IVAN THOMPSON

I saw the Skeena for the first time on a perfectly sunny fall day. I remember coming over Hungry Hill and seeing the Babine Mountains and all the colors. I dropped into town—into Smithers—and was browsing the bookstore. I saw so many incredible picture books and interesting history books and I thought, "If a town this small has this many great publications about the place and the people that live here, there must be something cool going on and I should probably be here, too." It was a rare moment of clear decision in life—especially in my 20s.

There was very little apparent industrial logging when I arrived in Smithers. I was teaching, and wasn't looking for something else to do. The only reason I got involved is because the logging was coming closer to the town, into the viewscape. It was harder to ignore. And then I learned of plans to log right up to the treeline in some of the valleys in the Babine, and I was shocked. I thought, "Well, it must be a terrible mistake being made here. We should just tell someone how important and special these areas are to people and maybe we can get a conversation going."

And it really was with that sort of naiveté that I engaged, and found out very quickly that people were feeling pretty defensive. Simply asking questions about logging—why or where—got a severe reaction. Forestry in British Columbia had been determined by frontier entrepreneurism. If you could convince people you could put it together and create some wealth, create jobs, help support communities, and so on, then go for it. There were some rules of course—don't damage the

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ecosystem too much—but there had never, ever been any conversation with the public at any kind of strategic level about where you get to log and how much you get to log. In fact, when you added it all up, it appeared that the annual allowable cut for the Province meant that you had to log just about everywhere!

I wasn't the only one waking up to it; a group of us created a little local organization called the Driftwood Foundation. We quickly realized that if you just talked about the areas you cared most about, the proposed logging would get cut in half just in those spots and continue as planned everywhere else. It became clear we needed to get everything on the table and have a conversation in the broader context about what should happen where. So, we did—we had a conference called "Reclaiming our Forests." Many people came, and we got a mandate to figure out how to get more community control over these kinds of decisions.

We learned a lot. We learned that, in a place like this, getting to some kind of solution requires figuring out how to avoid upsetting your neighbor. This meant we had to actually create a forum where people felt that their interests were going to get a fair play and in which they had confidence and the commitment to work out a better solution. Those initial efforts resulted in the creation of the Bulkley Valley Resources Board and a land use plan for the Bulkley Forest District that, among other things, protected the Babine Mountains. They also served as my introduction to the world of conservation.

By this time, I was teaching at the college level and focusing more on my interests in natural resource management and natural sciences.

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Around 2000 or 2001, I became aware of the work that was being done around the Great Bear Rainforest in coastal BC. It was a pretty significant conservation deal, one that worked at a large scale and incorporated aboriginal interests in a big way. There were people in Smithers that were working on the Great Bear initiative. In 2002, I had a chance to go and work with them as the community economic advisor for one of the organizations that was most involved. That's when I really started working in conservation full-time, and I've been doing it ever since.

The negotiations took years, because we were trying to put together a fairly large conservation and economic package. Through that process, I got to know some of the people involved, including the Moore Foundation. Later, they needed someone to help coordinate the work that was going on in the Skeena, where I was still living, and I took the position. At that time, we were primarily concerned with some mining proposals and a variety of other threats. I tried to support communities, ensuring the voice of conservation was heard around the watershed.

These early experiences inform my perspective to this day. It has been a blessing and a curse that I've never lost my sense that the power to stop change, or keep change from happening too rapidly or randomly, comes from people with a passion for place. I'm not saying there aren't other forms of power or they are less effective or important. I'm just saying this is the one I understand because, quite simply, that's where I came from.

Now, here I am working for one of the largest conservation funders on the planet. And I do this work because I came to understand the value in linking that place-based power of people with people elsewhere

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in the world. In the early days, I didn't understand the need or the potential. Maybe we didn't need it in the Bulkley valley process, but by the time we got to the Great Bear Rainforest it very much depended on access to different kinds of power. There was an international marketing campaign. There was a very sophisticated group of people that knew how to apply serious pressure from outside the region, both in the media and the marketplace, to create the conditions for change such that government and industry felt compelled to act and ultimately were able to act.

In the Great Bear initiative, I was working with the different communities on the coast, First Nations in particular, to understand what they needed. One time, one of the elders of the coast said, "you want us to quit (cutting trees). Well, we'd like to quit doing this stuff, too, but what are we going to be left with to support that community? If you are telling me the whole world is watching, and cares about our area, then put your money where your mouth is. Show us that they care, show us they're willing to support us doing something else." That was a pretty significant moment. That process became an example of an individual who deeply cares about the land, in a little community on the coast of British Columbia, getting connected to the hope and promise and resources of the world beyond. When those elements come together, it can be phenomenally transformative.

As funders committed to empowering communities, we have to accept that in enabling the process there is an implicit loss of control of the outcome. But it was never ours to begin with. Control of the outcome was always an illusion. That's our own need. We create very specific

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understandings about outcomes so we can hold ourselves to some kind of discipline and measure our progress and ultimately hold ourselves to account. That's our… stuff.

