

## “We give them seaweed”: Social economic exchange and resilience in Northwestern North America

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First Peoples of Northwestern North America have a long tradition of exchange governed by formal and informal cultural institutions. Plants and botanical products have been a major component of this tradition. Not just economic transactions, the exchange systems were parts of a complex cultural economy that provided dietary diversity, more knowledge and technologies, opportunities for enhanced intergroup relationships, new beliefs and perspectives, and greater resilience in times of instability. These systems changed dramatically with the arrival of Europeans into the region, with new products being incorporated. Ultimately, however, the cultural economy of First Peoples diminished as they acculturated into mainstream society and into the globalized, industrialized economy. Nevertheless, elements of the original cultural economy exist to the present day. Three major components of these systems include: a philosophy of mutual reciprocity; differing needs and access to different resources and/or skills by individuals and communities; and opportunities for interaction and communication where exchange can occur in culturally appropriate ways. Through helping to create and maintain these conditions, all of society can provide meaningful support for First Nations' cultural renewal and well-being.

**Keywords:** Informal economy, Plant resources, Indigenous cultures, Trading, Reciprocity

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“We give them seaweed”; they give us eulachons.”  
(Helen Clifton, Gitga’at Nation, British Columbia<sup>1</sup>)

Helen Clifton, matriarch of the Gitga’at Nation, on the North coast of British Columbia, Canada (Northwest Coast), often talks about the ties her people have traditionally maintained, both with other Ts’msyen speaking communities, and with others: the Nisga’a to the North, the Haisla to the East, at Kitamaat, and the Haida, of Haida Gwaii to the West. The Gitga’ata are known for the high quality of their edible seaweed, *ləʔask* [*Pyropia abbottiae* (V. Krishnamurthy) S. K. Lindstrom (syn. *Porphyra abbottiae* Krishnamurthy)], which they harvest at the low spring tides of May from the rocky intertidal zone of islands around their spring harvest camp, K’yel, on Princess Royal Island. They sun-dry the seaweed in squares of about 60 cm<sup>2</sup>, for transport and trade<sup>2,3,4</sup> (Fig. 1). The Gitga’ata have customarily exchanged some of their seaweed squares with the Haisla of Kitamaat and the Nisga’a of the Nass Valley for smoked eulachons (*Thaleichthys pacificus*, also spelled ooligans, or oulachens) and eulachon grease, a nutritious fat rendered from this small anadromous

smelt that spawns on the banks of the major rivers along the coast<sup>5</sup>. The mutual exchange of these highly valued products is reflected in shared vocabulary: the Nisga’a and Haisla names for the seaweed are *laq’ask<sup>w</sup>* and *laq’s* [and variants] respectively— closely related to the Ts’msyen name. Gitga’ata families process some of their seaweed further, curing the squares in cedar wood boxes and then chopping it finely and re-drying it as a valued condiment. They and other coastal peoples serve seaweed at feasts, attended by community members and invited guests from other First Nations: another means by which this product is shared<sup>3,4,6</sup>.

The role of *laq’ask<sup>w</sup>* in Gitga’ata culture and economy is just one example of the complex systems of trade and exchange that have occurred in the region, over millennia. These systems are embedded in seamlessly intertwined cultural, ecological, geographical and temporal elements. Gifting, sharing and trading, especially of food, are well known to cement social relationships, develop economic sufficiency and build resilience of families and communities<sup>7,8,9</sup>. On the Northwest Coast, among



Fig. 1—Drying seaweed (*Pyropia abbotiae*) squares, K'yel, Gitga'at territory

Indigenous communities, this practice is widespread, and is facilitated through a number of key cultural institutions, most importantly the potlatch and its associated ceremonial exchange, but also through other types of interactions, both formal and informal: feasting, kinship ties, clan relationships, leadership responsibilities, and protocols taught to children and youth regarding generosity and caring for elders and community members<sup>6</sup>. These traditions help enhance people's food security and overall well-being, especially at times of uncertainty and change. Yet, they are often overlooked in economic and health status assessments, as are the careful management of resource species and habitats. Furthermore, some of the exchange systems of the past have diminished in their importance as colonial governance, the wage economy and modern technologies have superseded traditional socio-economic systems. Another factor is the general trend of reduced procurement and consumption of local indigenous foods and increased use of processed, marketed foods: the well-known global "nutrition transition"<sup>10</sup>.

