

Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Guujaaw (Haida)

*Interview with Guujaaw
Conducted by David Hall
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Transcribed by: Michelle Emery*

DH: (00:14) Thank you, Guujaaw, for taking the time with us today. This project is about sustainability from the perspective of indigenous leaders and our aim is to hear from you on the subject today. To begin, can you share a little about yourself, where your home is, your cultural heritage?

G: (00:33) I'm Guujaaw of the Haida Nation. These islands are in the North Pacific just south of Alaska, and have provided for tens of thousands of people for tens of thousands of years, and continue to provide for our people.

As far as sustainability there, you have the indigenous way of sustaining oneself: living with the land, just doing what one would think is the natural way to live. I don't consider it as the ancient way to live, just the natural way. The land provides and you look after the land and make sure you don't abuse those gifts.

DH: (1:37) Can you say more about your cultural identity and how that informs the work that you do?

G: (1:48) Right now I am the political leader of the Haidas, but having been a trapper, and hunter, and fisherman, and still continue to do those things as well, including carving and make medicine for people, that's who I am. Those are the things that I come from and what makes me Haida.

DH: (2:29) You've used the word sustainability and talked about it as living the natural way. Can you say more about that?

G: (2:38) Well, sustainability is a funny word. You see, Weyerhaeuser will use it to their own advantage, but as we see it, it is living from the land without spoiling it. We know that's possible because it has happened for a long time.

There are obvious differences now in that there's so many people on the planet that there are challenges and yet for that very reason, we know that we can't allow ourselves to wipe out our life source. There should be enough here for everybody to live, eat well and be comfortable, the trouble is that too many people want more than enough.

DH: (3:29) What else comes to mind when you think about that word "sustainability?"

G: (3:34) Well, I think it means continuity of other forms of life too. I think we have to consider that we are just one of the critters on this earth and we have to be considerate of those other

creatures.

DH: (4:04) Are there good examples of how the people of Haida Gwaii have lived in that way that's respectful, considerate of other creatures?

G: (4:11) It's pretty clear that by the time I came into this world the land there was still abundant with salmon and clams and all the things that my ancestors used. And in my life-time I've seen it depleted. By a number of means; one is by over fishing, and destruction of habitat, and kind of shortsighted planning, and a lot of things; man-made depletions. Man made compromises in the quest to turn everything into money, commodity.

DH: (5:06) What do you see as alternatives to that?

G: (5:09) Nobody seems to want to give up the quest for riches, but a bit of planning could be done to provide for culture and environment and economies. I don't even think that rules out the use of the forest or even mining necessarily. I think that it's a matter of how you do it and where the limits are drawn. For instance, taking all of the fish from a river will give you a pocket of money, but taking only a portion of those fish over many decades provides far more over time, potentially in perpetuity.

Similarly you can employ many people to log an island in a few years and then move on, or employ a few people over many years as they raise their families and have a life. But investment is a shortsighted thing.

DH: (6:29) One of the things that's come up in other conversations about sustainability is *health* and how do you see the connection between how people are using that word and the idea of health and what that means for your people?

G: (6:42) As the resources are depleted and diets change, then the health of the people is compromised. If you impoverish the land, the people who depend on that land are impoverished. The ones to feel it and see it, the ones first impacted will be the indigenous people of the region, because they are of the land.

DH: (7:25) If you're talking with someone who's unfamiliar with the concept of sustainability are there any stories or metaphors or analogies that you share with them to help them understand the idea?

G: (7:37) I wouldn't say that there haven't been troubles before, otherwise, we wouldn't have stories like that. We have stories, one in particular: Hill whose brother was greedy with the eulachons (a small rich fish), and they never came back to Haida Gwaii. There are still eulachons on the main land, but, so this is our story.

There are stories of tsunamis occurring on our land, and most of those are tied to moral behavior such as mistreating baby otter, or doing something out of sorts that shouldn't have been done to the land or some other natural thing. Making fun of food has its consequence. So a lot of our stories and history are tied around showing a lesson of looking after things.

DH: (8:51) That reminds me of another thing that's come up in these other conversations; the

notion of respect and taking care. Do you see that connection too?

G: (9:01) Yeah.

DH: (9:05) What might you say about that?

G: (9:08) Respect is one of the core operative principles of law amongst our people. It's respect for the earth, respect for other people, which comes to respect for yourself. So, if you keep that foremost then the troubles don't occur.

