



# Wild Times

Raindrop to Torrent

by Joe Foy

I love the idea that even the smallest raindrop can join with others to become a mighty torrent. Perhaps it's because I have lived on the wet coast of Canada for my entire life, and my home has always been within 20 kilometres of the big river known as the Fraser.

In early October of this year, I drove up the highway through the mountain walls of the Fraser Canyon, then past Cariboo country and on to the Chilcotin Plateau to attend a gathering at a little lake at the western edge of the Fraser River watershed.

My drive paralleled the trek that a special run of sockeye salmon have been making almost as long as the river has been running. These sockeye are the champion mountain climbers of their kind. When their journey is complete, these determined fish will have climbed up from the North Pacific Ocean over a kilometre in height, having first bucked the current all the way up the Fraser Canyon and onto

the Chicotin Plateau to spawn in the shadows of the glacier-clad Coast Mountains. They do this in the late summer and early fall every year.

The First Nations people who live on the plateau and who have been sus-

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tained by these salmon for countless generations are also endowed with some sort of special strength. This is Tsilhqot'in Nation territory. The lake I had come to camp beside is Fish Lake (Teztan Biny in the Tsilhqot'in language).

In the morning, as the sun rose over Fish Lake, it revealed rolling pine forests and meadows framed by mighty peaks. All morning, pickup trucks bounced up the rough road packed with Tsilhqot'in families, their neighbours and friends, until the surrounding meadow was filled with several hundred people.

Tsilhqot'in men wore cowboy hats, western shirts and big silver belt buckles. Many of the Tsilhqot'in women wore long colourful skirts. Hand drums, each one with a different painted design, were backlit by the rising sun. Fragments of Tsilhqot'in language conversations mingled with smudge smoke, laughter and the breeze off the lake. Kids chased each other between the trees.

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Tim Paul, a Nuu-chah-nulth master carver from the west coast of Vancouver Island, was there with his family to present the Tsilhqot'in Nation with a totem pole, to honour their successful court battle to establish aboriginal title and rights to their territory. The Tsilhqot'in had also been successful in fighting off a proposal to turn the Fish Lake area into a huge open-pit gold and copper mine – the federal government having turned down the mining proposal not once, but twice.

The title and rights court case had dragged on since the early 1990s, and the battle over Fish Lake had been very intense in the final five years. But the Tsilhqot'in hung in there – just like their salmon – and eventually climbed to victory earlier this year.

It was quite a sight as Nuu-chah-nulth dancers in red button blankets danced traditional dances there on the shore of Fish Lake. And then the totem pole, carried by many hands, was taken to the place where it was raised by ropes and muscle power.

After much drumming, songs, prayers and a meal together, the Tsilhqot'in leaders had an announcement to make.

The Tsilhqot'in Nation was declaring that several hundred thousand hectares around Fish Lake and the Taseko River watershed would be designated as the Dasiqox Tribal Park. The exact boundaries and manage-

ment plan are to be worked out over the coming year after consultations with the Tsilhqot'in's neighbours, but Fish Lake will be forever off-limits to large industrial schemes like mining.

Seeing the pride of the people in their beautiful country I couldn't help but believe that Fish Lake is a source of what promises to be a growing torrent of change. And that's a good thing. It's about time.



Joe Foy is the National Campaign Director for the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, Canada's largest citizen-funded membership based wilderness preservation organization.



Photos: Joe Foy

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