

Nemiah

P A C I F I C S A L M O N F O R E S T S P R O J E C T

Home of the Xeni Gwet'in

by Richard Littlemore

David Suzuki Foundation

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David Suzuki Foundation

The David Suzuki Foundation is a federally registered Canadian charity working to design a vision of Earth in which humans live within the planet's productive capacity – and finding and communicating practical steps to bring that vision to reality.



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Consider the implications of a dead-end road. It is, in the modern world, a metaphor for hopelessness, literary shorthand for the place you don't want to be — a blind alley. Take the same road, call it a cul-de-sac and you get a completely different impression; a vague suggestion of prestige in fact. No longer a place you don't want to go, it becomes a haven, a refuge, a cloistered retreat for the privileged. Make this haven a valley, bordered by water, coddled by mountains - raw, wild and mostly unspoiled - and you have found Nemiah.

Nemiah

The name carries a ring of romance, and if it falls gently on the ear, it is easier still on the eyes. The valley is beautiful in every direction. Icy blue Chilko Lake lies to the west, north and east, a low range of mountains gives way to the rolling hills and rocky pine forests of Chilcotin country. Turn south and you will be awed by Ts'il?os, the overwhelming stone presence of a spirit that was once a man.

Ts'il?os is the Nemiah name for Mt. Tatlow, which rises to 3,000 metres and dominates the view in every direction. Its presence is so haunting — following as it does your every move through the valley — that if it did not already feature in a spirit story, you would have to invent one.

This entire scene, 200 kilometres northwest of Vancouver as the crow flies, is exquisite. But beauty alone cannot turn a valley at the terminus of a dead-end road into a refuge. Humans have demonstrated time and again that between our technological mastery and our insatiable appetites for the wealth wrought from minerals and fibre, we can deliver devastation to the most out-of-the-way place. Fortunately, due to a combination of geography and chance, Nemiah has been spared such ruin thus far.



Ts'il?os

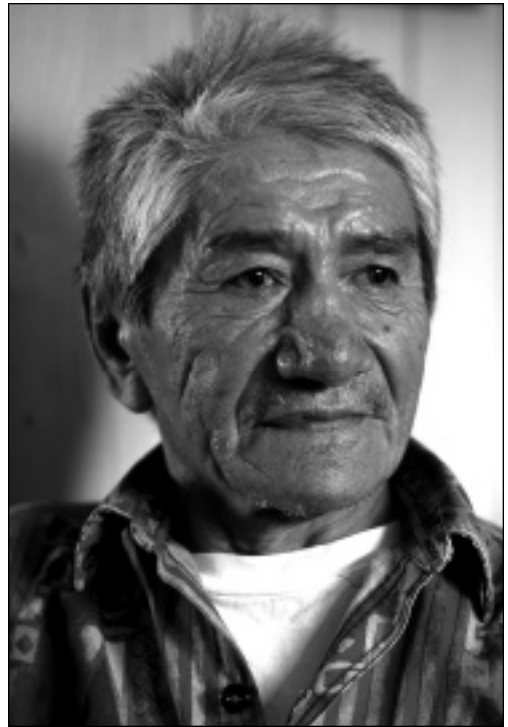
Ts'il?os

The Xeni Gwet'in tell the story of Ts'il?os, the man who turned to stone and formed the mountain that non-natives call Tatlow. Ts'il?os had a wife named ?Eniyud and they had six children. The union, however, was an unhappy one and the two parted, each taking three children. Ts'il?os stayed in the Nemiah valley turning to stone above Xeni Lake. ?Eniyud withdrew to the far side of Chilko Lake and turned to stone on the shores of Lake Tatlayoko. In both cases, the ranges dominate the modern landscape. Nor and east, the peaks are lower and under while mountaintops surrounding ?Eniyud and Tatlow rise to prominence among some of the largest peaks in the Coast Range.

A traditional story among the Xeni Gwet'in says that if you pointed at Ts'il?os, you would bring on a terrible change in the weather. Modern times have brought a new version that says if you point at the peak when you arrive in the valley, your vehicle will break down. It seems unlikely that anyone arriving in Nemiah could resist pointing at the spectacular mountain. Given the state of the road, it would be just as surprising if you got in and out without one minor disaster to attribute to Ts'il?os.