DH: (9:42) As you've been talking has there been any imagery that's come to mind in fact a lot of what you've shared has had imagery to it for me, but is there any image or symbol in particular that represents some core aspect of the idea sustainability to you? And, if so would you be willing to draw it.

G: (10:00) (Laughter) No. I don't have one, but I'll try to think of one.

DH: (10:04) Okay, if something comes to you then let us know.

G: (10:08) But, the imagery of our culture, which is from the relationship of our people to the land, comes quite an artistic culture, which is very political art. All of it was about who we are, about who the different clans are, and how they relate, what stories and what crests they own and the stories come with that. So, a very possessive kind of culture in that sense. But all of it is about the land: the killer whale, the ravens, the eagles, the supernatural and all those different things that we shared life with. In our instance that imagery brings us to the earth, and anybody viewing it would think about those earthly things.

DH: (12:46) Well, if you get inspired to draw anything. I'd like you now to think about applying--and I suspect you do on a daily basis--with this idea of sustainability in mind, what's your vision for the future of your community, the people of Haida Gwaii in terms of a sustainable future for them? What's that vision?

G: (13:20) Our people are the Haida people, indigenous from that part of the world, but also living in this century, and mixed with a variety of occupations, and careers, and ideals, and all those things, but we still go to the land for the food and expect that to always be part of our life. And it is part of the economy of our people. They also work for a living, and opportunities will be there for them to work on the land as managers of the land--there are people doing that now--but where there is work on the land, we know that a reduced level of logging is suitable for our people. The rates of harvest were far beyond what was sustainable for the land, and we've knocked it back to about a third of what it was and we probably expect it will go back some more. But we also know that as for independence, and ability to do the things we want to do, we need an economy. We can build it out of those resources, but I think that because of the fact that tribes as ours that are very much concerned with the clan, and the family, and attend the funerals, and celebrate births of all the different of all the kids coming in each year, that we're very much involved all the time in the multi-generational aspects of life. We're not just looking at a four or five year cycle. So, sustainability is quite broad and involves all of those things; the food we eat,

the kind of economy we're going to have, and the fate of the following generations.

DH: (16:13) So, then what else do you see in an optimistic sense for the fate for the future generations?

G: (16:22) Well, I've got kids and you know the oldest one's thirty-something and the youngest one's three. I have to consider that there will be future generations and if we look at the things that are going on we all have to be concerned. But yet, I know that I've got to be there for my kids for whatever is coming. While things look bleak for the earth, we have to plan for a future. I am certainly not going to throw in the towel because what I see going on. I think if anything it's all the more reason for people to stand and fight, whether it's with their computer, or whatever they got, and find their voice and try to deal with these problems.

DH: (17:35) Imagine your three year old, when your three year old is your age, and what's the world that you hope your three old will be able to look out upon and see?

G: (17:32) What we've got to plan for is we've got to make sure those kids can go and relate to the land in the way that my generation has. In 50 years, they should be able to see big trees, they should be able to see salmon coming into their creeks. They should be able to pull clams out of the beach, and crabs and pick sea weed, and all these normal things.

DH: (18:24) What about relationships within the community? What's your hopeful vision for that?

G: (18:32) Well, critical to our ability to have pulled off what we did in protecting half the landscape and changing the forestry to eco-forestry, is the support and cooperation of the other communities around us. We did that, and I think we found common ground in almost all of the big issues; what land should be protected, and those sorts of things.

DH: (19:12) Can you talk a bit more about those relationships with those other outside communities and organizations?

G: (19:18) The population of our island is about half Haida and half Canadian citizens. The tendency would be for those communities to basically accept what happens to them. The economy happens to them, the opportunities and challenges happen to them, and they have traditionally had little to do with designing what was going to occur. By working with us they found more of a voice than they had without us, because otherwise it would be generally that a Government or industry deciding what's going to happen, always somebody else deciding what's going to happen. In places where logging had come to an abrupt end and communities are shut down, they'd go somewhere else, that's been the way that it was. And they've seen that happen, they've seen communities their size just get shut down because they depleted the resources. We believe we're providing more opportunities for them in what we're doing if we can get to sustainable forestry; they have more control over their own lives by working with us.

DH: (21:15) What have been some of the keys to making that relationship work other than your shared interests?

G: (21:26) I think it just boils down to the ability of people to sit together and try to figure out what those interests are. People get caught up in trying to make a living, pay the bills, and don't have time for much else.

