



Voices from the Field

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Podcast: Voices from the Field 17 - Drawing on teachings from the land to adapt to climate change

In this episode, Spencer Greening, of the Tsimshian community of the Gitga'at First Nation in British Columbia, and a PhD candidate at Simon Fraser University, takes us on a journey to understanding how Indigenous knowledge, laws, governance systems, and oral histories inform sustainable environmental stewardship within the context of climate change. He grounds his discussion by reminding us that we, as human, are part of the larger ecosystem and that we have much to learn from the teachings offered up by different species, spirits, and beings, as we look for ways to adapt to a changing environment.

Bio

Spencer Greening (La'goot) is from the Tsimshian community of the Gitga'at First Nation. He is currently a



Ph.D. candidate in Interdisciplinary studies at Simon Fraser University and a Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Scholar. His research looks at the relationship between Gitga'at traditional ecological knowledge, language, and history in the context of Indigenous resource management. Spencer holds a bachelor's degree in First Nations/Indigenous Studies and an MA in Anthropology from the University of Northern British Columbia. His broader research interests include Indigenous governance systems, cultural and political identities, and pairing Indigenous oral histories with archeology. All his work revolves around his deep connection to his home community, elders, territories, and the self-determination and decolonization of Indigenous peoples. Spencer is actively engaged with cultural roles and work within the community of Hartley Bay and the greater Tsimshian Nation. His personal connection to this work is very important, when he is not engaging with it professionally,

he is spending as much time as he can on his traditional territory learning from his Elders.

Transcript

Spencer: My name is La'goot. That's my Tsimshian name. My English name is Spencer Greening, and I come from the Tsimshian people – and in particular, the Gitk'a'ata, the Gitga'at First Nation, a tribe of Tsimshian people on the Northwest Coast. Currently I am a PhD candidate in interdisciplinary studies, looking at an array of things. The way I describe it is how do we tell stories of stewardship and relationships with ecosystems when coming from the lens of Indigenous knowledge? My research revolves around that in an interdisciplinary fashion.

Roberta: Really, what we wanted to talk to you about today is to delve a little deeper into the research that you are doing as part of your PhD studies and what interests you in the work that you're doing, and how Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous governance systems, and oral histories or storytelling inform the work that you're doing related to sustainable environmental stewardship, all within of course, the context of climate change.

Spencer: Yeah, that's a big topic. Maybe the most appropriate place to start is on this inherent belief that humans should see themselves as a part of ecosystems. And when we do that, as humans, we can create some of the most ingenious imaginative things that allow our species, along with the species around us, to thrive. Through my own research, and colleagues and people I've met with and neighbors, and looking at Indigenous knowledge and oral histories, it becomes very clear that Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous laws, Indigenous ways of being and seeing the world, creates a very powerful roadmap on how we can learn how to live with ecosystems in a way that we become a part of those ecosystems, that we can thrive in them as well as govern, steward them and just be amongst them.

And those ways of thinking, ways of being, ways of governing, really should influence how we think of society, law, politics, all of these aspects of society we see currently.

Roberta: How was it that you became interested in that area of research?

Spencer: I became interested when I just started learning about Indigenous politics and colonization and all of these feelings you get when you have the story of Canada unfolding in front of you. You're being taught that as a young adult. That's when I was really able to put the pieces together of oh, this is why we might feel angry or oppressed as Indigenous people. This is why my family feels this way or might relate to history surrounding trauma, oppression, poverty, any of those issues that Indigenous people see today. As I dove into that political realm, I ended up doing my Master's thesis at UNBC on Tsimshian governance, in particular on my own role, in my own place, in our governance systems, and what an Indian Act governance system looks like compared to a traditional governance system. You can't disassociate Indigenous governance systems from the land.

So whenever I would talk to Elders, interview Elders, or just be out on the land with them, which is my favourite way to do research or to learn, this is just about being with them, and that's when the richest sort of knowledge and the teachings come out. There was always this essential tie.

During my MA and learning more about my own territory and working with my Elders and becoming more passionate about protecting our territories, I ended up being elected to leadership council for my Nation, and through there, I became engaged in politics. We had several court cases going on against development and all this stuff.