In this paper, following a short methodology section, I provide examples of plant products involved in traditional exchange arrangements, then describe some of the key institutions that facilitate cultural exchange of food and related products among First Peoples of the study area. I then outline management techniques applied to sustain and enhance resources used in cultural exchange. Next, I discuss the ways in which these institutions and the processes they support have shifted over time, particularly since European contact. The impacts of change – and resulting knowledge and resource losses – on people's health, well-being and cultural identity are also identified. Finally, I suggest approaches to biocultural

renewal and re-strengthening of these traditional institutions to reinforce family, community and ecosystem resilience.

## Methodology

### Study region

The study region, Northwestern North America, extends from central Alaska, United States, through British Columbia, Canada, South to the Columbia River region of the United States, and East to the Rocky Mountains region bordering the province of Alberta, Canada. Indigenous Peoples have inhabited this area since the late Pleistocene, some 10,000 to 12,000 yrs ago. They comprise about 50 groups, based on languages and major dialects, within several language families, the most common being Na-dené (including Athabaskan), Ts'msyenic, Salishan, and Wakashan, with Haida and Ktunaxa (Kutenai) being linguistic isolates. Major regions of cultural similarity include the Northwest Coast, the Interior Plateau, and the Southwestern Subarctic<sup>11</sup>. This work incorporates findings relating to the role of plants in social economy from over four decades of collaborative participatory work in Ethnobotany and Ethnoecology with First Nations, both coastal and interior, in the study region. It has involved documenting people's relationships with plants and habitats over time and across geographical and ecological space, including: names of plants, uses of plants as foods, materials and medicines, and the ceremonial and spiritual roles of plants in different communities<sup>12,13,14</sup>.

### Participatory observation and ethics protocols

The data are derived from a combination of interviews with knowledgeable Indigenous elders across the different linguistic and cultural groups, as well as participant observation; specific methods are included in the referenced publications from which the information is drawn<sup>11</sup>. In all cases, ethical protocols of obtaining prior informed consent were used in the documenting of traditional ecological and botanical knowledge. Specific knowledge holders are recognized, in many cases as coauthors in the referenced publications.

## Results

### Examples of products and goods in trade and exchange networks

Table 1 provides examples of various plant products that have customarily featured in the social

Table 1—Examples of plants and plant products traded or exchanged among Indigenous Peoples of northwestern North America  
(Modified and abridged from tables in other publications)<sup>11,15-19</sup>

