



200 - 2006 West 10th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V6J 2B3
www.wcel.org

tel: 604.684.7378
fax: 604.684.1312
toll free: 1.800.330.WCEL (in BC)
email: admin@wcel.org

Voice-over for Prezi on the RELAW Project Summer in Review September 19, 2016

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The summer of 2016 marked the first of four seasons of the year-long RELAW project. RELAW stands for “Revitalizing Indigenous Law for Land, Air and Water”.

At West Coast Environmental Law we share the belief that Indigenous law is law, that Indigenous laws are part of living Indigenous legal orders, and that Indigenous law can and should be used on the ground today. Indigenous nations have actively managed their territories for millennia and their management activities have shaped the ecological conditions that allow all beings to thrive.

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We have partnered with the University of Victoria Faculty of Law’s Indigenous Law Research Unit (ILRU). Their support includes advice and guidance to RELAW staff throughout the project. Together, alongside 6 First Nations, we are looking at traditional stories, and drawing out law from them using a case-brief method similar to what is done in Canadian law schools.

Now that the RELAW team is four months into our work, we want to take this moment to reflect and share some of the exciting progress.

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We will take you on a photo journey across these 6 indigenous territories. We hope you feel inspired learning about what each of the six First Nations involved in RELAW are doing to take care of their territories, those who live there, and those who visit.

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The Fort Nelson First Nation is located in the north in Treaty 8 territory.

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They are focusing on using their traditional laws to develop a water policy.

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Community member and RELAW researcher Kerissa Dickie said, “I’ve only been in this position for three months, and I’ve already benefitted so much. Not only have I been given the opportunity to research great stories, but I’ve also interviewed several community members: Adeline, Larry, Curtis, George, and Raymond (ranging in ages from 35-95) who invited me into their homes and shared great traditional and land stewardship knowledge. This project is not only helping my community to preserve its culture and values, it’s helping me learn more about who I am as a Dene person.”

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West Coast lawyer Georgia Lloyd-Smith joined Kerissa in Fort Nelson for the annual gathering called Treaty Days.

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This event brought family and community together from across the territory to sing, dance, play, eat, and talk about what is most important.

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Kerissa’s grandmother Adeline said: “All animals can talk, you just have to learn how to understand them. I always listen to the woodpecker, last time he told me: ‘the storm is coming this way, you better cover up your stuff’. Even trees talk, but really quiet. They tell me to be careful in the forest.”

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Besides conducting more interviews, Fort Nelson is also looking forward to an indigenous law art contest! The hope is to get community members of all ages engaged with the project, and really thinking about the stories that teach how people should live with each other and the earth.

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Next we move to the Northwest Coast of the Pacific to the Community of Hartley Bay of the Gitga’at First Nation.

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This image shows water and mountains in the heart of Gitga’ata territory. La’goot, Spencer Greening, is a member of the Gitga’at First Nation. He is a band councillor, and RELAW researcher. He and Indigenous Law Research Unit lawyer Simon Owen spent

time together in July talking to elders and knowledge holders about the laws that are held in their stories.

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These conversations happened at a very busy time as many people were fishing. La'goot said fishing for stories in the summer is like trying to fish for salmon in the winter. It is much harder to do. With their keen ears and minds, and getting out onto the water La'goot and Simon were able to engage with people about Gitga'ata law.

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The Gitga'ata believe they could never negotiate a treaty with their backs turned to the waters.

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The life found in the ocean provides the life force for those on the land. The Land and water are interconnected.

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Now we move into the Chilcotin mountain region, where the Tsilhqot'in Nation call home.

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The territory consists of mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes that have power according to Tsilhqot'in stories. The people must respect them, in order to live in a good way.

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RELAW researcher Alice William of the band Xenigwet'in and her husband Tom Dillabough guided West Coast staff Hannah Askew and Lindsay Borrows on two different horseback trips through the rugged landscape of Tsilhqot'in territory. These trips allowed for more than conversations, but to live Tsilhqot'in environmental laws.

