

## The Tsilhqot'in Territory is Our Home

The Tsilhqot'in territory is our home and Teztan is part of that home (See Figure 1). Teztan is a village of cathedrals, our qiyex (fish camp), a sanctuary, a place of safety, and a place to retreat to when final prophecies take place.

Mining will have a catastrophic effect on the immediate and surrounding landscapes of Teztan, affecting the spiritual and pristine nature of sites, the existing species, the Tsilhqot'in culture, the Tsilhqot'in people, the First Nations, and people around the world.

The Tsilhqot'in spiritual connection to Teztan is reinforced by the time-depth of traditional use, the pristine nature of the area, and the intact ecosystem. We are spiritually dependant on our ancestors, our traditions, and our land and its species. We need all aspects of our culture and pristine environments to be physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally healthy (See Figure 2).

The rivers in the Tsilhqot'in territory are known as ancestors and are respectfully called Yedadenilin (The Ancient One Who Lives) (Margaret Boyd, TI'etinqox Elder; Helena Myers, Yunesit'in Elder, born 1916). Dasiqox (Taseko River) flows out of a glacial fed lake below Teztan. This waterway provides a connection to ancestors and is a reminder of the ancient story of Lhindsch'osh who traveled with his sons across this landscape.

Jimmy William (Xeni Gwet'in, born 1912) is the great-great grandson of Louie Sit'ax (born in 1800s) and is oldest son of Samuel William. His father was raised by great grandparents so Jimmy was fortunate to receive cultural training. Louie Sit'ax's descendants represent six known generations who have used Nabas in the traditional way and this use of the area include ceremonies and the reliance on spiritual guides. Alice William has started documenting her family's memories of Nabas which she shared in part at the hearings in Xeni. She has learned much about her siblings' participation in traditional and spiritual observances, so it could be assumed that the six generations, their ancestors, and their neighbours have used the whole of Nabas for spiritual rituals while trapping, hunting, fishing, and foraging in the area.

Jimmy William was initiated for the entire period of his childhood through ritual bathing (Helena Myers, Yunesit'in Elder) and Jimmy's parents often lived at Teztan. A Coast Salish First Nations (Electronic Document, 29 March 2002) noted the importance of selecting ceremonial sites:

...Clean water either from the mountains or places of power, form a major part in the ceremonies and is used to cleanse, prepare, strengthen, and transform individuals. Two or three months bathing in snow, ice, or rain at dawn condition one to enter into other spiritual realms. The selection of a spiritual site is based on finding the right place and showing respect for the environment. The Coast Salish sacred ritual sites are carefully selected so as not to harm the other spirits of the water, and the paths of salmon are left in their pure states. The constant voices of prayer, songs, and the ceremonial activities create a sacred environment, allowing human and other spirits to co-

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exist. The bathing site is therefore a site which is imbued with power in part from the process of continuous ritual bathing and in part from initial contact with spiritual beings.

Water is one of many spiritual connections for Tsilhqot'in people, and water and deyen (spiritual healer) share similar roles in that they transform, cleanse, and heal. By its continuous flow, Dasiqox remains pure and when used within a sweat lodge ceremony, its steam acts as Healer.

Many of the Tsilhqot'in elders traveled to at least five fishing sites every spring and fall for many years. For a number of them, it has been years since they have gone fishing at a qiyex (fish camp) and Teztan is a qiyex. At some qiyex, there have been incidences of local sports fishermen taking away elders' nets to stop them from fishing.

The historical tragedies and struggles of First Nations continue on as more and more people begin to realize just how disastrously First Nations livelihood is being destroyed.

Today, some of the Tsilhqot'in elders will not be able to ground-truth important traditional sites. Within the immediate caretaking area of at least five Tsilhqot'in communities, the old growth has been clearcut during the last twenty-four years and more cut-blocks are being planned. The ancient trails and the old roads have been destroyed. The present climate has changed. The winters are colder, the winds faster, and the sun hotter. Much of the Tsilhqot'in landscapes are bare, some lakes are dry, and the many empty ditches no longer carry fish to and from their spawning beds. Migratory birds soaked in lagoon-filth still find places to nest. The land is unrecognizable.