Species (alphabetical by scientific name)	Notes
<i>Amelanchier alnifolia</i> (Nutt.) Nutt. ex M. Roem. (Saskatoonberry) (Rosaceae)	Dried berries and cakes commonly traded among Interior Peoples, and from Interior to Coast, especially central and southern Coast; several varieties recognized.
<i>Apocynum cannabinum</i> L. (Indian- hemp) (Apocynaceae)	Stem fibre, twine and woven products (bags, mats, fishnets) widely traded among Interior Salish, and from Plateau to NW Coast; plants taller and produce better fibre in some places.
<i>Betula papyrifera</i> Marsh.(paper birch) (Betulaceae)	Bark, containers (sometimes with food), wood traded among Athabaskan and Interior Salish groups and from Interior to Coast; birchbark canoes widely traded.
<i>Camassia quamash</i> (Pursh) Greene, <i>C. leichtlinii</i> (Baker) S. Watson (blue camas) (Liliaceae)	Dried, cooked bulbs widely traded from Coast Salish of southeastern Vancouver Island to Nuu-chah-nulth and Kwakwaka'wakw; also, among s to n Interior Salish.
<i>Chamaecyparis nootkatensis</i> D. Don Spach (yellow-cedar) (Cupressaceae)	Bark and bark products widely traded from coast to Interior, especially Chilkat blankets and robes; wood for bows traded from Coast Salish to Interior; wood for ceremonial articles traded from northern NW Coast into Interior.
<i>Claytonia lanceolata</i> Pall. ex Pursh ("mountain potato") (Portulacaceae)	Potato-like corms commonly traded dried (in strings or on sticks) within and among Interior groups; and occasionally to coastal peoples.
<i>Corylus cornuta</i> Marsh. (hazelnut) (Betulaceae)	Nuts widely traded among BC Salishan groups and among Columbia River peoples; possibly also between Fraser River Salish and Skeena River Ts'msyenic peoples.
<i>Lewisia rediviva</i> Pursh (bitterroot) (Portulacaceae)	Dried roots commonly traded within and among Interior Salish groups, BC and Washington.
<i>Lomatium nudicaule</i> (Pursh) J.M. Coult. & Rose("Wild celery") (Apiaceae)	Seeds from southeast Vancouver Island to West coast and Northeast coast of VI; greens traded among Nlaka'pamux peoples.
<i>Malus fusca</i> (Raf.) Schneid. (crabapple) (Rosaceae)	Fresh and preserved fruits in water or eulachon grease widely traded along NW Coast and from Coast to Interior.
<i>Picea sitchensis</i> (Bong.) Carr. (Sitka spruce) (Pinaceae)	Root baskets, hats from Tlingit to Athabaskan groups and from Haida to Ts'msyen; possibly to Ozette and other locations further South along the coast.
<i>Pinus albicaulis</i> Engelm. (whitebark pine) (Pinaceae)	Seeds traded from Upper to Lower Nlaka'pamux and probably from Upper to Lower Stl'atl'imx.
<i>Pyropia abbottiae</i> and related spp. (red laver) (Bangiaceae)	Dried seaweed traded all along the outer coast to inner coast and interior peoples; highly nutritious; eaten alone, in soup, or as a condiment <sup>2</sup> .
<i>Rubus spectabilis</i> Pursh (salmonberry) (Rosaceae)	Berries traded from Halq'emeyem to Lower Nlaka'pamux and elsewhere along the coast; sprouts exchanged locally.
<i>Sagittaria latifolia</i> Willd. (wapato, or arrow leaf) (Alismataceae)	Tubers widely traded, Fraser and Columbia Valleys to the Interior Plateau and along the NW Coast; also sold to settlers, including Chinese immigrants.
<i>Schoenoplectus acutus</i> Muhl. ex Bigelow) A. Love & D. Love (tule) (Cyperaceae)	Tule stems and woven mats widely traded, especially among Interior Salish, and between Coast Salish and Nuu-chah-nulth.
<i>Shepherdia canadensis</i> (L.) Nutt.(soapberry, or soopolallie) (Elaeagnaceae)	Berries widely traded as dried cakes, and jarred in water, among many groups in British Columbia, especially from Interior to Coast; from mainland to Haida Gwaii.
<i>Taxus brevifolia</i> Nutt. (Pacific yew) (Taxaceae)	Wood and bows commonly traded from NW Coast to Interior throughout range.
<i>Thuja plicata</i> Donn ex D. Don (western redcedar) (Cupressaceae)	Cedarwood dugout canoes, boxes, bark, bark baskets, mats, robes, ceremonial articles widely traded along NW Coast and into Interior; split root baskets also widely traded.
<i>Vaccinium membranaceum</i> Douglas ex Torr. (black huckleberry) (Ericaceae)	Berries widely traded among Salishan peoples of BC and among Columbia River peoples.
<i>Vaccinium oxycoccos</i> L. (bog cranberry) (Ericaceae)	Fresh and preserved fruits in water or eulachon grease widely traded along NW Coast and probably among Interior peoples.
<i>Viburnum edule</i> (Michx.) Raf. (highbush cranberry) (Caprifoliaceae)	Fresh and preserved fruits in water or eulachon grease widely traded along NW Coast and from Coast to Interior.

economy of trade and exchange in the study area. In general, these include:

- Species/products from one region, absent or rare in others (e.g. *Pyropia abbottiae*, *Camassia* spp.);
- products from species that are particularly productive in one place, or season and not in others (e.g. *Shepherdia canadensis*, *Vaccinium membranaceum*);
- species/products which may be present in one area but are of lesser quality compared with those in the trading source area (e.g. *Apocynum cannabinum*, *Schoenoplectus acutus*);
- species/products accessible to some families in some locations but not to others because of territorial boundaries, resource ownership or differing seasonal harvesting schedules (e.g. *Malus fusca*, *Viburnum edule*);
- species/products carrying social obligations related to ancestral origins or affinal relationships; and/or
- species/products for which particular people have become specialists in their use and therefore are particularly desired by others (e.g. *Thuja plicata* dugout canoes; *Picea sitchensis* twined hats).