The Building of a Road

The Xeni Gwet'in have occupied the Nemiah valley since before time was recorded. They are a people steeped in tradition, but shaken by contact; a people whose customs suffered because of the 'civilizing' forces that were intended to help. To understand the story of Nemiah, you have to go back to the road.



Henry Solomon

The biggest surprise is that Nemiah is inaccessible rather than remote. Physically, it lies less than 200 kilometres northwest of Vancouver, but with the Coast Mountains looming in between, the only road access from BC's largest city is through the Pemberton Valley or up the Fraser Canyon to Williams Lake and then west into the mountains. Figure eight or 10 hours by car, but preferably truck. This is not a nice road. For most of the last 100 kilometres, it is not even up to the standard demanded by the Ministry of Forests for logging roads. You bounce and slide and pray (pointlessly, it turns out) that you don't get a flat tire. But the most important thing about the road is that until 1973, it didn't exist at all. While that made life difficult then, today the road brings new problems as well as opportunities which the Xeni Gwet'in hope to maximize.

Henry Solomon was the Xeni Gwet'in chief in 1973 and he remembers the wrenching effort required to get the road finished. The project was started by an entrepreneur trying to improve transportation to a nearby fishing lodge. He ran out of money, however, leaving the Xeni Gwet'in scrambling for resources to finish the job. Solomon and band members lobbied the federal government for aid and support until, finally, the Army Corps of Engineers stepped into the breach. Life changed overnight, Solomon says in his native Tsilhqot'in, his daughter translating. "Before, no one wanted to help the Indian. We never got welfare or anything and we had to make our own money," he said.

Earning a living in this isolated valley was no easy feat. The Nemiah ran cattle and trapped through the winter, gardening

This is not a nice road. For most of the last 100 kilometres, it is not even up to the standard demanded by the Ministry of Forests for logging roads.

and fishing in the finer months. Once a year, they hitched up their horses, loaded the wagons and journeyed into Williams Lake, driving cattle for sale and buying seeds and dry goods for the coming year. The trip took a week, one way. It was a life little changed from 100 years earlier, when the survivors of the short-lived Chilcotin War withdrew into the valley to live in safety apart from the white man.

Before the road came in, the Xeni Gwet'in communicated in Tsilhqot'in. Today, almost everyone over the age of 25 is still a fluent speaker. If outsiders came into the valley back then, Solomon said locals would default into Chinook, a lingua franca derived from aboriginal languages, English and French and shared by natives and non-natives from the BC coast into the Interior. There was some knowledge of English but not much affection for a language drummed in at the Oblate Mission school in 150 Mile House, east of Williams Lake. "They were pretty mean," Henry Solomon says of the missionaries. "We couldn't speak to each other, couldn't speak Tsilhqot'in." Smiling, he adds, "But they couldn't hold the kids; the kids would run away," as he did before he reached his teens. And life just seemed to get tougher,

he remembered. Fur prices fell and “there was hardly any game, no beaver, no lynx.”

Francis Setah, at 69, is three years older than Henry Solomon. He speaks fondly of the coming of the road. Before, he remembers, if you ran low on supplies it was three days to Lees Corner, at what is now Hanceville, 90 kilometres away. The trip home, loaded down in bad weather, usually took a week. “Now you can go to Williams Lake and back in a day,” Setah says, somewhat proudly.

At first, few people made the trip. The adventurous would go perhaps once a month, according to Henry Solomon. But as more people got vehicles (and money to spend after the government started paying welfare in 1975) people started going more often. Now, many Nemiah residents make the three-hour drive to Williams Lake every week, to shop, visit relatives or their children in school or just to do the laundry. Yes, the laundry. In 2000, Nemiah is still off the provincial power grid so luxuries like laundromats are reserved for town. Soon people became aware that all kinds of luxuries were available in town — off the shelf at the Overwaitea supermarket — and Nemiah residents gradually stopped working to protect their gardens from the harsh climate. Some young men lost interest in trapping and even ranching lost its urgency. Centuries-old traditions began to wither.

