

CHAPTER EIGHT

VISUALIZING A DIFFERENT TOMORROW

The Columbia River Reconsidered

Aboriginal peoples in the Columbia Basin are poised to redefine the nexus between water, food, energy, biodiversity and social justice and equity in North America. In his book *The Comeback*, prominent intellectual John Ralston Saul observes that with the help of the Supreme Court of Canada, indigenous peoples in Canada are at last regaining the respect, dignity and social, political and legal powers they deserve. Saul quotes indigenous leaders who believe that the rest of Canada should consider doing the same.

It is not the first time such provocative ideas have been put forward. At the Columbia Basin Symposium held at Fairmont Hot Springs, BC, in the fall of 2013 – which Saul attended and discusses in his book – indigenous leaders not only demonstrated their newly restored rights and powers but also made a strong and very articulate case for other Canadians waking up to the realization that serious contemporary threats to their fundamental rights also exist and need to be addressed if they do not want to spend generations fighting to regain those rights after losing them as was the case with indigenous peoples.

The purpose of the symposium was to share understanding of holistic watershed governance as a framework for the impending reconsideration of the 50-year-old Columbia River Treaty under which the US and Canada operate dams and reservoirs on the shared waters of the Columbia to provide flood protection and generate electricity. The symposium explored draft principles for an expanded binational Columbia Basin water governance entity, and right from the start it put into relief stark historical contradictions.

On one hand were experts on the Columbia River Treaty who spoke on how each of its clauses had been carefully and clearly negotiated and each of its conditions precisely met over time through well-established channels of co-operation and mutually respectful, proactive conflict avoidance and resolution mechanisms. These are vital elements of any successful treaty, of course. On the other hand were indigenous people who, though their traditional lands were often submerged, were not consulted in the Treaty negotiations. The treaties to which these people were already signatory, if they existed at all, were dishonoured and continually manipulated to the point of injustice, resulting in what the Supreme Court of Canada described as egregious suffering. Today such conduct could be judged a crime against humanity perpetrated against peoples who in good faith had entered into nation-to-nation relations with federal and provincial governments.

The contrasts between these two views of Treaty relations, and the comparative commitment to meeting their terms and the changes that have taken place in our society since the signing of the Treaty, could hardly have been more obvious. It is not just indigenous rights that have been clarified in Canada during the past half-century. A new and growing understanding of ecosystem dynamics centred around the nexus of water, food and energy has also emerged. We now realize that although the Columbia is a big system, it is not just its sheer size that distinguishes it. It is also unique in its combination of latitude, longitude and altitude, the patterns of its rain and snowfall, the nature of its soils, the broad extent of its forests and the coldness and cleanness of its waters.

We now understand far better than we did in 1964 that the evolution of extraordinarily productive ecological circumstances in the Columbia basin are the result of synergy between ocean, atmosphere, land, water and rivers that together, over millions of years, have created what could be described as a veritable perpetual-motion machine of energy and food production.

Evidence of the productivity of this self-regulating, self-sustaining system is made obvious by the largest salmon runs in the world. Estimates of the peak runs in the Columbia system prior to damming ranged from six million to as many as 16 million fish each

year. We will never know how many there really were, but we do know what the iconic species symbolizes. As the author of this book noted in an earlier, collaborative work, *The Columbia River Treaty: A Primer*, salmon could be considered as electrons in the current of planetary life. Existing at the nexus of water, energy and food in the Pacific Northwest, salmon are a key species which transform the enormous energy of the ocean-land-life-water-weather-climate cycle, of which the Columbia is such an enormous expression, into bite-sized bits that other life forms can metabolize. This is why, wherever we find salmon, we also find indigenous peoples whose cultural heritage has linked them directly to the ecological energy of the Columbia River for hundreds of generations.

It is this globally significant energy system that was ignored and compromised in order to harness and control water in the Columbia basin. Because we did not have a full understanding of the riches we already had, we took one of the greatest natural ecosystem powerhouses on the planet and shut it down just to produce electricity. The resulting dams caused convulsions throughout the natural energy cycle of the Columbia system. We realize now that we turned off our biodiversity-based life-support system in the Pacific Northwest just so we could turn on some lights.

