

Blueberry River

Rita Wong

They polluted our country so bad we cannot go out there by the creek and make tea. We cannot drink water anywhere in northeastern Peace River.

...And another important thing is too the berries have all disappeared. There's no berries around. The Blueberry River, they call it Blueberry River because of blueberries. So today there's nothing.

– Jerald Davis, Elder from the Blueberry River First Nations¹



A blueberry is a small, sweet medicine. A humble, watery globe, so fragile and so necessary.

Blueberry is also a mighty First Nation.

I remember spending time along the banks of the Peace River, watching a beaver build its home. Tasting the fresh, clean water of rare tufa seeps before they were destroyed by BC Hydro. Watching the eagles soar above us as we sang for the river's life.

How long does it take for a highway to kill an ancient forest? One year, one hundred years, two hundred years? We are learning through trial and error, mostly error.

Are we learning?

Cumulative impacts have taken us into climate destabilization, heat waves, intensifying forest fire seasons, polluted air, and poisoned water.

This August, each inhale a smoky one for young lungs.

¹Quoted in “Yahey v. British Columbia,” BC Courts. The Supreme Court of British Columbia, 2021, https://www.bccourts.ca/jdb-txt/sc/21/12/2021BCSC1287.htm#_Toc75942631.

Capitalism denies our reliance on the earth, refuses reciprocity, puts us on a collective death spiral, prioritizing consumption to the point of collapse.

Can cumulative impacts change this trajectory? Can cumulative impacts restore the land's health and people's respect for the earth?

If so, what would such cumulative impacts look like?



Blueberry River opens a path. I am grateful for the determination and strength of the Dane-zaa people in northeastern so-called British Columbia, who are holding the Crown accountable for its actions. Dane-zaa hunters, dreamers, mothers, children, Elders, leaders, and healers.

On June 29, 2021, the Blueberry River First Nations won an important legal victory. Suffering from the cumulative impacts of oil, gas, forestry, mining, hydroelectric infrastructure, agricultural clearing, and more, Blueberry sought, and received, an acknowledgement that the province of British Columbia has breached its treaty responsibilities and that it must not continue to authorize activities that breach Treaty 8.² The promise of the treaty was that Dane-zaa people would be able to continue their forest and river life, hunting and living with the land for as long as the sun shines, the rivers flow, and the earth remains.

Judge Emily Burke recognized that a tipping point had been reached. Dane-zaa people can no longer practice their culture the way they used to due to widespread and intensive industrial damage to their homelands.

Blueberry's reserve has been nicknamed "Little Kuwait" because it has been lit up and poisoned by fracking flares.³

²According to the ruling the province has six months to negotiate changes; on December 29th, 2021, it must stop authorizing industrial activities that have been devastating Blueberry's traditional territory, where more than 80 percent of the territory is within 500 meters of an industrial disturbance ("Peace River Corridor Industrial Development," Vidyard, <https://share.vidyard.com/watch/oMzaqY1bkyhVJV1esjBoRc>)

³Cox, Sarah, "'Our Way of Existence is Being Wiped Out': B.C. First Nation Besieged by Industry," *The Narwhal*, June 28th, 2016, <https://thenarwhal.ca/our-way-existence-being-wiped-out-84-blueberry-river-first-nation-impacted-industry/>



Can Blueberry and the Peace region be healed?

First the violence and abuse of power have to stop.

Violence against the land is violence against the people.

Clearcutting trees is violent. It is indiscriminate. It disrespects life. Logging can happen in a way that is selective, respectful, and sustainable. But this has not been happening in BC for the most part.

What would cumulative impacts *in the right direction* look like?

Trees are one answer, one key.



Trees—their death en masse, that is—connect the destruction inherent to the TransMountain pipeline expansion, the Site C dam, logging at Fairy Creek, the Coastal GasLink pipeline, and other resource extraction projects.

Across BC, millions of trees that we need to cool the climate are being cut down at the absolutely wrong moment. This is a cumulative impact and replanting them might not be enough to reverse the harm of killing the trees while they were old and sustaining a complex network of life.

There's no guarantee that young trees can or will survive the climate extremes we increasingly face. Still, stopping the clearcutting would be a step in the right direction.⁴



⁴The 1308 Trees project (<https://1308trees.ca>) was started as a way to oppose the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion (TMX) and associated plans to cut down 1,308 trees in Burnaby, BC without permits.