Something else the Xeni Gwet’in picked up on more frequent trips to Williams Lake was English. While the middle generation, between the ages of 25 and 50, speaks Tsilhqot’in and English with equal ease, many residents under 20 speak English almost exclusively. What the Oblates could never do — banish the Tsilhqot’in tongue



Francis & Agatha Setah

— the road did in one generation. This has become such a concern that the band has started a Tsilhqot’in immersion class in pre-school and kindergarten, and Chief Roger William and the council have decreed that all band meetings will be conducted in the traditional language.

The Xeni Gwet'in Declaration



Chief Roger William

To a great degree, Chief Roger is the linchpin in the story of Nemiah, although if you said so in his presence, he would surely look down at his championship bull-rider belt-buckle and deny any personal credit. At the tender age of 34, Roger William has been chief for nine years — a reign marked by modesty and defined by a relentless insistence on consensus. Perhaps most impressive in one so young is Chief Roger's ready ability to admit his mistakes; one he readily discusses is the time he tried to negotiate a logging plan for the near-sacred Brittany Triangle.

The Nemiah valley has never been logged. Flying over its breathtaking expanse, different aged forests cover the landscape, but the patches and layers of growth were designed by fire, not by logging cutblocks. Pressure is mounting, however, to change that as mill owners in Williams Lake and as far away as Prince Rupert are ranging wider in their search for fibre. So far, the Xeni Gwet'in have said no.

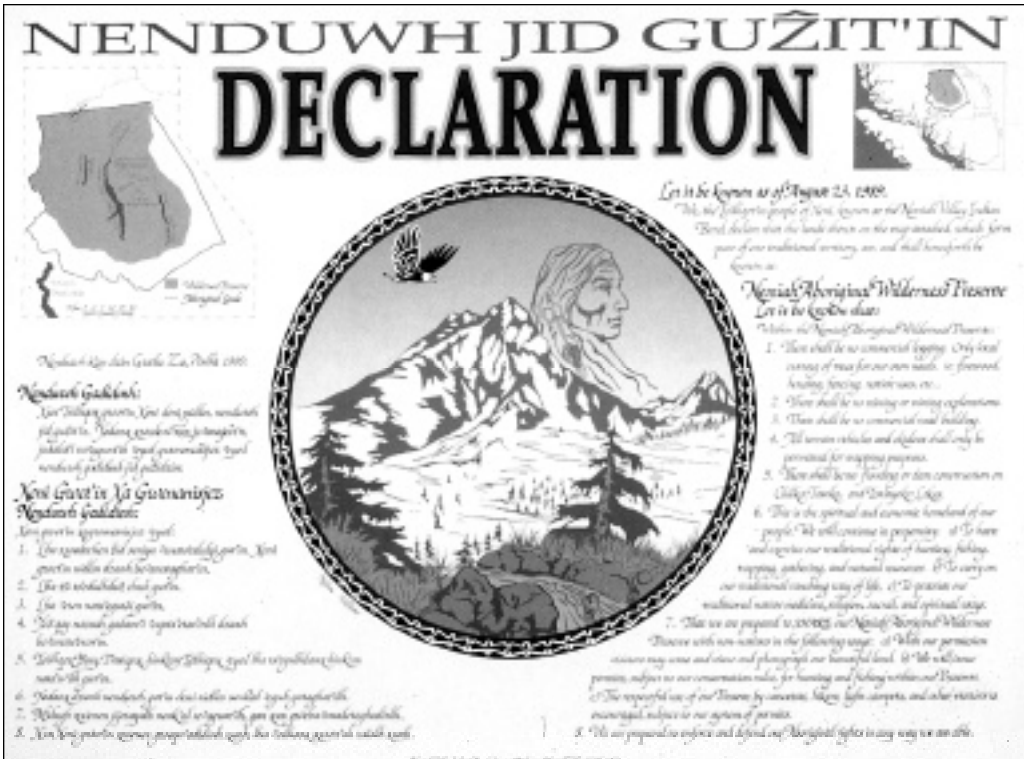
In 1989, the Nemiah Indian Band issued a declaration, setting out the



Nemiah Traditional Territory

Nemiah Aboriginal Wilderness Preserve, an area within which there was to be no logging, no mining and no commercial road building. The jewel in this preserve is the Brittany Triangle, bounded on the south by Nemiah valley, on the west by Chilko River and to the east by Taseko River. For three short years after the declaration, all seemed well, but in 1992 the BC Ministry of Forests gave Prince Rupert's Carrier Lumber a permit to log in the Brittany. The Xeni Gwet'in immediately erected barricades and the provincial government pulled the permit. On May 7, 1992, Carrier Lumber turned away.