Some of these products are exchanged in raw form, others partially processed and others ready for consumption. Sometimes living plants or plant propagules are brought from one place to another; oral testimony of recent occurrences of species translocation, and shared names of plants across geographic distances suggest that this has occurred relatively frequently<sup>11</sup>. Sometimes the exchange involves permission by one house, clan or community for another to harvest in their territory, often with reciprocal permission to the host group by the visitors in the latter's territory on other occasions.

### **Cultural institutions supporting or facilitating trading and exchange of food or related products**

Trading and exchange of these products are influenced and mediated by various cultural institutions acting in concert and at different scales of time and space. Strong value systems based on responsibility towards others – both human and non-human beings – and reciprocity exist in all of these cultures. These principles are key for developing exchange systems based on sustainable production and that are respectful and equitable. They also reflect

lessons learned over millennia of coexistence in a changing world<sup>20, 21, 22, 23</sup>.

Warfare and inter-community conflicts over various resources are a part of the history of First Nations in the region. In the past, some trade good production and products consumed directly were assisted through the institution of slavery, often accompanying warfare. However, there were many alliances that were maintained through intermarriage, often with the wife going to reside in her husband's community. In these cases, obligations to one's in-laws through affinal exchange, were a key element of these arrangements, the bride's parents and family taking on a responsibility to host and provide for the groom's parents and family members should they need help, and vice versa. Gifts of cedar wood boxes of crabapples (*Malus fusca*) and highbush cranberries (*Viburnum edule*, Fig. 2), along with other similar products, were common dowry items at weddings<sup>7,19</sup>. Sometimes foodstuffs, baskets and other goods were – and still are – given during a formal ceremony, such as a potlatch, where invited guests and dignitaries from other communities are hosted by a Chief and his clan, family or community and are presented with gifts in return for witnessing important "business," such as the taking on of a hereditary chieftainship, the coming of age ceremony of a young woman of high standing, or the announcement of a new name or of some major accomplishment of one or more individual. Hazelnuts (*Corylus cornuta*), edible roots, dried berry cakes, seaweed, and herring spawn on kelp were all exchanged in the past, carrying informal, or sometimes formal, obligations for reciprocity, then or later. Today, foodstuffs – dried



Fig. 2—Highbush cranberries (*Viburnum edule*), a commonly traded food

seaweed and berry preserves, as well as jarred smoked salmon, or smoked deer meat – are still gifted at potlatches, along with many other items such as kitchenware, clothing and many different household items<sup>6,11,24</sup>.

Feasting is another institution that supports reciprocal exchange of goods. Feasts may be a component of potlatches, or may be held as a separate event, to mark a particular occasion. On the central and North coast, chiefs and matriarchs of clans customarily host feasts for the other clan or clans, and the hosting clan members contribute food harvested and processed over the preceding year to be served at the feast<sup>7</sup>. Division of labour is an important component in relationships of trade and exchange. Women and children usually harvest and prepare most of the traded plant foods as well as processing the meat and fish procured by the men. Nlaka'pumux elder Annie York recounted trading bitterroot (*Lewisia rediviva*): “*That’s expensive stuff, that [bitterroot].... We don’t have that bitterroot here [in Spuzzum, in the lower Fraser River Canyon]... that’s all up there [upriver] – comes from there and they trade. They trade with their vegetables here... we have the fish here and then we trade with the bitterroot.*” On another occasion, she explained that the upriver women dried bitterroot by stringing it on Indian-hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*) thread of a given length so that the roots would be traded in standard units<sup>20</sup>. Helen Clifton of the Gitga’at Nation explained how her people maintain links with their ancestral homeland through trading of soapberries (*Shepherdia canadensis*): “*And then we trade for the soapberries, which is a dessert, a confection, and it’s traded with our relatives up [on the] Skeena River, ‘Ksan, and it reminds us of our ancestors. And you whip it up like whipped cream, I guess, and so it has that special taste.*”<sup>11</sup> Women also tend to harvest and prepare the fibrous materials for baskets and containers, and to weave and stitch these containers, which were often traded along with the food they contain, again in standard sizes to provide equivalencies in trade<sup>24</sup>. Men were, and are, the usual wood harvesters and wood workers, producing canoes, and bentwood boxes that also commonly featured in trade and exchange in the past. Some of these items – baskets, boxes, and canoes – are regaining popularity as gifts and trade items at the present time, as a component of cultural revitalization and renewal.