The ancestors continue to walk these places. The spirits of the elders, Louie Sit'ax, Samuel William, Jimmie William, and other Tsilhqot'in, will remain forever where they have traveled across the lands. The lives of present Tsilhqot'in elders as they knew it, is gone forever and these elders are dwindling in number. These elders hold knowledge received from their great grandparents and they have had the privilege of passing on the land before its destruction. Within the life span of Prosperity Mine, the present elders will no longer be with us and our language may no longer be spoken.

As First Nations cope and find strength to voice present concerns and oversee environmental problems, it is becoming apparent that the solutions have to involve different forms of change and the process of requesting change to land and resource use has been like forcing water to flow backwards.

It is interesting to note that an ancient Tsimshian story (Cove and MacDonald 1987: 17-18)<sup>1</sup> has a powerful message for people today and it is comparable to what is happening to our water:

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<sup>1</sup> Cove, J.J. and G.F. MacDonald. 1987. Tsimshian Narratives. 1: Tricksters, Shamans and Heroes. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa, Ontario.

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Txamsen [Raven] would consume huge dishes of food and berries. He would finish the food in one house and then move into the next and the next until he had finished eating all the food in the chief's village, and he was growing very quickly. One day the children playing by the water's edge saw something coming up through the water as from a spring. Curious, they followed it until they saw this gluttonous person sitting at the edge of the water and there was a constant stream of excrement coming from his anus. This they saw and they went up to the chief's house. "We have seen the gluttonous one and his excretions are now filling the beach...."

At the time of this story, the people had the option of moving away from their traditional site which they did, but today there is nowhere to go. This story is also a reminder that not long ago, Tsilhqot'in drank water anywhere on the land, but they cannot today because of Forestry practices.

Nabas is the last pristine spiritual area on this side of Dasiqox. For First Nations who live in more populated areas (cities), the creation of parklands does not provide secluded areas for sacred ritual activities. Sites which require focus, training and enhanced solitude fundamental to the spiritual training process can be permanently harmed with casual use, camping, hiking, and tourist activity.

Mining will destroy the spiritual nature of Teztan and will devastate natural ecosystems that have sustained living species for thousands of years. A Tsilhqot'in stated last week, "It is basic common sense to know that certain practices will adversely affect land and water."