To mark this auspicious date and to thank the native and non-native people who joined locals on the barricades, the Xeni Gwet'in hold the Brittany Gathering celebration every May 7. In part, this event is to help focus discussion on how to build a better future for the Xeni Gwet'in, but the preoccupation over logging in their exquisite territory remains paramount. Aware that his people had won the battle without necessarily prevailing in the war, Chief Roger has tried to move to a new, perhaps more pragmatic position. If there is to be logging, he says, the Xeni Gwet'in must be in control and must share in the



The Xeni Gwet'in Declaration

bounty - a position advocated elsewhere in the Tsilhqot'in Nation where several communities have made alliances with logging companies. To this end, the Xeni Gwet'in invited forest companies to make partnership proposals: Lignum Resources offered the best terms. The band and Lignum applied together and received a cut allocation for 250,000 cubic metres, potentially within the Brittany Triangle. Following numerous meetings with Lignum, Chief Roger and the council agreed to put a proposal to the community. "I pushed for a (logging) plan that I agreed with," Chief Roger said. "The people didn't agree." Twice in the last three

years, the council brought logging plans to the community and on each occasion the people turned it down.

A lesser leader would have resigned: A more divided community would have demanded it. But Chief Roger seems to have lost none of his popularity or support. He waived the agreement with Lignum, freeing the company to take advantage of its cut allocation elsewhere, and began looking for a different path. The Xeni Gwet'in lawyer, Victoria aboriginal law specialist Jack Woodward, suggested the David Suzuki Foundation.

Building a Partnership

In early 1998, scientist and broadcaster Dr. David Suzuki and Chief Roger William met. They soon discovered that the goals for a Nemiah community project and the solutions sought by the Foundation to address ecological concerns were indeed intertwined. For Chief Roger, the local project was clear enough: To restore prosperity to his community and ensure that his people have firm control over any resource extraction. His vision matched the Foundation's, which believes communities must be involved from the outset in order to achieve responsible economic development that will conserve ecological treasures for future generations.

“We at the Foundation believe that biodiversity is the key to the life support systems of the earth, that without biodiversity we don't have the fundamental elements of life,” says Dr. Suzuki, chair of the non-profit organization. “But we don't think the solution is just parks, humanity is too large a presence. The challenge is to find a way to make a living and to protect biodiversity. We need to find a way to maintain the integrity of that ecosystem without trashing the land for a one-time-only injection of cash into the local economy.”

Having spent decades as a committed environmentalist and experiencing first-hand battles that split rural communities and mostly urban-based conservation groups, Dr. Suzuki believes new approaches must be found. “It's fine for us to wish that logging companies would submit a 500-year logging plan, but the economy doesn't work that way. Trees don't grow fast enough, even here trees add two to three per cent per year to their mass. But if you cut the trees down and put the money in the bank, you'll get eight per cent. In those circumstances, no shareholder in the world is going to tolerate a CEO who will accommodate a two- to three-per-cent return.”

If that's a bleak picture, it is at least a clear one for the Xeni Gwet'in. If conventional resource extraction is the only choice for economic revival, the result may help in the short-term, but could spell



David Suzuki & Tara Cullis

economic and ecological ruin for future generations. If the local economy can be invigorated creatively, however, resource extraction will be only one element of the plan, and one that can be pursued at a sustainable pace. Looking at it this way, community development encompasses a social agenda as well as an environmental agenda, which is an ethos that has guided the Xeni Gwet'in for centuries: What is good for the land is good for the people; if you look after the people, they will look after the land.