### **Management techniques used to sustain and enhance resources in cultural exchange**

Techniques, protocols and approaches that maintain and enhance the growth, productivity and/or quality of resource species, including the various plants and plant products featuring in systems of trade and exchange, are often under-recognized and under-rated in considerations of cultural economies. Yet, there is an obvious link between enhanced resource production and successful exchange systems. The greater the value and the higher the surpluses of the products involved, the more likely they are to be incorporated into the social economy of a group, and therefore to enhance access to other important goods, knowledge and technologies, and ultimately to maintain their resilience in the face of unexpected circumstances.

Virtually all of the species listed in Table 1 have been subjected to some form of traditional management to maintain and promote their growth and productivity<sup>20-23,25,26,27</sup>. Ownership of resources and resource habitats, with exclusive rights for controlling their harvest and use, is one approach to management for many of these species. Ownership rights lead to reciprocity at a number of levels<sup>23</sup>. The chief, matriarch or designate having proprietorship over a resource such as highbush cranberries might invite members of the community to pick from their patch, contributing the first basket or container of berries picked to the owner, to be used in feasting and trade, and then harvest more for their own family’s use<sup>4,11</sup>. Similar arrangements might be made between communities, where one group might invite another group to harvest a particular resource, such as camas (*Camassia* spp.) bulbs or springbank clover (*Trifolium wormskioldii*) rhizomes, from their territory, and in turn would be invited to harvest wapato (*Sagittaria latifolia*) or bog cranberries (*Vaccinium oxycoccos*) from the other group’s lands. All of these resources might be enhanced by controlled burns, pruning or coppicing, tilling, selective harvesting, fertilizing, or creating optimal habitat conditions for their growth.

### **Trading nodes: cultural edges and ecological edges**

There are many locales throughout the study area that serve as nodes of trade and exchange of products, along with other cultural entities such as words, songs, stories, ceremonies, techniques and ideas. Such nodes, or “cultural edges,” are often situated along ecotones or “ecological edges,” where different ecosystems come together – such as along a shoreline,

or at the tree line in the mountains, or at geographical meeting points, such as the confluence of two rivers, or the valley between two mountain ranges<sup>26,27</sup>. The juxtaposition of different cultures, languages and ecosystems at these meeting places has tended to enhance biocultural richness at different scales of time and space – increasing the diversity of available resources, as well as the diversity of cultural knowledge systems. Places where migrating spawning salmon can be caught along the Columbia and other major rivers are a good example of these “edges”; at times 5-10 thousand people have congregated at such sites, to trade for dried salmon, and participate in cultural exchanges of all kinds<sup>11</sup>.

## Discussion

### Changes in trading patterns since the time of European newcomers

People in the study region have been engaging in trade and exchange since the earliest times; obsidian, shells and other mineral evidence of trade extends back to at least the early Holocene<sup>28</sup>. There is no reason to believe that plants and plant products were not part of these early trade networks, although because plants do not preserve as readily under many circumstances, evidence for early plant trade in terms of plant remains is limited. Trading routes – such as the “grease trails” – and routine exchange of diverse trade products have been in place for several millennia. Alliances among communities sometimes lasted for generations, being cemented by inter-marriage and clan ties. Along with goods, new technologies would have been shared, as well as narrative themes, told and retold in different areas using the ecosystems and species relevant to particular places as backdrops and even actors in the stories<sup>29</sup>. Ceremonies, value systems, and traditional ecological knowledge systems, including land and resource management practices, would have also been shared and adapted to local situations. Dramatic changes to all aspects of these exchange systems occurred, however, following the arrival of European explorers, traders and settlers. The variety of goods available for trade expanded. New plants were introduced and fit into the existing array of products. For example, potatoes, first brought by the Spaniards in the late 1700s, probably directly from South America, were soon widely cultivated and even traded to the Hudson’s Bay Company along with salmon (*Oncorhynchus* spp.), cranberries (*Vaccinium*