SALMON, ECOLOGY AND HUMAN SOCIETY IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

In her 2014 book *Salmon: A Scientific Memoir*, Jude Isabella observes that this is a cold-blooded species that cannot adapt to warming waters. As temperatures rise these fish look for cool pools in rivers – what researchers call thermal refuges – where they can rest and save energy. The range of temperatures salmon can survive without suffering heart failure is quite limited. The Chilko race, Isabella reports, can manage up to 22°C, but the salmon of the Nechako will stop swimming once the water reaches 20°C. Temperatures in salmon streams in many places in western North America are already reaching these temperatures, making it a race to understand salmon before they become largely extinct.

There are also temperature-related issues with the metabolism of sockeye fry in lakes. Such fry do best in water at or below 15°C. If

the temperature is higher than that, the fry's metabolism accelerates to such an extent that the available food can be barely enough to sustain them. Warmer water also has a huge influence on disease proliferation. It is now thought that a form of salmon leukemia has been responsible for the decline of the Fraser River population over the past twenty years. The average temperature of the Fraser has warmed 2°C in the last ten years. The Yukon River temperature has risen a whopping 6°C over the last decade. Isabella reports that this warming has been accompanied by the rise of the *Ichthyophonus* parasite, which is killing chinook salmon. Nor are artificial fish-rearing programs bringing these populations back. Hatchery success for chinook in the Phillips River, Isabella reports, is less than 1 per cent.

Isabella's book also explores Aboriginal relations to salmon. She describes in exquisite detail how coastal tribes not only survived but thrived despite chaotic shifts in ecosystem function in the North Pacific, through the use of elaborate stone fish weirs. The use of such structures, Isabella notes, predates the Magna Carta and they remain so clearly identifiable archaeologically that their presence is now being used in settling land claims. While such weirs may be impractical today, what they say about ecologically based cultural resilience is not. The thinking behind these weirs may be important to reconsider today. There has been no time in the evolutionary history of our species when it has been more important to incorporate ancient knowledge into sustainable modern practice.

Part of the value of Jude Isabella's book resides in the fact that it traces the history of salmon, coastal ecologies and salmon-dependent cultures through the upheaval that has been European settlement of North America and into our very uncertain times. Although she doesn't mention it, this idea has considerable bearing on the impending reconsideration of the Columbia River Treaty. Salmon streams are much richer in nutrients – nitrogen in particular – than streams that do not support salmon. By blocking salmon, the Grand Coulee and other dams on the Columbia rob the upper basin of nutrients, which diminishes upstream ecosystem vitality. The dams also terminated the long history of co-evolution of salmon and humans in the Columbia basin. Warming temperatures now call into

question whether or not salmon could exist in the future even if the Columbia dams weren't there. That said, we know very little about salmon while they are in the ocean.

We are now using science to try to find our way back to where we were before we transplanted ourselves out of nature, to see where we might somehow fit in again. We are beginning to sort out what Europeans thought they saw when they arrived in the Pacific Northwest versus what was actually there. As Isabella explains, we are relearning the meaning of old words like taboo, which can refer to places you don't fish because that is where stocks replenish. Not only did arriving Europeans misread the meaning and function of ecological processes that animated the Pacific Northwest, they also completely misunderstood the cultural traditions that had emerged from hundreds of generations of close contact with those processes.

The indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast had a completely different idea of wealth than the European settlers that overwhelmed them. To Aboriginal peoples wealth was simply the fact of living in a place and sharing local relations in such a way as to allow nature to generously supply abundant, delicious food and satisfy the material and spiritual needs of all for all time. Ceremonies such as the potlatch were high-profile expressions of the equitable sharing of that wealth and the commitment societies never to allow material possessions to stand in the way of the common good.

Isabella invites us to give new consideration to our environmental and cultural misreading of the Pacific Northwest. She urges us to go back to that point in our own relationship where we took the wrong turn in our understanding of where and how we should live in such a place. We may in fact wish to go so far as to seek to be neo-indigenous in order to recover harmony and sustainability in our relations with the land, the sea and one another. While only part of the abundant natural wealth that existed in the Pacific Northwest at the time of European contact remains, a reconsideration of what salmon mean to us would be a good place to start in contemporary society's last chance to again become native to where we live. Jude Isabella doesn't think it is too late. She believes that after six million years on Earth and 12,000 years migrating in and out of the Pacific

Ocean, salmon must be at least as able to adapt to climate change as we humans believe we are. Isabella also has confidence in science, which she holds to be the equivalent of a modern potlatch in the degree to which it is generous with its wealth, altruistic in its aims and in constant unselfish pursuit of truth.