DH: (21:53) So, you've had a lot of those conversations, a lot time around the table?

G: (21:55) Yeah, we've been in the logging communities and amongst the others and had the debates, and had the discussions, and live along side our neighbors.

DH: (22:16) Back to the idea of your community, and the future, and it being a sustainable future, what about the *worldviews*, the important values for your people? Both to take them there, and for them to maintain sustainability?

G: (22:47) Well, like in any community we'll have our internal differences, but the values that are shared by the people is that we've got to protect the land, and in doing that we protect the culture. We've got to have a sustainable economy; it's a matter of how we get there. Those kind of values remain strong because the land is still providing for us, and I think in places where the opportunities have left and the urban sprawl has caught up to some of the other villages, the answers are going to be different than what we come up with.

DH: (23:54) Anything else you'd say about values or belief systems?

G: (24:03) A common colonial approach is offering economic solutions by itself. We see this all over Canada, and an impoverished people will have basic needs. This is the test of wills, and even more often the solutions play into the cycle of poverty while the riches of the land are more often to the benefit of people who have no affinity to those lands.

DH: (25:21) Thinking again about your youngest children and their generation, when they're your age, what about their identity, their self-concept and how might you hope to see them express their identity through "I am" statements? How would they define themselves?

G: (25:45) When they are my age isn't that far off. In the scheme of things it's not a long ways off to the future. It seems like it when you are a little kid, but it doesn't seem so long once you get there. Anyway, since our people were free of any of the external troubles that way we've dealt with--200 years ago, which isn't that long ago--I like to think that a lot of the values are the same, particularly, that when I go to the beach the smells and the sounds are the same as what my great-grandmother knew. I mean the forest; basically the sounds and the smells are the same. So those things will continue to inspire the same values in my kids, but it also inspires other people to stand up and take steps to try to protect it. And that's how we've been able to move people: we've opened up some of the remote areas of our lands to visitors, and that's where we get a lot of our external support-base. It doesn't matter what race or nationality you are, when you're there and you're on the land, and you know what's at stake, then those values are instilled, they're deep, they get deep very quick.

DH: (28:03) Would you say anything else about what you are hopeful for the future of your

people?

G: (28:09) What we are planning for is simply the ability to supply their families with food, and comfort; we want to provide every step of the way with their food until it's on the table. That in itself is pretty high value. The other things of being able to make a livelihood in the modern times looking after the land and working the land--I think the question's a little funny because it's not just wishful thinking. Now we are in a position to be able to design an economic future that will fit with our culture.

DH: (30:00) Can you say more about what that design is that you have in mind for aligning the economic system with your culture?

G: (30:11) Not without just getting into a bunch of buzzwords and stuff like that. (laughter)

DH: (30:21) Want to share a few of those buzz words? (laughter)

G: (30:22) What we've already looked at is how do you do more with less, and treat the resources; the trees, the wood as precious commodities, and really treat the fish, and flesh, that you are going to either eat or transfer to somebody else as the very precious life that it is. There's a lot of opportunities with the kind of control that can/will be gained in the next couple of years. Again, it is the design of the future.

DH: (31:18) So, you mentioned that you are planning now for the future and engaging in different actions and strategies. Can you say more about that? That is the next phase of this interview; how do we get there? What are the kinds of actions and strategies we need to take?

G: (31:36) To get there for our people it is years of fighting to protect the land, fighting to protect salmon creeks, and going through courts, and going through blockades, going through negotiations, and dealing with other people, and scaring away investors. We really will have to become a different kind of creature as we gain that control. Personally, I would be happy to hunt and gather as my primary life and carve for those other things.

DH: (33:06) What would you like to see in the leaders that will follow you?

G: (33:14) I think our people will put forth principled people. I think those principles kind of become in-bred when you are amongst your own families, and you're attending the funerals of your opposite clans, and you're involved in all that, that inter-generational thing again does become instilled in you.

DH: (34:17) So, other kinds of actions and strategies?

G: (34:26) When people have the necessary information before them, they will be inspired to action of whatever it takes, it is absolutely necessary that the leaders are with the people. It is also necessary to understand the fleeting nature of investment, pretty much any project is going to need someone else's money, if not its own, in which case, they will always be looking for the best bet in increasing their investment, not seeing it tied up in any number of ways that

money can be stalled. Also the investors should be made to know what their investment dollar is doing.