After further meetings with staff of the Foundation's Pacific Salmon Forests Project (an initiative designed to support community economic development and natural resource conservation), the Xeni Gwet'in

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Dr. David Suzuki



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decided a partnership made sense. The relationship was established with clear goals and parameters, including time frames and responsibilities. Then the fun began! On July 13, 1998, two Foundation facilitators travelled to the community of 250 residents to help prepare the Nemiah Valley Economic Development Roadmap. A SWOT analysis, conducted during a three-day workshop, defined the community's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The result is an overlapping list of dreams and fears. Under opportunities you find tourism, under threats, tourists; under weaknesses you find TV, while back in opportunities appear video stores. After all this hard work, the community produced a working paper, well-stocked with complexities and challenges but also bristling with good ideas. With that in hand, the Xenigwet'in and the Foundation agreed to undertake a two-year project and set about finding a facilitator.

The ?Inteniluyini Team

Enter Roberta Martell — bounding. Roberta is a thirty-something former youth worker from North Vancouver. An athlete who competed at the national level in women’s softball, football and basketball, she is an irrepressible font of energy. She moves fast, talks fast and seems forever to be thinking with her hands. In a big city newsroom, she would raise the intensity level at deadline. In Nemiah, the very mountains must have been moved by her arrival, which is especially interesting given the reserved nature of the Xenigwet’in.



Roberta Martell

It’s not just that they are shy around strangers; Nemiah people themselves say this is their way. They are a quiet people who speak a soft language, who crave consensus and meet conflict only as a last resort. Yet Chief Roger and council members decided dynamic Roberta would be a good match for their serene, secluded community. When Chief Roger thinks back on the decision to hire Roberta, he immediately starts talking about all the other projects that raised promise in the valley but failed. He lists government consultants who have come and gone, or sometimes never come at all. “We’ve been here before. People didn’t want to talk any longer. They wanted to get going.”

They chose wisely. Roberta’s first order of business was to set up shop in an abandoned construction trailer and, with the chief and council, hire three Xenigwet’in staff members. They hired Francy Merritt, a fluent Tsilhqot’in speaker and active community member, especially in her work with elders. They hired Bonnie Myers



Francy Merritt and Lucy Lulua



Maryann Solomon and Bonnie Myers



A Community Garden

who had worked as a secretary at the Stony Band office, and they hired Maryann Solomon who, for the previous 11 years, had been the school custodian. Although her job title is Community Development Facilitator, Roberta immediately stated her preference that as a team, they would have no leader. From the outset, she wanted to establish that her role was to work with the community, not to run the project when it was the residents who had a lifetime of local knowledge and experience. Wanting to demonstrate the creativity they foresaw for the project and identify it as different from previous efforts, the four women chose the name Tsilhquot'in: ?Inteniluyini, meaning Weavers of the Web. They then set up an advisory committee, with the chief and council, to guide the team's actions.

The dusty construction trailer behind the Nemiah band office quickly became a hive of activity. In addition to acquiring computers (which run off a diesel generator at the band office) and adding telephone lines to the sole connection in the valley, the ?Inteniluyini team began engaging the community in new activities. Working with the list of opportunities from the community workshop road map, the team started implementing items that were immediately possible and challenging others to do likewise. They plastered every available surface in the band office with posters that read: "If not you, then who?"

People took up the challenge. When the ?Inteniluyini team noted that a community garden was high on the list, they delegated the job to Maryann. She jumped at the challenge and received so much help from community members, they built two. Roberta, meanwhile, was facing a personal

?Inteniluyni: Weavers of the Web

The ?Inteniluyni team wanted a name that evoked vision rather than a standard ‘advisory committee’ designation. Team member Maryann Solomon provided this definition: “There’s a lot of issues out there. Things we could do for the earth to sustain all humanity. All we have to do is put them together, connect them like a web. Then the wheel will start to turn, once we are aware of how all these things come together to work in sync with harmony for the rest of our time. We are the weavers of this web.”

challenge, trying to find a home in a community where 66 people were on a waiting list for housing. She discovered the inadequate federal allowance for First Nations’ shelter, and the rising cost of conventional housing, and started dreaming of an alternative: straw-bale houses. Once again, the idea spurred such enthusiasm that the Xeni Gwet’in built two — one for Roberta and one to house a new ecotourism trail riding enterprise. If the straw-bale concept succeeds — and there is no reason it shouldn’t — it could provide an affordable alternative for families living in cramped quarters all over the valley. As for the trail riding, it is only one of a host of ecotourism plans under review. Roberta spins ideas such as a high-end winter hiking mecca, only 20 minutes from the famed Whistler-Blackcombe ski resort by helicopter. The possibilities, she says, are limited only by what the community wants.