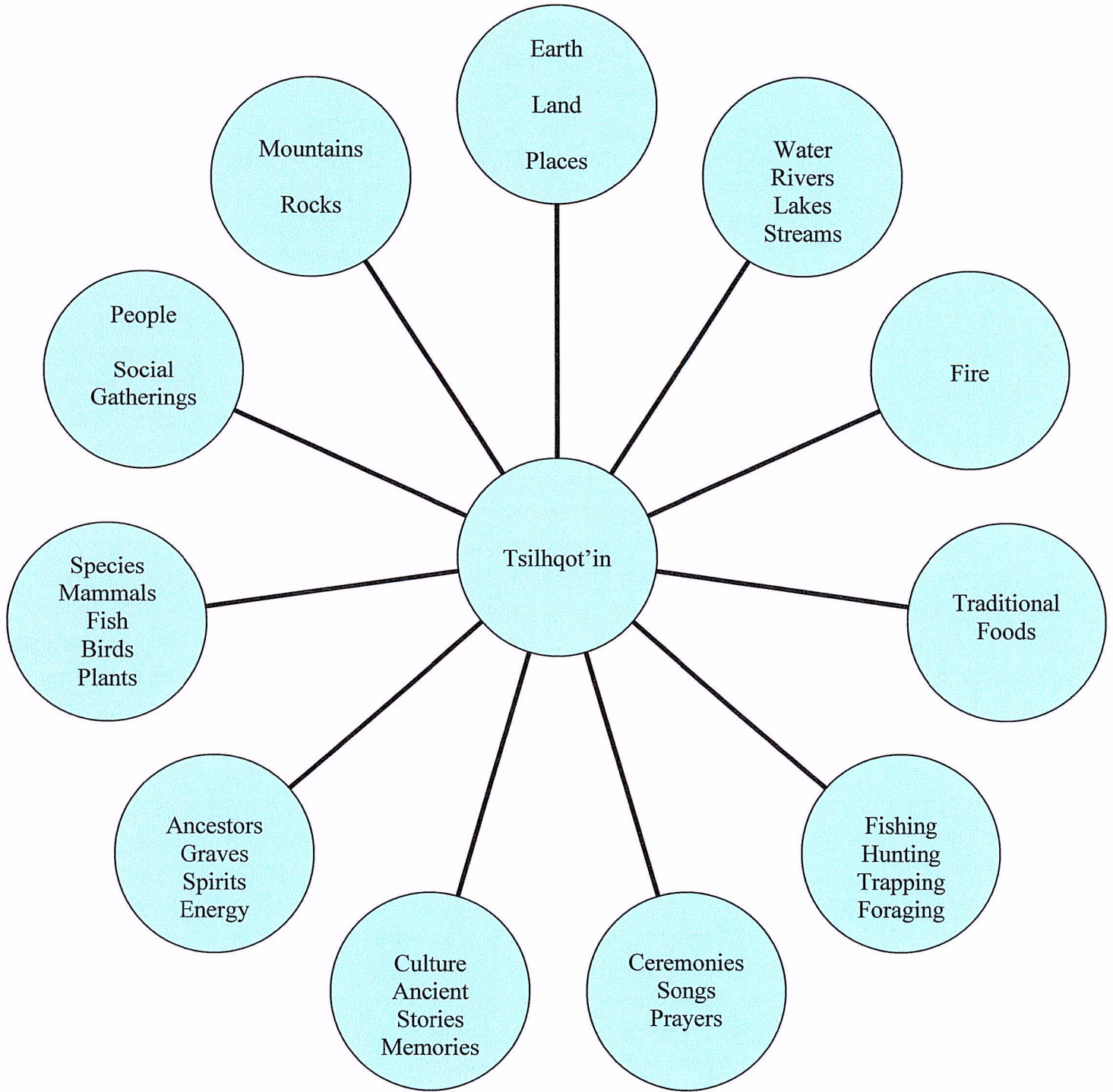
Has society become so addicted to destroying natural systems that they feel the need to deny the impacts from projects like this?

It is imperative that adverse cumulative effects imposed on us by outside institutions are addressed. Tsilhqot'in will also need to recover the culture they have lost, and bring healing to their people, the land and its species. It is tragic that so much of our land-base has been already permanently altered by clearcuts and roads. Physically deformities and contamination of sites are more difficult to restore to previous healthy states.

We are grateful to have learned so much from the Secwepemc [Sewhepemuwh] and the Elk'achugh [Carrier, Anahim Lake]. We are indebted to all the extraordinary experts, the spiritual people, and others who assisted us during this CEAA process. We appreciate the hard work of the CCEA panel and their technical assistants. We thank the Prosperity Mines Limited staff for bringing people together. We feel that there is hope for the future. This process has made us more appreciative of our land, our traditional foods, and our culture. The Tsilhqot'in, Secwepemc, Elk'achugh, Indigenous people, and Non-Indigenous people around the world have shared their concerns and this has created common ground and unity. We sincerely hope that this positive ripple in the pond will spread out and touch the rest of the world.

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Figure 1: Tsilhqot'in Land is Our Home



We are spiritually dependant on our ancestors, our traditions, our water, and our land and its species.

# The Tsilhqot'in Territory is Our Home

Figure 2: We need all these aspects of our culture and pristine environments to be physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally healthy.