I became more and more called to do research around our relationships with land. I felt like not only do we, as Indigenous people, deserve the right to strengthen that connection where we've lost it, but also there has to be some sort of educating of mainstream society, to say, "Hey, maybe you need to rethink how you understand your relationship with ecosystems and how you need to reevaluate your relationship with how you see the natural world, especially in times of climate change." It became this eye-opening experience of being interested in culture and going to university and learning these things that made parts of my upbringing make a lot of sense and that turned into me getting engaged politically with my community. And then now I really am passionate about focusing on that research around traditional ecological knowledge, relationships with land, and everything that encompasses that.

Roberta: How do you see that, oral histories, the storytelling, that being on the land and working with Elders, has informed your understandings of climate change within your region?

Spencer: I guess there's a few facets to answering this question. One is just accepting that we are in this place of this huge unknown. It's very hard to understand solutions in this crisis because there's so much that we can't just really tell the future and know what's going to happen. But on some level, at least in my own territory, with my own people in our Nation, we have amazing stories of overcoming complete downfalls of society and natural disasters and extreme floods. If you go up and down the coast, almost every Nation has a story of living on a particular place during a flood time. Usually it's on mountain tops, or they tie a raft of a village of canoes onto a mountain, and they had to float like that for however long. This story exists up and down the coast, along with a great freezing and all the wild game disappearing. So many places have those stories. And so there's this embedded experience and almost familiarity with what we're seeing today. On some level, there's this resilience that we know that we have as Indigenous people, but also these gems in our culture that say, this is how we got through it. And this is how our governance system, so our day-to-day morals and values, our day to day laws, and how we structure ourselves as people.

We have almost a roadmap on how all those things taught us to be, how we are today, because of the natural disasters. And so something I talk about in my thesis is how, as humans ... it wasn't really often, it wasn't really us who decided we're going to change how we live and we're going to introduce a new law.

What I find in our stories is it's sometimes animals or spirits or beings, we don't understand, who have to deliver these messages. There's two stories that I highlight in my thesis and one is from the mountain goats, and anyone from the Tsimshian, Nisga'a, Gitxan sort of area will know of the power mountain goats have because we all share this story of them bringing the downfall of one of our ancestral villages, a huge ancestral village, because we weren't living properly, and they saw this.

I won't tell that story, but what I will say is in the end, the goats came to us after causing great destruction and they said, "we're going to have an agreement here". And this isn't how they say it in the story, but this is how I interpreted it as. They say, "we're going to have an agreement here. It's almost going to be like a marriage, where we have to come together and agree on how we're going to move forward, where we're going to honour you by letting you harvest us. But we, as mountain goats, have the right to be harvested in a respectful way and this is how we're going to lay that out." And so they gave us ceremony. They gave us teachings. They gave us ways to use them, and many Indigenous people have stories of how animals like bears, elk, or whichever come and say, "this is how you should use my flesh. This is how you should use my hide. This is what medicine I bring to you." It isn't the human in this sense that creates the laws, but it's the animals. These animals, in this context of the mountain goats, create this beautiful picture of laws and, in a sense, management of their own species and they give it to us.

The same goes for salmon. We have the story up and down the coast. It's published quite well and it's called the Salmon Prince. Different Nations have different takes on it, but this boy gets taken down into the salmon world and there's a bunch of events that unfold, but essentially the salmon teach him how humans should be respecting and treating and harvesting salmon. It's a similar story in that, "we're going to give you the tools for how to harvest us properly, and if you listen and you join us in this sort of marriage, you're going to do well and we're going to do well." And, it's this connection of seeing humans becoming this essential part of the system that sort of plays out.

And so to bring it back to what we see today, it really becomes a part of really leaning into and listening to what ecosystems can tell us, and finding our place in where we fit in those ecosystems. As Indigenous people, we've been able to lean into those different species and the stories they've given us, the teachings they've

given us as spiritual beings, and the stories and teachings that they've given us. We've been fluid and been able to sort of groove with how they want us to live in their ecosystems, which is clearly a complete contrast to, I guess, what mainstream society, modernized society, if you want to call it that, is doing today where it's just kind of, let's just keep pushing forward, let's keep extracting, let's keep living the way we do, with so many things and we keep accumulating and keep cutting down forests and all these things. There hasn't been that stopping point yet. I think these stories really bring relevance to where we're at as a mainstream society.

