



Navel Gazing

"Welcome to the New Wild West" - that's what should be written in big bold letters on a banner above main street in Prince Rupert. Two big LNG projects proposed for the Prince Rupert harbour, three more in varying stages between rumour and reality, and so many pipeline proposals that I've lost count - it's enough to make your head spin! Hard hats and construction trucks are more common on the streets of town than pigeons. And yet, it is like some kind of surreal movie - everyone is putting up big stakes, and there may not even be enough LNG in the North to support one large LNG export facility, let alone the 8+ currently being schemed about. What's up? Despite the fact that we are apparently a boom town, stores are still closing, and the locals are quiet and apprehensive. Where is the employment we were promised? Prince Rupert looks like a place that is quickly becoming a ghost town.

Government has changed the rules of the game, but has not yet provided the new rule book. Environmental assessments are still required, but the old procedures and standards are no longer adhered to. The habitat division of DFO in Prince Rupert has been closed down - the last person was transferred to Nanaimo this summer. No one remains in town who can speak to the changes. Industry hires biologists from the east coast to study our eelgrass beds - I guess it is easier than hiring locals who might ask awkward questions or care too much about the environment which is also their home.

This free-for-all approach has caused dissonance within the community and between the community and those who have been brought in to support industry. The lines

have been clearly drawn in the sand - you are either pro-industry or anti-industry. There is no middle ground where an objective scientist can work.

As I amble down the docks towards our boat, I see several people handling a sediment sample in ways that would make my old oceanography professors shudder in horror. I don't know what company they are working for, and with my hands in my pockets, wearing my old work clothes, and looking like just another unemployed local, they have no clue as to who I am. At the moment, this may be for the best.

So ... what to do in this time of turmoil and tension? Well, I decided to take a holiday. Some friends of ours wanted to kayak on the wild west side of Banks Island. They were willing to pay the cost of fuel, and we were willing to share what we knew about this beautiful and remote place, so the deal was struck.

My trips to the wilderness help me focus on what is really important in life. I can reconnect with the aspects of nature that led me to become a biologist and an oceanographer. I can feel the pulse of life, see the changes of the seasons, sense the effects of climate change. Out of reach of cell phones, email, and the constant uproar of "progress", I can smell the seaweed in the air, share a fresh-caught fish over a camp fire with friends, and spend some time doing one of my favourite activities - navel gazing.

In some of my previous musings, I have talked a bit about professional ethics, but now I was facing something even more challenging, something that affected both my professional ethics and my deep-rooted personal morals. Not only did I find myself asking the classic question "What should I do in this situation as a biologist bound by professional ethics?", I also found myself asking several questions which were much harder to answer: "What do I do as a person?"; "How do I maintain trust with my community?"; "How important is the environment to me?"; "Am I willing to stand up for what I believe in, even if it means losing work and living with less?"; "What is best for my community". Like many scientists, I find it easy to make objective

decisions, but subjective navel gazing is much more difficult.

Two weeks of sunshine and beach sand, glass balls and ocean views, went by. Slowly the whirling in my head stilled, and I started to soak up the quiet steady rhythms of nature. Just as slowly, the answers coalesced from the depths of my soul - I probably knew what they were all along, but couldn't hear my inner self for all the noise around me.

My first care and duty is to the environment. Hand-in-hand with this duty is the need to help my community find a healthy and sustainable way to live within this environment. To do this, I must foster the trust of my community, and not turn my back on its welfare for the sake of a buck. The answer was simple - the doing may be much harder!

So, for what it's worth, my words of wisdom to other fellow biologists who find themselves at odds with the world - take a vacation. Do some navel gazing. Listen to nature, and find your own inner words of wisdom.



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