



TOWARDS RECONCILIATION AND INDIGENOUS SELF-DETERMINATION IN PARK PLANNING AND OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT IN NORTHWESTERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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ABSTRACT

Reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination have importance globally for the management of protected-area systems, as these landscapes constitute key arenas where conservation, colonial history and contemporary struggles for Indigenous governance and authority interface. This case study examines the role of reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination in the Northwestern region of British Columbia's (BC) provincial parks system in Canada. The objectives were to identify socio-political barriers to Indigenous inclusion in BC Parks' planning and operations management and to develop practical recommendations for park planners and operations managers to support reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination in their work. Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with Gitksan First Nation Chiefs and Elders and BC Parks staff revealed that settler colonialism, residential schools and assimilation policies have created longstanding mistrust in the Province. Gitksan participants emphasised that reconciliation is community-specific, and self-determination requires greater control, agency and governance over their territories. BC Parks participants called for regionally located Indigenous Relations specialists, co-management of parks and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas to support engagement and relationship-building. The paper argues that meaningful inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in park planning and operations management is essential for advancing reconciliation, supporting self-determination, and addressing broader social and environmental issues.

Key words: Parks, Settler Colonialism, Protected Areas, First Nations, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Questions of Indigenous rights, governance and land stewardship are being raised globally and with increasing urgency in the fields of conservation and protected-area management; however, research on Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation and self-determination in provincial park planning and management remains limited. This urgency has intensified with the adoption of Target 3 under the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022), which commits countries to protect at least 30 per cent of the world's land and oceans by 2030 while emphasising equitable governance and respect for Indigenous territories. **Protected areas** are geographically defined areas managed for the long-term conservation of nature and associated cultural

values. **Parks** are one form of protected area, formally designated and managed by government agencies for conservation, recreation, and the protection of cultural and historical values.

In 2019, the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia (BC) passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA), making BC the first and only Canadian province to legislate the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007). DRIPA establishes UNDRIP as the Province's framework for reconciliation and requires provincial laws to be aligned with UNDRIP. International frameworks such as UNDRIP have influenced how countries including Australia, New Zealand and the United States consider self-determination and Indigenous authority in land and



'Ksan Historical Village in Gitksan First Nation Territory (Laxyip) © Sophia Graham

resource governance. Canada's context is uniquely shaped by histories of settler colonialism and reconciliation efforts (Graham & Osborne, 2024). The current investigation considers this context and analyses reconciliation, self-determination and Indigenous inclusion in park planning and management in an effort to contribute to these international, scholarly discussions.

There is research on the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples within national parks operated by Parks Canada (Cook, 2020; Houde, 2007; Johnston & Mason, 2020, 2021), and within this literature, there is a focus on environmental monitoring (Popp et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2019). To date, there are no studies that offer recommendations for working towards reconciliation and self-determination in BC Parks' planning and management. The only study that discusses the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in BC Parks was conducted by Kadykalo et al. (2021), who interviewed and surveyed BC government decision-makers from a variety of ministries. The current case study built upon Kadykalo et al.'s (2021) work by focusing on BC Parks management and including Indigenous Peoples' perspectives. While previous scholarship has examined Parks Canada's reconciliation policies (Cornthassel et al., 2009; Finegan, 2018), this literature has not analysed the role of reconciliation in provincial park management agencies or how self-determination can be best supported by park agencies and managers. This study addressed these literature gaps, with an emphasis on the ways in which socio-political factors influence the inclusion of

Indigenous Peoples and their perspectives in BC Parks, and how BC Parks can prioritise reconciliation and self-determination in their planning and management of protected areas. We contend that including Indigenous Peoples in park planning and management is imperative for mobilising reconciliation, self-determination, and addressing larger social and environmental issues.