Roberta: What happens when those species aren't there anymore? What happens when those animals aren't there anymore to help teach us? We know that with climate change, species are changing, our animals coming and going or leaving us completely. And there's a real fear in that right? So what do we do if our teachers aren't there anymore to help us adapt in that way to climate change?

Spencer: Yeah. And it's a great question. I haven't experienced it, but I've definitely thought about that and wondered about it. There's this amazing story that I think of often, and it's not like an oral history or maybe it's an oral history somewhere, but just this phenomenon that... I grew up a little bit in the interior of Prince Rupert, and in the interior there used to be a ton of caribou, so much so that interior peoples, in their clan and hereditary system, they have a caribou clan. Today you rarely see any caribou around, but what has replaced them are moose. Moose have been integrated into the culture and integrated into the traditional ecological knowledge, and are a very important part of potlatching, and wealth, and governance, and stewardship. On some level, you see the human ingenuity of adapting and changing where the caribou is still very relevant to the community, but there's also adaptation and change.

On the micro level, I think we have to look to our oral histories and say, "okay, we've had to overcome these extreme circumstances in the past. And what we did is we just focused in on the teachings we had because even if the teachings an animal gave us disappeared, we can still carry them and pass them on. We can lean into those in hopes that new ones will come." In my own personal world, I believe that spirit, the spirit of the land, never dies. Species just take different forms and their spirits take different forms. I would hope that on a micro level, we can find ways to adapt.

But this also isn't me saying, "let's just let climate change run its course and do its thing, and let's be passive about it" because clearly we are making it worse and worse. The more we ignore it or we're potentially making it more and more extreme, the more we ignore it. There's this balance of honouring the teachings we've been given, honouring the spiritual practices, where we can tap into those teachings, tap into what our people have done for years, tap into our ancestors, tap into the land that we exist on.

Whether a species has come and gone, there's still spirit there and things to learn, but also being very critical and analytical and scientific about how we deal with climate change today. So there's this balance in the two, I think, and that's sort of my answer and how I move forward. As I see in my own territory, the salmon stocks getting worse and worse, something that comes to mind is how am I going to ensure that I can feed my family? My goal is always, for how I want to feed my family, only traditional protein for the entire year. When I see this happening, I have to ask myself, how am I going to do this, this coming year if I can't have access to let's say sockeye salmon? We're going to have to be able to find new ways and who knows what that means? Maybe where one stock goes down, we can find the abundance in another. Maybe not, but the harder we lean into the land, I believe the more resilient we'll be to these changes because we'll be aware of them. We'll see them coming. We'll know how to adapt as opposed to just like blindsiding us and not being aware.

Roberta: How do you make sure that youth are engaged in leaning into the environment and leaning into, as you say, our stories, our teachings, so that there's not that eco-anxiety, eco grief, the trauma we can see happening, when we're not able to connect to our land-based activities anymore, or our traditional foods,

country foods, whatever they may be? How do we engage more youth to participate so that they feel that hope, which is the only word that I can come up with as this point?

Spencer: So there's again different facets to this. I think on some level we have to teach our children to be resilient, and tell them stories of resilience, and allow them to be comfortable with discomfort sometimes. Our people, we're great at that. Our traditional ceremonies and practices, they weren't always comfortable. I think of like the stories of my Elders who started fasting when they were 12 years old. Started, I mean, amazing tests of strength and bravery and just things that build the character of someone to have the confidence that, "I can have hope, I can be resilient." I think that's key on some sort of moral teaching level.