*oxycoccos*), wapato (*Sagittaria latifolia*) and other indigenous products. Other new trade goods included tobacco, beans, rice, garden vegetables, apples and other orchard fruits, and plants and seeds of these species<sup>7,30</sup>.

The trading opportunities also expanded, as first the fur traders and then the European settlers participated in the growing cultural exchange systems. The newcomers benefited substantially from informal economic arrangements with their Indigenous neighbours, and in turn, contributed their own products and knowledge to the mix. For example, Susan Allison, a young pioneer woman who settled in the Hope-Princeton area of southern British Columbia, reported from the mid-1870s.

The Indian women used to gather and dry *Saskatoons* [*Amelanchier alnifolia* berries], so I did the same and when they brought me trout which they caught by the hundreds in the baskets they set in the One Mile Creek, I paid for them with butter and then dried and smoked the trout, making delicious kipper for winter<sup>31</sup>.

Susan Allison also traded for baby cradles and baskets, and learned a great deal from her Indigenous neighbours about survival in her new landscape. Many Indigenous women were skilled basket makers; they traded their basketry – woven in styles and shapes, such as knitting baskets, tea trays and even tables and trunks, that appealed to the settler women – who gave them potatoes, apples, children’s clothing, or other products in exchange. These same women traded baskets to their own community members for salmon, venison or other foods<sup>8</sup>. Japanese and Chinese immigrants also participated in informal economies, exchanging cooking pots, porcelain dishes and tea for dried seaweed, wapato and other products from the First Peoples<sup>32</sup>.

Improved transportation routes during the colonial era – larger vessels, roads with horse-drawn wagons, and later, railroads and steamships – allowed more extensive travel and broader linkages with more distant peoples. New trade nodes sprang up at trading posts, and then agricultural centres where families from many areas converged to pick hops and fruit. Canneries, fishing grounds and logging camps also became major exchange nodes, where people from all along the coast converged for work in the so-called “moditional” (a blending of modern and traditional) economy of the 1800s and 1900s<sup>11,32</sup>. Trade and exchange has almost always involved bilingualism,

but, as speakers of more and more languages – including French and English – came together, trade languages, particularly Chinook Jargon, developed out of the need for more effective communication.

During the trade and settler era, some Indigenous people moved away from their home communities to new settlements and urban centres, but often maintained their ties with their families and communities in their places of origin, returning home seasonally or having products sent to them in their new locations by family, often to be exchanged for products from the markets of urban centres. As mentioned previously, not only goods, but an immense body of associated knowledge, technologies, stories, songs, ceremonies and general beliefs was exchanged and adapted to new contexts and ecosystems through these trading relationships.

### **Loss and renewal of cultural knowledge and related exchange systems**

The complexity and enormity of the acquired knowledge, practices and beliefs involved in these exchange systems were remarkable. However, multiple factors have impacted both traditional exchange systems and accompanying cultural knowledge in recent times. These include major disease epidemics during the fur trade and colonial era that decimated many communities and disrupted hereditary leadership systems, banning of the potlatch by the Canadian federal government, imposition of western style governance and religions, conscripting First Nations' children and youth to residential schools with enforced suppression of Indigenous languages and cultures and disparagement of Indigenous food, increasing participation of First Nations in the wage economy, alienation of First Peoples from their traditional territories and resources, and general forces of industrialization and globalization<sup>33,34</sup>. Losing cultural knowledge, along with reduced traditional food use, and language loss, has, in turn, impacted the health, cultural identity and overall well-being of Indigenous Peoples.