Previous research on settler colonialism and reconciliation in parks highlights how colonial power structures systematically dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of their lands, erased their histories, and marginalised their governance. Scholars such as Mason (2014, 2021) and Binnema and Niemi (2006) show that Canadian parks were established through colonial policies, including the Indian Act (1894), which forcibly displaced Indigenous communities without consent, imposed Eurocentric place names and narratives, and restricted Indigenous cultural practices – thereby undermining Indigenous sovereignty and ways of life. Today, Indigenous histories and knowledge often remain underrepresented or misrepresented in park signage, programming and staff understanding, sustaining colonial myths and impeding reconciliation efforts (Johnston & Mason, 2020).

Indigenous perspectives on the environment centre the concept of relationality, where Indigenous Peoples understand themselves as living in deep, reciprocal relationships with the land, water, plants, animals and all forms of life (Cajete, 2004). These relational understandings form the foundation of Indigenous

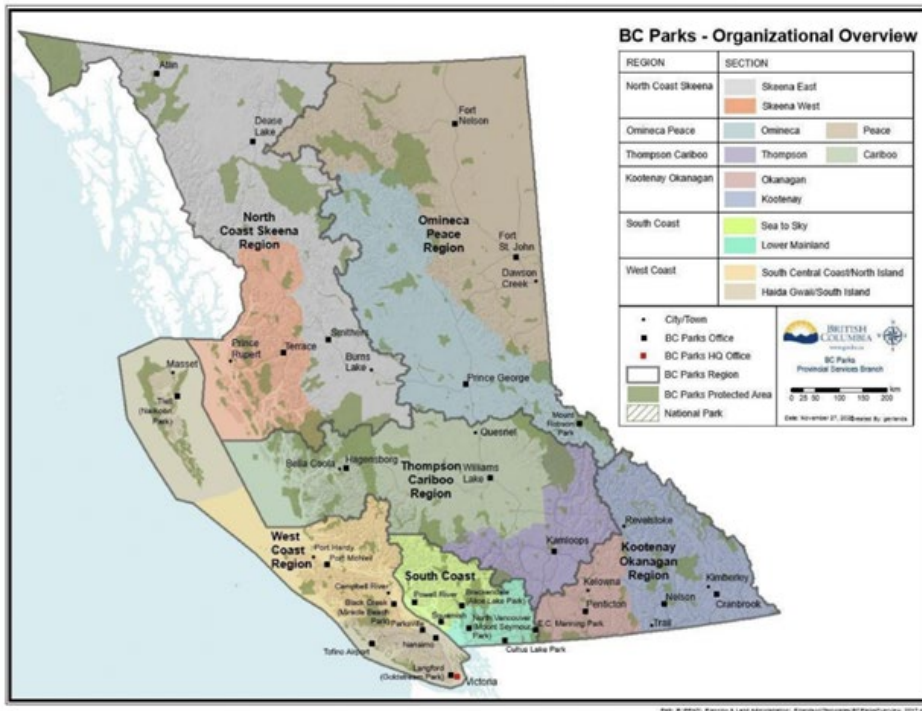


Figure 1. BC Parks Regions. Reprinted from: the Government of British Columbia, 2021, BC Parks Administrative Boundaries for the Provincial Parks System. Retrieved November 4, 2025 from https://portalextnrs.gov.bc.ca/documents/processed_files/Park+Contacts+Conditions+and+Restrictions+2021-01-18.pdf. Copyright 2021 by the Government of British Columbia.

Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA), which are protected areas legislated under the jurisdiction and laws of Indigenous governments to protect their lands and waters (Finegan, 2018). Studies on IPCAs demonstrate how Indigenous self-determination is expressed through stewardship rooted in traditional beliefs and values (Murray & Burrows, 2017; Tran et al., 2020). IPCAs offer a practical pathway to reconcile conservation objectives with Indigenous rights and are increasingly recognised as a key tool for advancing Indigenous governance, cultural revitalisation, and biodiversity protection within protected-area management.

The research was guided by two questions: (1) What socio-political factors influence the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in park planning and operations management? And (2) How do Chiefs, Elders and Parks personnel view reconciliation and self-determination in terms of park planning and management? In addressing these questions, this research aimed to offer practicable recommendations for park planners and operations managers to meaningfully include Indigenous Peoples, with a focus on upholding the principles of reconciliation and self-determination in park planning and management.