DH: (35:37) So, educating, working with investors to help them understand the impacts.

G: (35:41) Yeah, and basically scaring them off when they need to be scared off. They'll put the money where they need to, but they're not going to put it where it's going to be tied up in court cases, and bad press, and bad karma. But they got to know where their money is.

DH: (36:02) Other action or strategies you might recommend?

G: (36:10) Depending on what is at stake.....whatever it takes.

DH: (36:35) When would direct action strategies be essential?

G: (36:39) When everything else fails. Because really what's important is what happens on the ground; you can go and negotiate and have your consultations with governments and industry but if those things aren't producing any results, you've got to take steps to stop them. I think they've got to know that you are ready to do that too.

DH: (37:11) You've mentioned obstacles different things that need to be overcome, are there any major ones that you see now that we should be collectively be focusing our attention on overcoming?

G: (37:29) We could see our own people succumb to material wealth and lose sight of the source of that wealth.

DH: (38:21) That makes me think about what I read on the Haida Gwaii website about the mission of your people and intimacy in terms of your relationship with the landscape. Can you say anything about that intimacy and what you hope to see for other people in terms of developing an intimate relationship with their landscape?

G: (38:46) I would like to think that anybody who wants to do that just needs to take a walk, or get on a boat, or go catch some fish or something. And yet there is a danger in inviting that catching a fish is a sacred thing; taking another life for your own. But we've seen what can happen, like with sport fishing, it is not much different than the trophy hunting where it is all a big laugh; go out, get drunk, get away from the old lady and kill something. It depends on how you go out into the land. Once you go there then that intimacy begins and it takes hold.

DH: (39:46) That would just be the beginning?

G: (39:50) Yeah, I think people just need some exposure and they need some opportunity to go there, to go the land and do something natural, something not necessarily where we live, but anywhere that there's natural earth. As you get closer, you revere it, and maybe even join in the fight to save what's left of it.

DH: (40:18) Are you hopeful that we'll be doing that?

G: (40:24) I think it's occurring. But as it's occurring, still the losses are tremendous, and other parts of the earth, if you look at the excesses that are going on ... if you consider what they spent in the Iraq war they probably could have bought the Amazon jungle. Certainly, they could have provided the means to keep the illegal logging out, but I think they could have bought that whole jungle for that price.

DH: (41:09) So, it's a question of where we're investing? What we value?

G: (41:15) I think it's a matter of who benefits. The war is fought for the people who make arms or otherwise make money off wars. I don't think any of those people are spending much time thinking about the condition of the earth.

DH: (41:32) Back to the question about imagery, does anything come to mind that symbolizes sustainability in some way?

G: (41:45) (Laughter) I'm a good artist but I'm not clicking with that, the imagery. But I will keep thinking about it. I don't know if you want a circle or an infinity sign, a rock...

(laughter)

DH: (42:09) Whatever for you is something that stands out and says, "You know what that's what it's about. It's about this basic symbol."

G: (42:22) Right now I am building a canoe. A 36 foot canoe made out of about a 500 year old tree. The canoe when it's done will be--I'll steam so it'll become wider and it'll be accurate from side to side within 1/16 of an inch. Every line is going to be true to the way that the water should move off of an object, almost like a marine mammal. This canoe is made for the high seas. They have a prow on it that's very interesting; I've been on them in sea's that are 15 to 16 ft. waves or a little bit bigger than that. Anyway they are a pretty amazing vessel, and our story is that it wasn't a design that had evolved, but rather was brought to our people and shown to them by the super-naturals. That's another piece of imagery.

There is a copper shield which is quite a geometric shape. It actually had become the symbol, not a symbol of wealth, but actually the banking system of the coastal people. How it worked was, the chiefs prestige is measured by not how much they accumulate but by how much they give. So all the time that they are giving, the common people are benefiting. Yet the other chiefs are put into debt. The way they get out of debt again is by reciprocating with another potlatch where the people again receive and the cycle continues. But all the time, you put that value of your giving into the copper, so nothing is lost, and the interest is the prestige. So this copper is an interesting kind of shape with a dome top, and a T that goes in the front. A tricky piece of metallurgy, not easy to produce. In displaying the wealth, the clan prerogatives are brought out in song and dance and material. The whole business is an economy of sharing

DH: (48:38) Would you be willing to give a quick sketch of that form?