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Alice lives Tsilhqot'in laws when she hunts, fishes, harvests plants, takes care of their horses and how she treats the water.

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Alice's brother Norman is a hunter. He took Lindsay on a walk to find deer. They followed the tracks from the camp up the mountain and along a little ridge. There was scat from rabbit, deer, bear and moose. Norman shared stories about hunting with his dad and mom. His dad told him to walk gently on the trail because you need to be quiet, and you don't know when you'll come across game and have to stop.

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The landscape is powerful. We enjoyed all the moods of the sky throughout the 24 hour cycle—the sun sets, sun rises, stars and the sunshine of the day. The earth itself is a legal textbook.

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The Tsilhqot'in have worked very hard together over the years to protect their land and ensure their laws govern their territories in the way their ancestors were taught.

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The St'at'imc Nation also had a busy summer working with youth, adults and elders. Dean Billy and Helen Copeland were excellent researchers and organizers. WCEL executive director Jessica Clogg and articulated student Lindsay Borrows were grateful to work on the St'at'imc RELAW team.

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The St'at'imc had eight different workshops over the course of four months to bring people together to talk about stories and the laws they contain. These elders pictured here met in T'it'q'et, near Lillooet. 82 year old Albert Joseph said about a coyote story, "That Charlie Mack story about the coyote wakes you up after a few hours and makes you realize the most important. Makes you know why you're alive."

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This sign on the Fraser River lets visitors and St'at'imc Nation members know what the fishing laws of the area are. It includes that "licensees will contribute 5-10 fish to those unable to fish for themselves (elders etc.)". It also states that "traditional fishing methods only" will be used there, including gillnet, set net and dip net.

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The Transformers were beings of the past who transformed the territory into a safe place for humans and others. The Transformers taught the St'at'imc how to fish, deliver babies, and where certain geographic boundaries were to be respected.

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The Secwepmec have been engaged in drawing environmental law out of their stories for the past couple of years. The Shuswap Nation Tribal Council is working on the RELAW Project.

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This past year, SNTC has made a beautiful workbook to share with community members the findings of their earlier research drawing environmental law out of stories.

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Aboriginal Rights and Title Coordinator Sally Hunter says they are looking forward to moving into the application phase of the RELAW work now that autumn has arrived. Together the team is working on developing an environmental code of ethics based on their Secwepmec laws.

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Finally we go to the home of Tsawout First Nation, located on the Saanich peninsula next to the Salish Sea. RELAW team members Joshua James and Shauna Johnson, had a successful summer bringing people together to talk about their marine laws. WCEL team members Georgia Lloyd-Smith and Maxine Matilpi enjoyed learning with them as well.

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They held a story-telling session on LEU WEL NEW. This is the place of their origin story as WSANEC people. They told the story outside in the place, to develop a deeper connection between community members and their story. 20 people came. They ate together and shared in an open process that allowed anyone to share their ideas, stories, or feelings about the words that were shared.

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Shauna said of the experience, quote, “For me, working with WSANEC law through stories has been an eye-opening experience, because I have never heard many of these stories before. But as I become more familiar with them, I am now constantly thinking about the stories, the teachings that they offer me, and how I can apply those teachings in my own life.

I’ve started down a new path, so the picture of the steps resonates with me, because this is the start of a path that leads to an amazing view of the Saanich Peninsula. At that viewpoint, you can see the gulf islands, as well as our spit, TIXEN, and another one our

sacred mountains, PKOLS. I look forward to getting far enough along this journey to see the landscape at this viewpoint, but to see them with a different perspective now; one where the landscape is filled with stories and teachings from our ancestors.”

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Thank you for travelling with us in photos and stories across these territories to learn about some of the work being done to revitalize indigenous laws.

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Please check out our blog posts linked below to other work we have done on RELAW this summer and stay tuned for further events. We are now moving into our application and enforcement stages which will involve creating contemporary legal instruments that record and utilize Indigenous law. We are happy to hear from you with any comments or questions! Thank you.