Three key concepts underpinned the study’s analysis. First, settler colonialism is a distinct form of colonialism in which settlers seek to remove and erase Indigenous Peoples through culturally genocidal practices to expropriate and use their lands in perpetuity (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This form of colonialism aims to replace Indigenous identities with a colonial identity – often through forcible assimilation (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Second, reconciliation has been defined as establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). Third, self-determination is a First Nation’s right to govern their lands, territories and resources, serving as an animating force for reconciliation by confronting legacies of empire, discrimination and cultural suppression to build social and political relations based on mutual respect (TRC, 2015).

METHODS

The research focused on BC Parks’ North Coast Skeena Region (see Figure 1). BC Parks is an agency of the British Columbia Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, responsible for the designation, management and conservation of provincial parks. Its mandate is to protect natural environments and biodiversity, manage cultural values, and steward parks as a public trust for conservation, recreation, education, scientific study, and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples (BC Parks, 2025). This was an ideal location to study reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination, as it is home to approximately 25 distinct First Nations and contains 190 parks and protected areas. The research team chose to work with the Gitxsan First Nation due to the first author’s personal connections with Gitxsan Peoples, the size of their Territory (known as Laxyip), and the number of BC Parks located within it. Gitxsan Laxyip spans 33,000 km² and contains 10 BC Parks (see Figure 2).

The research employed a case study methodology that focused specifically on the institution of BC Parks, the Indigenous perspectives of Gitksan First Nation members, and the processes of BC Parks planning and operations management, within the context of Northwestern BC. Case study research is well suited to exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena, although scholars note limitations related to generalisability, time intensity, and the potential production of large volumes of data (Yin, 2003). Because case studies are deeply embedded in place, their findings are most directly applicable to similar contexts; however, robust case studies that provide detailed, multi-faceted analysis can still generate insights that are relevant in other settings (Yin, 2003). The study's focus – Northwestern BC Parks and Gitksan Indigenous Knowledge – mean the findings are most applicable to northern and coastal First Nations within BC Parks' planning and management system. While this study lacks complete generalisability for other parks and regions, several of the findings, particularly the practical and adaptable recommendations related to Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation and self-determination, may be more generally useful to park agencies.

The authors are White women of settler descent, and attention to position and power dynamics shaped each stage of the research. The project received approval from Gitksan Huwilp Government in June 2022, BC Parks North Coast Skeena Region in September 2022, and the University of Northern British Columbia's Research Ethics Board in January 2023 (File No.: E2022.1019.058.00). The first author worked with Gitksan Huwilp Government to develop a formal Research Agreement and Data-sharing Protocol in November 2022. This agreement outlined the binding expectations between the First Nation and the authors regarding the collection, use, storage, disclosure and analysis of data. Research agreements and data-sharing protocols help prevent misunderstanding and misconduct and protect community interests, information and privacy. The first author completed the First Nations Information Governance Centre's OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) training and applied the OCAP Principles throughout the study to support Indigenous data sovereignty and information governance. Free, prior and informed consent was obtained from participants before beginning research activities.