We have to give our kids that. That rarely comes from an institution. It rarely comes from external funding. It comes from you having a relationship with the people in your community, the children in your community, and just teaching them a life on the land. Sometimes the life on the land just naturally brings that. It naturally brings the ebbs and flows, the wins and losses, of what we need to learn as opposed to the instant gratification we might get from an upbringing of Fortnite computer games, what we see today. So that's one aspect of it. The other aspect is, we have this word that I love in our language. It's *gugwilx'ya'ansk*. Translated it means for all-time passing down or for all time distributing. It's most often used in a political setting when you see the passing of a hereditary title or someone's hereditary standing down to the next generation. But we have to think of knowledge in that way, where the things we take and hold for this time, we have to make it on the top of our to-do list to ensure that they get passed down. I mean, there's nothing more exciting for youth to get out on the land. There's something in their ancestral memory, in their blood. Every child I feel like has some sort of spark. Maybe it's easier to obtain for some children more than others, but I feel like every child has this ember that's waiting to just turn into a fire around a life lived on the land and that they're happiest and that they're healthiest when they're doing that. Part of it is cliché in that we just have to do it more and less talking about it. But I know every village, every community, faces their own struggles in doing that. I mean, some communities don't have much territory to go experience that in. We all face different issues and struggles in our own way, but those are some thoughts I have. So one thing I try to do in my research is, when I can, incorporate *gugwilx'ya'ansk* process, where I see myself distributing information from my Elders to the next generation so it'll continue to pass down. If that's not in my to-do list or in my checklist of being a successful researcher, then I don't know what is successful.

Roberta: I can really appreciate that knowledge translation that has to occur. Do you have any last words that you'd want to share related to the work that you're doing? How we can look forward to, I guess influencing at a community level, a national level, but also an international level with the work that you're doing?

Spencer: To build on what I was saying earlier is one of my goals is to look at traditional ways of harvesting and say, how do these practices really make us healthier along with making our ecosystems healthier. One of them that I'm really excited to look into and do more research around is rebuilding fish traps and fish weirs. I think there's great ways you can incorporate youth, you can incorporate Elders, you can incorporate entire communities around how to do this and that's just one species. I have colleagues who are doing similar things with clam gardens, which is a very similar concept that if you build a beach structure, clams thrive and they grow four times as much and four times as faster. It's a whole community thing that involves Elder knowledge and youth learning about it and doing these things.

I think we can apply those to every species in our society. So my hope is that in the future, I'll be doing research revolving around that stuff and it also allows me to be close to our own ecosystems. So to answer the bigger question of how do we talk about this moving forward, essentially how do we build connections on an international scale? It's key to share the successes and that's been hard during COVID. We are in the time of a pandemic where as researchers, we used to get together and share ideas and share our research.

That's been very hard when you can't travel. So that's been unfortunate, but I think just telling those stories, like story itself is essential to the human existence, and that's all we are as researchers, is we're storytellers.

So when we can share successes, you can ignite this hope and this belief that other people can have successes. A part of the rebuilding salmon weirs and fish traps comes from neighboring Nations who have started doing the same thing. It's been on my mind for years and then I saw that the Heiltsuk did it and they're in the process of doing it and rebuilding fished weirs that have contributed an amazing ways to research. It just sort of tells me, "oh, I can do that." And in time, maybe we can feed our entire community with food fish, with our sustenance fishing because of these traps. We don't need to rely on industrial processes anymore. And if we can be healthier for everyone and maybe that will resonate with people in Norway, who are fishing communities. And maybe that will resonate with people in New Zealand and people all over the world who rely on fish. The same could be said for interior species and species and other places. And so on some level, it's just this wonderful tool that we've had forever and that's sharing these stories, of leaning into the land and the successes we find in leaning into the land.

Roberta: I want to thank you for leaning into the land and for leaning into the research that you're doing. I'm in awe and I wish you the best of luck going forward with all of that. So thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today about the stories, your culture, where you come from, and why it's important to you.

I really appreciate your time. Thank you so much, Spencer.

Spencer: Thanks for having me Roberta.

Roberta: To hear more podcasts in this series, head to the Voices from the Field, on the National Collaborating Center for Indigenous Health's website, NCCIH.ca. Music on this podcast is by blue dot sessions. It appears under a creative commons license. To learn more, go to www.sessions.blue.

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