your capable people that can bridge historic vs. contemporary realities (to clearly understand ‘what do we have?’ and ‘what do we want?’);**

# **Lessons Learned**

- **Time-frames should not create ill will;**
- **Respect, honour and dignity can persevere!**