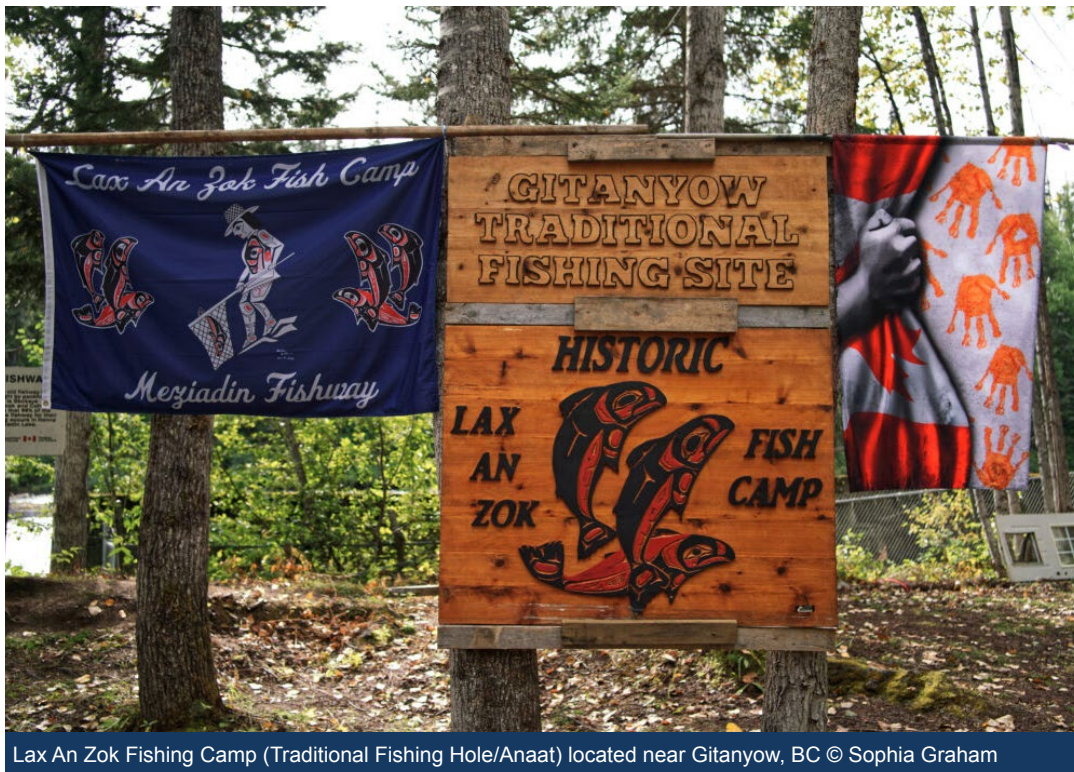
Participant recruitment followed two nonprobability sampling approaches: purposive convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive convenience sampling involves selecting participants based on practical criteria such as accessibility, availability and willingness to participate, while snowball sampling refers to identifying



Figure 2. Gitksan First Nation Laxyip Boundary Map. Adapted from: Huwilp Gitksan Government, 2019, Gald'm Mahlasxw, Gitksan Laxyip. https://gitksan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Gitksan_MarchNewsletter_2019.pdf. Copyright 2019 by Gitksan Huwilp Government. Adapted with permission.

additional participants through referrals from initial participants who possess relevant knowledge or characteristics (Patton, 2015). Recruitment criteria for the study required that all BC Parks participants had direct involvement in park management planning processes, and because sharing Indigenous Knowledge is a culturally governed responsibility, only Chiefs and Elders from Gitksan First Nation were included in the study, aligning with Indigenous governance systems and methodological guidance that identifies Chiefs and Elders as knowledge authorities (Simpson, 2001). These sampling approaches were selected intentionally due to the relational, jurisdictional and ethical considerations required when conducting research with Indigenous communities and government agencies. Chiefs' and Elders' contact information is not publicly available, and access requires trust-building, the establishment of a formal Research Agreement and Data-sharing Protocol, and direct approval from Gitksan Huwilp Government. Similarly, identifying BC Parks employees who had contributed to park management planning required prior approval and relationship-building with BC Parks regional leadership.

Both purposive convenience and snowball sampling carry acknowledged limitations, including potential sampling



Lax An Zok Fishing Camp (Traditional Fishing Hole/Anaat) located near Gitanyow, BC © Sophia Graham

bias, non-representativeness and limited generalisability (Patton, 2015). The convenience and referral-based nature of these methods does not guarantee that participants reflect all possible perspectives within Gitksan First Nation or BC Parks, and the findings represent the experiences of a specific subpopulation. However, in research involving Indigenous governance, Indigenous Knowledge Holders, culturally governed knowledge-sharing protocols, and specialised administrative institutions, these methods are widely used and appropriate for accessing individuals with the necessary authority, cultural knowledge, or involvement in the processes under study (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021). These institutional and cultural realities made random or statistically representative sampling for this study impossible and ethically inappropriate (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999).