“This is good stuff for us,” says Chief Roger. “It’s nice to see things happening, to show the people we are serious. (Before the partnership with the Foundation) we didn’t have the resources to get into economic



Trail Riding in Nemiah

development because we were putting all of our energy into protecting our land.” Pursuing economic development opportunities is essential for the community, he explains. Forty-four people, almost one quarter of the valley population, work in the band office (including the ?Inteniluyni project). But work for the Xeni Gwet’in does not necessarily mean receiving a regular pay-check; sometimes people are too busy

Straw Bales for Real People

The very idea of a straw-bale house summons images of the big bad wolf; such a threat, however, is of little concern to a structure that is rated at seven times the federal standards for withstanding hurricanes. As for other common risks, straw-bale houses will shimmy and shake in a catastrophic earthquake but they won't fall down. And in a fire, there is so little air in the bales themselves that they will snuff a smouldering blaze for lack of oxygen.

Perhaps most important for Nemiah's cold winter climate, the bales have an R factor of 35 and a 12-hour thermal lag. That means that just as the heat of the day is fading and the evening breeze is starting to chill, the heat that has been radiating against the house all day has finally penetrated the walls and is beginning to warm the inside. Likewise, in the daytime, the chill of the night keeps the house cool, having taken the previous 12 hours to work its way through the width of the bales.

Straw-bale houses are assembled like Lego-block structures and then covered with chicken wire. That, in turn, is covered with 'shotcrete' — a kind of stucco finish — inside and out, making the walls weatherproof. Add windows, doors and a roof and all you are left with is the decisions of how to divide up interior space. The goal in Nemiah is to build such houses for less than the roughly \$40,000 allowance that the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs provides for family housing.



Straw-bale House Construction



*Smoking Fish (left),
Ranching (top right),
and Xeni Gwet'in
Territory*

hunting, ranching, guiding or fishing to take a paid job - something outsiders often find strange. This highlights the need for economic development projects to incorporate traditional ways people sustained themselves, Chief Roger adds.

While the ?Inteniluyini team champions new opportunities — one family has started a cafe and another is working on a laundromat while the band is looking at a gas station and convenience store, and everyone is rooting for a tire repair shop — Chief Roger's commitment to protecting the land is never far from view. In addition to economic initiatives, the Xeni Gwet'in are also committed to establishing an ecosystem-

based forestry plan, not just for the Brittany Triangle but for the entire Nemiah traditional territory. Designing such a plan will draw heavily on an expert in eco-forestry. This brings us back to the road and whether it delivers life to the valley or sucks life from it. The danger, where forestry is concerned, is that a logging plan — whether or not it is drafted with an eye to ecological sustainability — will result in construction of a better road suited to the movement of heavy equipment. The fear also exists that once a better road is built, the pressure to use it and push deeper into the valley, exploiting more of its bounty, will increase by huge measure.



The ?Inteniluyni āam

Fear also exists that new economic development will bring activity that the community, or at least some members, may not want. The ?Inteniluyni team is acutely aware of this risk and is working hard to guard against it. On the plus side, the Xeni Gwet'in is one of few First Nations that doesn't have a contemporary-versus-traditional fracture. In part, this is because of the road or rather the lack of one for so many years. Nemiah's location helped its citizens stand up against industrial resource extraction even as their Tsilhqot'in neighbours were, in many cases, overwhelmed by pressure to log. As a result, the Xeni Gwet'in have no investment in

modern forestry hardware and practices so no one is arguing for relaxed logging standards. Isolation has aided in preservation of Xeni Gwet'in culture. These are a people steeped in history and determined to honour the old ways. It is this blend of respect for the past coupled with great optimism for the future offered by the ?Inteniluyni project that offers such hope to the Xeni Gwet'in and the David Suzuki Foundation.

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