Fortunately, many of the original connections, ties and traditions, including exchange systems of the region's Indigenous Peoples, have been retained, at least by some individuals and communities. Even the potlatch, which was outlawed in 1885, under penalty of heavy fines and imprisonment for any people organizing or participating in a potlatch, continued in remote places, sometimes under the guise of other

events such as weddings and Christmas festivities<sup>11</sup>. The fact that these systems have persisted and are still in place, despite all their active repression, opens possibilities for cultural renewal and revitalization. The potlatch ban was lifted in 1951, and since that time, potlatches and associated feasts have gradually regained their former prominence, incorporating more and more of the types of gifts, including indigenous foods, that were part of the original potlatch system. Other, more recent types of gatherings, such as the annual All-native Basketball Tournament at Prince Rupert on the North coast, the annual Canoe Journeys that have taken place along the coast since the 1980s, salmon festivals, and Native dancing powwows throughout the southern interior, have presented new occasions to exchange goods, knowledge, skills, stories, medicines and traditional food<sup>42</sup>. Some of the First Foods ceremonies that were once prominent annual events to honour the gifts of salmon, game, roots, berries and other foods, are also being renewed. All of these bring people together and provide opportunities for cultural economic exchange.

Simply maintaining local food production and control is important to the integrity of cultural exchange. For the Gitga'ata of Hartley Bay, traditional foods remain immensely significant, as documented in a recent study<sup>35</sup> on the cultural impacts of the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline and oil tanker project.

Everyone we spoke with participated in some kind of informal trade or distribution of traditional foods. Distribution and preparation of foods constitutes important cultural capital; many, in fact, call it a tradition. In the small village of Txałgiw (Hartley Bay), there are 8 smokehouses in operation; people freeze, dry, and jar foods for the winter. While current figures are unavailable, a 2009 Traditional Food Study<sup>36</sup> which consulted 35 households in Hartley Bay found that in 2008: 57% (or 20 households) fished, collected wild berries, and collected seafood; 31% (or 11 households) hunted or set snares for food; 23% (or 8 households) collected plant roots and plant greens; and 11% (or 4 households) planted a garden.

Today, the struggle for cultural renewal and Indigenous people's rights to their ancestral territories and resources has presented increasing possibilities for the cultural economy to flourish, especially given the increased opportunities for travel and communication over longer distances, newer modes for harvesting and preserving traditional food (such as

freezers and dehydrators), and new and effective technologies for documenting aspects of people's culture, including language, stories, songs and technologies. The dominant forces of international markets and mass production exist with increasingly globalized economies and food production, threatening small-scale local production and cultural exchange systems that increase local communities' self-sufficiency and resilience. Nevertheless, these global forces are countered by observable trends towards local food production and strengthening of ties and cultural practices at the community level. As well, new forms of reciprocity may be brought into the host of products available for exchange. To obtain traditional food, for example, one might offer a gift of transportation, babysitting, cutting firewood or some other service<sup>46</sup>. The possibilities and opportunities are virtually unlimited. Furthermore, cultural exchange as part of cultural renewal for First Peoples is generally condoned and supported by mainstream society, including some government departments, university researchers and non-governmental organizations.

### Conclusion and policy implications

To assist in maintaining Indigenous Peoples' cultural economy, identifying the key threads of the original systems of the cultural economy can be an important step. Three major themes evident in these systems are:

- a philosophy of reciprocity and "giving back" as a societal norm, instilled at an early age through lessons and stories, and demonstrated through example in day-to-day practices as well as special occasions and events;
- existence of differing needs of different individuals and communities – needs that can be met by others through access to different resources, skills and/or technologies not directly available to the former;
- opportunities for interaction and communication between individuals and communities where exchange and reciprocity can be fulfilled in ways that are culturally appropriate.