The Executive Director of Gitksan Huwilp Government and the Regional Director and Planning Section Head of BC Parks North Coast Skeena Region assisted in identifying appropriate participants and facilitating communication. In total, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Gitksan First Nation Chiefs and Elders (n = 17) and BC Parks staff (n = 11) between March and July 2023. There are approximately 11 employees in BC Parks North Coast Skeena Region that contribute to park management planning. Gitksan Huwilp Government consists of 60 Hereditary Chiefs and 38 Wilps (houses) that govern the Territory.

All interviews were conducted individually, audio-recorded and manually transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2023). Thematic analysis seeks to identify patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Aronson, 1995), and in this project both data-driven (inductive) and theory-informed (deductive) coding strategies were employed to categorise, interpret and synthesise findings (Cope, 2021).

RESULTS

To protect anonymity, participants were given pseudonyms. With permission, in the study's writeup, Gitksan First Nation participants are identified by community and BC Parks participants by job title. The results are organised around three key themes – Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation and self-determination – with exemplar quotes provided to illustrate each finding.

Indigenous inclusion

Sixteen of the 17 Gitksan First Nation participants described longstanding tensions with the Province stemming from settler colonialism, the Residential School system, and assimilation policies. These histories led to a deep mistrust of the government, making collaboration difficult. Krystal (Chief, Gitwangak) reflected: "Our ancient traditional livelihoods and political systems were broken down by the federal and provincial governments of Canada and BC ... so how do you trust them when they say they want to work together?" Danni (Chief, Gitwangak) noted how the

repression of cultural practices affected her family: “My mom and grandma remember not being able to use parks for medicine gathering anymore, or other sustenance uses practiced by my Wilp there for thousands of years before BC Parks were established.” These experiences illustrate how the erasure of Gitksan cultural practices in parks has contributed to present-day challenges in trust and inclusion.

Eight of the 11 BC Parks employees identified First Nations’ historic mistrust of the provincial government as a major social and political barrier to inclusion. Casey (Operations) expressed the need for employees to “build relationships with First Nations that have historically been undermined, mistreated, and exploited by government policies and relationships”. Nelly (Operations) noted how staff are often viewed with scepticism: “Being a provincial representative ... unless you have those good relationships, you’re just whitewashed with all the other ministries and agencies.” Relationship-building is often further complicated by frequent staff turnover. Five BC Parks participants highlighted how staff changes weaken continuity and can damage fragile relationships with First Nations. Limited regional capacity and shifting personnel challenge BC Parks’ ability to build and sustain trust. All 11 BC Parks employees stressed that hiring regionally located Indigenous Relations staff to support consultation, engagement and relationship-building with First Nations would be beneficial. As Casey (Operations) explained: “... each region really needs its own Indigenous Relations folks so that they can understand the nuances of each Nation”. This was identified as a consistent and urgent priority across the region. The Gitksan Chiefs and Elders explained how their laws, culture and traditions guide relations with BC Parks, with 14 participants citing the examples of their trespass law and ban on recreational fishing within their Territory and on the Anaat (i.e. traditional fishing holes). As Wesley (Elder, Gitwangak) noted: “Within our culture, it is taught that you do not play with your food. We are against recreational fishing, and this is tied to our Ayook [Gitksan law].” Mary (Chief, Glen Vowell) added: “Sport fishermen are banned from the Gitksan Territory, and the Fishing and Angling Permits issued by the BC government do not authorise trespass.” Since 2019, Hereditary Chiefs have enforced these laws due to declining salmon, yet the Province continues to issue fishing licences and campers still fish in parks in Gitksan Territory. These tensions illustrate the difficulty of aligning provincial regulations with Gitksan governance.