In the lengthy court case *Yahey v. British Columbia*, Blueberry reminds the court of “the need to leave areas fallow for rejuvenation.” Areas that were clearcut and poisoned as a result of industry were not “empty” or “neglected.” They were respected areas given space by Indigenous people, a practice that colonizers didn’t care to understand. Dane-zaa people conducted seasonal rounds, visiting different areas and only taking what they needed, generation after generation. They cared for the land. They still care for the land.

Healthy hunters are the sign of a healthy land.

Elders spoke of the bush being their store, and the wildlife their groceries. But the connection between Blueberry and the animals they harvest runs deeper than sustenance. One of the most important aspects of Dane-zaa identity is the maintenance of a relationship between hunters and the spirits of the animals they hunt. Hunters ‘dream’ their prey, and animals willingly give themselves to hunters who uphold their responsibilities.⁵

The judge also noted that the Dane-zaa’s freedom was important to them and “they spoke about it regularly.”⁶

The land is under siege. Biodiversity is under siege.

How long does it take a dam to kill a species? Track the caribou and find out. Trace the path of the moose that are missing in action. Families that used to rely on a dozen moose in a year, are now down to two, if that. Track the trout that they plan to truck past the Site C dam and see how long that expensive and insane plan goes on for⁷.

Watch the eagles, necessary guides and teachers, who are losing their nesting trees.

Up in the Peace Valley, forests are being clearcut the equivalent area of the length of Vancouver to Whistler. Billions are being wasted on destroying a precious

⁵ “Yahey v. British Columbia,” BC Courts. The Supreme Court of British Columbia, 2021, https://www.bccourts.ca/jdb-txt/sc/21/12/2021BCSC1287.htm#_Toc75942631.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cox, Sarah, “BC Hydro’s Bizarre, Multi-Million Dollar Boondoggle to Save Fish from Site C Dam,” *The Narwhal*, April 4th, 2016, <https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-hydro-s-bizarre-multi-million-dollar-boondoggle-save-fish-site-c-dam/>

ecosystem, rich wildlife refuges, sacred burial sites, rare northern wetlands, fertile farmland, and more.

It is a heartbreaking mistake, one that Dane-zaa seers have foretold will end in failure. Two landslides have occurred near the dam site since BC Hydro started this disastrous “project.” When will the next landslide be? I have more faith in landslides than governments to protect us from the Site C dam.



A watery globe, so fragile and so necessary. Where a blueberry grows, or doesn't grow, is an indicator of health.

So is a healthy moose liver. And lichen on a tree. So much subtlety in a forest, so much medicine, stupidly destroyed by brutal colonial extraction.



Down in the unceded x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), S_kw_xwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) lands also known as Vancouver, we are connected to the Peace Valley because of the previously built WAC Bennett dam and the Peace Canyon dam, which provide roughly a third of the electricity we use. The grid connects us to a history of attempted genocide of Indigenous Peoples, the flooding of vast areas of land, intergenerational trauma, the displacement of people and animals from their homes, the drowning and deaths of countless animals⁸, gestured to through a meaningless apology from BC Hydro as they prepare to flood one-hundred and twenty-eight kilometres more of sacred places.

⁸ See for example the removal of a thousand-pound eagles' nest by BC Hydro contractors for the Site C dam. (Poets for the Peace, Twitter post, September 28th, 2021, 12:12 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Poets4thePeace/status/1442915180153741316?s=20>)

With a flick of the light switch, I am connected to this violent history, which I cannot change. But I can decide how I respond to this history, and I can refuse to continue its violence and injustice. We can do this by stopping the Site C dam. By recognizing how the Peace Valley in its natural state is worth more than a mercury poisoned reservoir to pump electricity at a loss, since it will never recoup the expense it will take to force the dam on a land that doesn't want it.

More Dane-zaa people will be back in court in 2022, with the West Moberly First Nations seeking to halt the Site C dam.⁹

Cumulative impacts can and must be turned around in the right direction. I don't know if humanity has enough time to achieve this, but I know this is what we need to do for our own humanity, even if we run out of time.

To become good relatives and good ancestors, we have to stop destroying biodiversity. We have to protect the land and watersheds, which is also to protect ourselves. This is the best solution to the climate emergency facing us.

In the long run, the earth will have the final say. My prayer is for humans and our so-called leaders to listen to the language of the earth, to truly care for the health of her waters, to respect and protect the land that gives us life.

May my life protect the Peace Valley. I offer this prayer for its life.



⁹See the following Raven Trust Campaign for a link to the direct action: "Stop Site C Dam," Raven Trust. <https://raventrust.com/campaigns/sitec/>