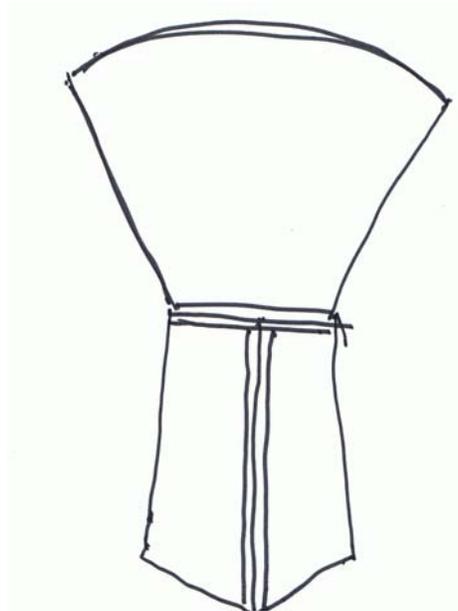
G: (48:43) The copper?

DH: (48:44) The copper piece, yeah.

G: (48:48) Sure...okay, finally you got me. (Laughter)

DH: (48:52) And, maybe also share how you think that the deeper meaning of it might be relevant to other cultures as well, and where we, hopefully, collectively, will start heading.

G: (49:11) (*Drawing*) You take Western civilization and the difference, of course, is the accumulation of wealth is for the individual is the main problem. That's the objective and training, since you were a little kid in school is that you learn that the freedom of America or Western Civilization is the freedom to become like Donald Trump if you can. That's how the copper is (*holds up image*):



DH: (51:25) So, that can symbolize an alternative valuing system of what wealth means?

G: (51:33) Yes, where the measure isn't accumulation but in distribution.

DH: (51:52) You said this was the basis of the economic system. Is there a name or any referencing for this?

G: (52:02) *Dao*, "The Copper." That's how it's referred to, just as The Copper. Like a shield. You see them from small ones to bigger ones.

DH: (52:41) Thank you for sharing that imagery with us. Wondering if there's...

G: (52:51) Sustainable (*pointing to image*), a sustainable future with The Copper; with a whole different set of values. Imagine if Donald Trump gave out all his money; consider the forest equivalent to his wealth. I think it's a good system that works. It worked for thousands of years.

DH: (53:32) Is there anything here from our conversation that you'd like to reemphasize or make a stronger point about?

G: (54:32) One of my concerns is to go onto a modern University campus and see what's going on there. It's like nothing is wrong, there doesn't seem to be any challenge of what's happening. They all seem to be like cattle or something off to the slaughter next week, but they're not challenging anything that's going on. Somehow they've found a way to beat the kids, they found a way to beat the grown-ups a long time ago, you just pound them into debt. And so these poor little kids think that their just going to go on and do what their mom and dad did.

DH: (54:36) Do you have a call to action?

G: (54:45) Yep...you see those big buildings in the middle of San Francisco, you go down there, and you bust it up (laughter). No...it is the economy that has no conscience. Those who benefit the most will see that it continues. It works in favor of those people who are in control of it, and people just got to quit allowing it to wreck the earth.

DH: (55:39) What's the most positive thing that you see today that we can draw upon and build upon?

G: (55:51) There is a swing... even more of a call to action in Europe because the denial and the control isn't as strong there, they have accepted that they have big troubles coming their way. They take the big windstorms as a message. There is a swing in the Americas, though suppressed by the powers that be. I think the USA has got to get rid of those electric computer voting machines.

DH: (58:01) Is there a positive?

G: (58:02) I don't know if there is a positive. (Laughter) I don't know if there is a positive... I was quite happy to see how many people were involved in this thing here, the Bioneers (*conference in San Marion, October 2007*). I didn't know if there are that many people involved in the struggle or caring about it. It's a good sign.

DH: (58:31) For all those people that aren't here, aren't involved, that are in denial, any message there?

G: (58:41) You know how it works is, either we design our future or somebody else designs it for us. Someone is out there already doing that, bidding America to "KEEP SHOPPING". Sadly, for many that will be all, and it is the few that we have to count on.

DH: (58:49) You'd like to be in the designers seat?

G: (58:58) Well, I think we got to be, otherwise we know what's happened.

DH: (59:04) Any other thoughts to share in closing?

G: (59:11) That's quite a bit.

DH: (59:12) Yes. Thank you for taking your time with us today.

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