

Knowledge development between First Nations and Salmon Farming companies

First Nations along the Canadian west coast have relied on seafood and the catch of wild salmon to sustain their communities. Entering into salmon farming through alliances with corporations provide a double challenge for the First Nations that decide to do so. Firstly, doing business with corporations can be demanding as such for indigenous peoples (e.g. Peredo and Anderson, 2006). Secondly, opposition against salmon farming is strong in British Columbia; critical voices can be heard from First Nations and other stakeholders alike. Indeed, the combination of corporate relationships and the involvement in salmon farming challenge the conditions under which First Nations make their living (cf. Bebbington, 1999).

The theme of this proposal is how First Nations and corporations influence one another when they enter into partnership agreements or alliances. The study focuses on two different First Nation's and their relationships with salmon farmers. Ahousaht has worked with the global farming giant Cermaq for a number of year. Tla-o-qui-aht has a more recent partner agreement with Creative Salmon, a smaller and local farmer. Two related research questions are asked: how are First Nation - corporate relationships built, and how is knowledge utilized in these relationships to create mutual benefits?

The project is longitudinal and ongoing. It employs a relational perspective where both indigenous and corporate perspectives are acknowledged to understand how the relationships evolve. The Ahousaht-Cermaq alliance has been studied since 2010 (Huemer 2014). Ahousaht is located on Flores Island off the west coast of Vancouver Island. Cermaq is the second-largest aquaculture company in British Columbia, with its head office in Campbell River. Cermaq holds half of its operations in the Ahousaht territory where it has been operating since 2000. The alliance has evolved from significant levels of conflict and distrust, to be better described as promising with a potential for mutual benefit. Cermaq has taken time *“to see who we are. Our potlatch, our sorrow times, they came to understand this.”* (Ahousaht member). Other firms has not taken the time to really *“learn about our identity, what makes us tick.”*

The Tla-o-qui-aht-Creative Salmon partner agreement has been studied since 2015. The Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations (formerly referred to as the Clayoquot), live on ten reserves on Vancouver Island. The First Nation's primary economic activities are fishing and tourism. Creative Salmon Company Ltd. was established in 1990, and the firm employs about 50 people full-time, year round.

Their agreement is the result of two decades of relationship building and cooperative effort, and it establishes the guiding principles for Chinook salmon farming operations within the *Haahuulthii* (traditional territory) of the Tla-o-qui-aht *Hawiih* (Chiefs). The parties have appointed members to a Fish Farm Committee for regular and ongoing dialogue and exchange of information on subjects such as predator management, feed content, and fish health. The Tla-o-qui-aht Resources Director stresses that the creation of a harmonized operational environment with Creative Salmon is central to the Nation's work to manage traditional territories.

As to relationship building between First Nations and corporations, the analysis points at significant investments in order to establish closer interactions. These relationships were built gradually, based on patience, evolving respect and mutual acknowledgment. The development of trust and identification of both individual concerns and common goals helped in transforming feelings from 'we' and 'them' towards a partial recognition of 'us'.

These relationships also suggest that what is considered as relevant knowledge is influenced by the sentiments and beliefs of organizational members. To illustrate:

“One thing we are doing now in terms of new sites and locations...we have taken the territorial map and plotted where the opportunities are, then we take this to Ahousaht and ask, ‘where are your ecological areas, your historical, ancestral areas?’ And this is good for us, they will tell us, ‘you must know that there is a gap in the mountain here, so historically you get southeast winds which will be hard on the sites’, so OK, maybe this one is better. Using their knowledge of the land, their knowledge of the environment, that makes us better. (Cermaq manager).

The actors have developed knowledge and new practices by combining available knowledge in uncommon ways (cf. Nag and Gioia 2012). Cermaq previously perceived its own knowledge to be good whereas Ahousaht's farming knowledge was evaluated as rather insignificant, a belief largely shared by the First Nation. By joining forces and thereby combining existing knowledge in uncommon ways, the value of the knowledge pool they can access has changed.

Whereas classical resource analyses suggest that resources have a given value independent of other resources, the studied relationships reason better with the underlying logic of the resource interaction approach (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002). This approach stresses that the actual value of a resource only emerges on the use side in specific use contexts. In other words, the value of a resource always depends on which other resources it is combined with. The study thereby provides illustrations of how the relationships were built through mutual acknowledgment, respect and patience, and how these qualities helped to realize the emergence of new knowledge through uncommon utilization of already existing knowledge.

References

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