Scientific ideals are not as incompatible with traditional values as we used to think. In concluding her book, Jude Isabella makes a most eloquent claim. We need to stitch back together again the larger narrative of the Pacific Northwest, a tapestry of which salmon are just a part. The vehicle for starting that long but necessary process leading to a potentially highly satisfying regrounding in place is the reconsideration of the Columbia River Treaty.

Such matters remain difficult to discuss in the Columbia basin, though, partly because discourse about the Treaty and the future of the basin as a whole has been dominated by those with special interests who still think it wisest to define the future by the narrowly technical and economic parameters established in 1964. The Columbia Basin Symposium put into relief just how easily Canadians have come to accept the notion that the way things were done as a matter of course in 1964 somehow provides valid historical justification for perpetuating denial and injustice today. But just as we begin to think we can carry on exactly as we have done for the past 50 years, the old maxim that what goes around comes around enters stage left in a feather headdress, singing to the beat of a raw-hide drum.

TREATIES, SCIENTIFIC TRUTH AND THE HONOUR OF NATIONS

As Ojibway grand chief John Kelly predicted in 1977, what Canadians did to the Indians is what we are now doing to ourselves. We are stepping back and away from honour and truth.

In the same manner as we reneged on our promises as a nation in making treaties with indigenous peoples, we are now backing away from values and commitments that once defined Canada. One of the most clearly obvious ways we are backpedalling away from truth is how we are compromising the bridge we have been building for more than two centuries between science and public policy.

Science is to our culture what traditional knowledge is to indigenous peoples. It is the ground of experience based on cumulative observation upon which we base decisions that will affect our future. It is our intellectual potlatch.

This bridge between objective knowledge and evidence and public policy in Canada has come under siege in recent years. We have been muzzling scientists and eliminating science from public discourse. We have cut public support for independent research and delivered science into the self-interested hands of the private sector. In so doing we have allowed the bridge between research and fact-based policy-making to become a fortified border, a checkpoint through which only the science approved by special interests is permitted to pass.

Because indigenous people have experienced this themselves and know how hard it is to regain lost rights, they rise up in outrage with respect to these matters. A comfortable, indifferent settler populace, however, has appeared perfectly satisfied to sit back and watch while their fundamental rights and protections were taken away one omnibus bill at a time by a government that publicly pronounced that obtaining a majority meant it could do anything it wanted as long as it was in power. History, however, has a way of stumbling backwards and colliding with itself. Perhaps not surprisingly, all of these problems have come to a head in the reconsideration of the Columbia River Treaty.

The questions regarding the Treaty have become these: Are we going to carry on saying this was just how things were done back then and keep denying that what was happening then is still happening now? Are we going to continue to ignore Supreme Court of Canada rulings on indigenous rights? Are we going to say it's okay that the same exclusionist interests that crafted the Columbia River Treaty are going to be permitted to perpetuate its terms for another fifty years? Are we going to fall for the worn-out conventional wisdom that Canada – or anyone – could never get a better deal anyway? Are we so comfortable as a society that we will just sit back and let whatever happens happen? Maybe, but not likely. Why? Because the indigenous peoples in the Columbia Basin are not going to let the injustice to which they were subjected in 1964 happen

to them again. And if we were smart, the rest of us in Canada would realize we don't want that to happen to us either.

It is now widely recognized that there is a great deal more at stake in the Columbia River Treaty renewal negotiations than is presently understood by the general public in either country. Times have changed. Really changed. Not only are there new ways of estimating the economic value of environmental services, but there are also higher ideals to which we know we can aspire when it comes to transboundary agreements over water. At stake are ongoing efforts to restore river ecosystem function that has been damaged or lost as a result of dam construction. We now realize that sustainable development means restorative development. A primary goal of a renewed Columbia River Treaty should be restoration of lost ecological elements and conditions that fifty years later are seen to be of far greater importance than the architects of the original treaty were able to imagine.

The second thing a renewed treaty could – and should – do is redeem injustices that today would be judged as human rights violations: actions that took place as a consequence of the non-inclusive manner in which the treaty was negotiated and the final conditions that were imposed upon those who were made subject to its terms.

Also relevant to the Treaty reconsideration is the ability of the people of the Pacific Northwest to monitor and respond to hydro-climatic change in the larger Columbia Basin in a way that will adequately permit coordination of effective and meaningful adaptation strategies. A renewed Treaty should lay the foundation for continuous improvement of social and economic resilience in the face of direct and indirect effects of climate change, not just in the basin but also in surrounding regions. In this context, flood control amid changing hydro-climatic circumstances will be more valuable than ever. So will drought management. And yes, we need electricity. Sustaining productive irrigation is important too. But salmon and other critical ecological values also count.