Funders should try to make appropriate decisions about the allocations of resources. It all depends on how you define those outcomes. At the end of the day, I love seeing the creation of a protected area or a change in policy as much as anybody else. But with two billion more people entering the middle class in the next twenty years, and god knows how many more after that, neither of those strategies are going to look after the land. At the end of the day, we're still going to need people in place to keep watch. It doesn't mean those protected areas and policies aren't valuable—they are. And one of the reasons they are is because they keep places intact, which inspires people to look after them and connect with other people who value them as well. This is the power of the immune response, the function of the Skeena watershed. People are connected to every little part of that watershed and those people are connected to each other because the watershed is still connected to itself—the water is still flowing downstream, from the mountains to the coast, the fish still swim upstream, from the coast through the mountains. It's not about outcome—what's the outcome? Where is the endpoint? When do you ever feel done? You aren't ever done. There's no "done." We need to raise our children to make sure they are connected long after we're gone. It goes round and round, or it breaks.

It's such a delicate, difficult question—how to support a network of connections between people, in a way that doesn't push them away from each other and realign them to the sources of support. That's what

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keeps me up at night. As a funder, I believe the most important question to consider, from the beginning of engagement, is what's going to be there when I'm gone. Start with the exit in mind. I always worry about whether I've done that well, because it's hard not to think "oh, wow, now there's suddenly this wonderful opportunity to put more resources into this place I love," and why wouldn't you put more into it—everything you have into it? But you have to be very careful about the relationships you endow, because you can transform how these places work. For example, there are very complex relationships between the people inside the region, on the ground, and the people outside the region, who are supporting them.

We set up the professional conservation world in a way that provides incentives for people to take credit. Create a story, tell the story, attract funding—and that's all understandable. But the truth is, when all is said and done and the funding is gone, the story needs to be one of local people in a time having taken action and, as a result, having strengthened that part of their identity that is associated with looking after the place. It is about reinforcing the positive self-image of a people who worked together to look after the place. As much as the place itself, you've got to protect that, and the narrative around their actions. Royal Dutch Shell's decision to leave the Sacred Headwaters is a great example. The story of that decision, and the history of engagement leading up that decision, needs to be a local story. We have, for a time, protected the Sacred Headwaters. Protecting the story is just as important.

Greenpeace called up at one point in the Enbridge fight and said, "How do we be helpful?" I responded, "Stay out. Go organize outside,

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don't come inside. Support where you can, but don't come in here and try to organize people. You'll just undermine them." And, to their enormous credit, Greenpeace has been incredibly valuable in this whole thing, without intruding. They listened. They have found other ways to participate without making it "theirs."

I also think it's critical not to overfund, not to create too much new stuff. We try to be very clear with organizations from the beginning. It's easier to scale up than it is to scale down. You have to be careful not to professionalize organizations too much or they potentially walk away from the base of people we want to get involved in the work.

But the sad reality in a place like the Skeena is you can't entirely avoid it. The Skeena is basically in the crosshairs of industrial-scale energy development, and there's no way to go back into mom-and-pop approaches to its conservation. It is very reassuring that, for now, the core of what has provided pretty effective resistance—the communities themselves—remains strong.

During this whole Enbridge-Northern Gateway battle, industry was spreading all kinds of rumors about how the resistance in the Skeena was being organized by a bunch of U.S.-based foundations. The first day an important hearing was being held in Kitimat, rumors were spreading around Terrace that someone had been on the plane from Vancouver and it was full of professional protesters. All the media had descended on Kitimat looking for these people, preparing for this story of imported advocacy, and what they saw instead were very old Haisla people coming up to the microphone and graciously offering everybody their

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thoughts. The story changed. The media couldn't find the conspiracy, couldn't find the paid urban protester. They couldn't find any of it. There were no "protesters." There were people, speaking about their home. That was the beginning of the end for Enbridge.

Some of the things we're trying to do now aren't particularly exotic. We put a lot of money into the Skeena supporting really good science—about all the different species of salmon, how they're doing, how abundant they are, how much life history diversity is expressed here. We've got a lot of information now, and we're trying to use our available time to make sure it stays accessible, presumably in a form that can be updated. We really want to figure out how to empower the different groups—individuals, First Nations, government agencies, advocacy organizations. This has become more important to me than the big events, endowing an ongoing capacity for people to continue to assert their interests.

And, beyond the science, there are other kinds of information. People here are more aware of what has happened in other parts of the Pacific Northwest than they ever have been. That history has become part of the narrative here. Having outside groups and the attention of the world has helped people in the Skeena appreciate the context of their struggles. They love this place as their place, but I think they've come to understand the world recognizes there's something special here, too, and that in its defense they are really holding a line.

I think one of the problems here is that our economic system is structured in a way that inevitably undermines the core strength of

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advocacy for place. When I fly up to the Skeena now, there are so many people on those airplanes that aren't from up there. When I stay in hotels, they're full. These are all people coming into the area for the opportunities of the industrial economy that are quickly becoming available as a result of the transmission lines and early stages of pipelines, gas, mining exploration, and other projects. And if those people stay, it could change the area. Already, the people who are making decisions about the region are from "away." They don't have any sense of what we have here; they just don't get it. Enbridge was totally surprised by the resistance they met here. The whole reason Enbridge chose the proposed route through the Skeena is because they thought, "Well, it'll be a hell of a lot easier to go out the Skeena than out near Vancouver." They had no idea. They were from Alberta, the other side of the Rockies. They really just didn't get it. And Alberta is relatively close; so think about the effects of decisions being made even further away. I don't see any evidence that the Prime Minister of Canada has any connection whatsoever to natural places. And I don't think he has a clue what drives people who do have that connection.

And yet these are the guys who are trying to make the decisions about our future. They make it hard to be optimistic; it's pretty difficult to see a pathway through to where we can protect somewhere like the Skeena from them. On the other hand, if we're going to do it anywhere, I can't see any other place where we will. ○