In the first case, schools – once a negative influence on Indigenous children, with enforced acculturation of European ways of thought and values – can be a positive venue for instilling and nourishing philosophies of reciprocity and caring for others, including other species, that have been an important part of First Nations' worldviews.<sup>37</sup> Activities in

schools involving harvesting and gifting can help to maintain that special role that children have had in participating in the cultural economy and are especially effective if elders and knowledge holders are asked to share their traditional perspectives with students. Modern technology provides further opportunities for conveying elders' wisdom to children, youth and young adults through books<sup>37</sup>, and recordings, films and videos, available through a wide range of devices, from computers to smart phones. Historical lessons, stories, songs, ceremonies, and art that convey Indigenous worldview are all readily accessible in today's world, providing the foundations for a healthy, mutually beneficial cultural economy.

Many First Nations individuals and communities still harvest their own characteristic resources and practice their own special skills, which they enjoy sharing with others, as in the Gitga'ata seaweed-eulachon exchange mentioned in the introduction. Maintaining healthy ecosystems and protecting people's lands and waters are key. The decline of culturally valued species, such as eulachons, can be devastating not only to the environment but to the social systems that rely on them<sup>33</sup>. As Helen Clifton recounted,

We trade for eulachons with the Haisla and Nisga'a. We trade for dried herring eggs with the Kitasoo and the Gitxaala [neighbouring Ts'msyen groups]. We trade for soapberries with the Gitksan and the Wet'suwet'en. There are many other foods that we trade with many other communities.... Any negative impact on our resources is going to affect our ability to trade and barter, which is another important part of our culture<sup>1</sup>.

Conservation and species protection are therefore critically important elements in supporting Indigenous Peoples and their cultural traditions, including the trading and exchange that enhances biocultural diversity<sup>38</sup>. Supporting cultural institutions that enable both use and protection of resource areas is an essential step. Setting aside and acknowledging areas and resources that have been traditionally owned by particular clans or communities, and supporting First Peoples' land rights are also important measures, as is support for First Nations' controlled conserved and protected areas where they can apply traditional management and control<sup>38</sup>.

In terms of promoting opportunities for interaction and communication, there are many different venues that can be created and supported by all people.

Creating spaces for First Nations cultural activities, meetings and education centres, such as the First Peoples House at the University of Victoria (<http://web.uvic.ca/fphouse>) and other cultural gathering places, is one positive step towards facilitating cultural exchange, especially in cases where people are living away from their home communities and do not have the same opportunities for interacting and practicing their culture as they might at home. Supporting seasonal fairs and festivals, such as the Tsawout Annual Seafood Festival for the Saanich Nation (<http://www.tsawout.com/index.php/community-calendar/details/209-tsawout-annual-seafood-festival>), is another way to help enhance cultural exchange. Providing opportunities for travel and transportation of Indigenous students, elders and others to attend cultural events can also help to maintain the cultural economy.

Taken together, these features create conditions that allow the continuance and flourishing of positive systems of social economic exchange. The exchange systems, in turn, help to promote cultural richness, cement social relationships, strengthen ties between generations and across communities, bring meaning to a people's lives and maintain the ties for mutual support and security that are necessary, ultimately, for their survival and well-being. Advancing First Peoples' cultural economies fits seamlessly within language revitalization, cultural renewal, revival of traditional land and resource management practices, and local sustainable economic development.

Among many First Nations, distribution and exchange of cultural goods, especially food, is considered a part of good cultural citizenship. Rather than serving as a means of wealth generation or profit, it is an integral part of community well-being and survival, and reflects the convergence of sustenance, ecology and culture<sup>9,33</sup>. It also represents the versatility, ingenuity and resilience of First Nations in the face of immense change<sup>14</sup>.

Although change is inevitable, and in some cases desirable, it is unlikely that these local practices and relationships of mutual benefit will disappear. These are living cultures, capable of great flexibility, and as long as the weight of peoples' values is on the side of community well-being and caring for others, and not on individual consumerism, these systems of communal support and reciprocity towards others, both human and non-human, will persist<sup>39,40</sup>. The spirit of the cultural economy is still alive and well

and the trend is for its continued flourishing, along with vibrant traditional knowledge systems<sup>41</sup>. Helen Clifton's words<sup>1</sup>, describing her own Gitga'at community, sum up the situation: "So they have their favourite places of gathering and bringing it home to granny. That's when you feel special." Relationships are often more important than possessions – the exchange of food and other products of great cultural meaning cements relationships and brings enriched meaning to people's lives.

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