From this we see that what is really in play here is nothing less than the region's real prosperity, however you wish to define that concept. But there is also more at issue that goes far beyond the river basin. It is clear to many observers that the Columbia River Treaty

has the opportunity to become the first transboundary water agreement in the world to be effectively reformed so as to create a living blueprint for how people would like to inhabit their river basin – and regions like it – now and in a sustainable future.

What is at stake, finally, is our moral duty. The reconsideration of the Columbia River Treaty is an opportunity to show the world how to shed the limitations of the past in ways that will allow others to use our example to break out of the prisons of treaties that no longer respond to the realities they face and the new challenges that are emerging as the global hydrological cycle responds to a rapidly warming atmosphere. As Yakama tribal elder Gerald Lewis pointed out at a conference on the Treaty in Ellensburg, Washington, in 2012, we have to keep in mind that we are not reconsidering the Columbia River Treaty just to satisfy ourselves. We are doing this for future generations.

For our children's sake we cannot let what happened in 1964 happen again – to any of us. We can no longer ignore the existence and aspirations of our indigenous neighbours. We cannot afford to allow what was done then to be done yet again to the landscapes upon which all of us have come to depend for our identity and ultimately for the sustainability of our livelihoods and prosperity. We have to heal the waters.

SO WHERE DOES THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST GO NOW?

The first thing we have to do is recognize that the Columbia River Treaty is only one element of a larger whole that needs to change. Reconsideration of this Treaty, however, could be an important door-opener for reconciliation with the peoples with whom we are grateful to share the waters of the Columbia basin and to whom we owe such a considerable debt for having never lost their intergenerational connection with the circumstances and cycles through which human existence derives its deepest meaning and connection to place – a place that is now our place also.

The Columbia basin is not the first place in Canada to confront such matters. The government of the Northwest Territories and its indigenous government partners have faced up to exactly the same kind of challenges and have succeeded in redefining the nexus

between water, food, energy and biodiversity while at the same time reconciling equity and social justice in one of the largest river basins the world: the Peace–Athabasca–Mackenzie system. There is much that can be learned from the NWT experience that could help the people of the Columbia basin achieve a better future through re-consideration of this Treaty. Upon examination we discover there is actually a great deal of similarity between the two situations.

Not unlike the residents of the Columbia basin, the people of the Northwest Territories were worried about climate change effects. What is important about their example is that they acted on those concerns. As noted in chapter three, the territorial government and its indigenous, federal and provincial government partners have demonstrated that there is nothing in the Canadian federal–provincial political structure that makes it impossible to undertake the kinds of reform necessary to adapt successfully to climate change through enlightened management of water.

The NWT example does demonstrate, however, that it is not possible to craft leading-edge transboundary agreements with riparian neighbours without first getting your own water policy house in order. Without the *Northern Voices*, *Northern Waters* stewardship strategy in place, the Northwest Territories would not have had the administrative capacity, scientific wherewithal or moral ground to stand on in negotiating the kind of progressive transboundary agreement it signed with Alberta in 2015.

So what should British Columbia and the residents of the Columbia River basin take away from the Northwest Territories example? The national and international significance of the *Northern Voices*, *Northern Waters* strategy document derives from the patient and inclusive manner in which it was crafted and implemented and the ongoing engagement through which its effectiveness will continue to be thoughtfully monitored and evaluated. In that it respects traditional knowledge and ways of life and balances the economic realities of resource development within the context of basin-wide aquatic ecosystem health, the strategy represents a landmark in integrated watershed management. Its example demonstrates that in fact there are no real jurisdictional, legislative, constitutional or political obstacles to the creation of a sustainable future based on new

ways of occupying the nexus between water, food, energy and biodiversity. The Northwest Territories example makes it impossible to say anywhere that this cannot be done. If it can be done in the Mackenzie system, it can be done in the Columbia basin. What it will take, however, is collaboration, strong political will and persistent leadership.

As John Ralston Saul reported in *The Comeback*, the indigenous speakers at the Columbia Basin symposium in 2013 told those assembled that the road is open for reconciliation, for correcting the mistakes of the past and for collaboration on a better, more secure, more just and ultimately far more sustainable future for all. They said that this collaboration can begin with water, with the Columbia. Should we not – all of us – take our neighbours up on their kind and generous offer? Is there any reason we can't start again down that road – and that river, together – now?