Totem poles in Gitwangak/Kitwanga, BC, within Gitksan First Nation Territory (Laxyip). These totem poles represent one of the most extensive and oldest collections of original totem poles found in their original village context within BC, with some dating back to the mid-19th century (c. 1840-1905) © Sophia Graham

Reconciliation

Reconciliation was discussed by both BC Parks and Gitksan First Nation participants as a complex and evolving process, with no single definition. The participants described reconciliation as context-specific, requiring relationship-building, sincerity and respect. All 11 BC Parks employees explained that reconciliation is dependent on collaboration, ongoing engagement, relationship building, and partnerships. As Dennis (Operations) highlighted: “It’s working with the Nations, trying to figure out how to best work with the Nation on their reconciliation goals ... whatever that looks like for the Nation.” Sixteen Gitksan First Nation participants explained that reconciliation should be centred around humility, respect and kindness. Roy (Chief, Gitanmaax) stated: “Kindness and respect go a long way with Chiefs and Elders – if you don’t show respect, you don’t get it in return.” Twelve Gitksan participants discussed reconciliation in terms of participating in cultural activities when invited and learning the culture, for example, Donald (Chief, Kispiox) said: “Go do those small things. When you’re invited, attend the ceremonies, sit at the feasts, go to the fish camps, experience and learn the culture ... and respect it.” Fifteen Gitksan participants underlined the importance of sustained, sincere communication. Spring (Chief, Kispiox) advised BC Parks: “Reach out, be curious, be sincere, be respectful and polite. Then, stay in contact with those communities.” These findings show that reconciliation is an ongoing practice grounded in relationships and community-specific priorities, not broad government frameworks.

Both participant groups viewed territorial acknowledgements and co-management (viz., shared park management decision-making and responsibilities



Gitanmaax/Hazleton, BC, with Hagwilget Peak (Sti gyo'den) in the background, meaning "stand alone mountain" and "big brother to the Seven Sisters Range." This is a prominent, culturally significant peak located within Gitxsan First Nation Territory (Laxyip) © Sophia Graham

by both provincial authorities and Indigenous governments) as meaningful steps towards reconciliation. All 17 Gitxsan First Nation participants asserted that signage projects acknowledging Indigenous territory were important for reconciliation. Roy (Chief, Gitanmaax) stated: "All we want is acknowledgement... *tell the truth of this land*. This land is Gitxsan land." Similarly, Eddie (Elder, Gitanmaax) urged: "Acknowledge our Territory, let us tell our story. And that's it." Twelve Chiefs and Elders stressed the use of Gitxsanimx/Gitksenimx (Gitxsan language) in signage as part of reconciliation. Gladys (Elder, Kispiox) explained: "All signs in parks should incorporate the Indigenous language." Fourteen Gitxsan participants also underlined co-management as critical. Fred (Elder, Glen Vowell) noted: "Unless we have co-management of the parks, how we wish to manage our land is not being incorporated." Roy (Chief, Gitanmaax) was more direct: "Land back! They need policy or legislation changed to allow for co-management." In contrast, eight BC Parks participants viewed reconciliation as developing incrementally through collaborative planning and partnerships. Tammy (Operations) explained that "Reconciliation is dependent on collaboration, ongoing engagement ... making those relationships and building partnerships in working together." Stanley (Planning) reflected: "Renaming parks with Indigenous names and telling both stories is a way I've seen BC Parks do reconciliation." While BC Parks has embraced steps like signage and collaborative arrangements, Gitxsan participants consistently indicated the need for deeper systemic changes – particularly shared governance.

Self-determination

All 17 Gitxsan participants defined self-determination as having more power, agency and governance over their Territory. Mary (Chief, Glen Vowell) stated: "We want more control over our land and waters ... more stake in parks, in the natural resources and park visitation decisions." Fifteen Gitxsan participants described self-determination as directly tied to land and governance. Desiree (Elder, Kispiox) declared: "This is our land. It will always be our land. And we want it back." These views underscored that self-determination in park management must go beyond consultation and include shared or full Indigenous governance over lands and resources. While BC Parks has moved towards collaborative arrangements, statutory decision-making remains with the Province, which creates a disparity between reconciliation rhetoric and actual Indigenous authority.

BC Parks is implementing programmes to include First Nations in operations management, with seven participants highlighting the Indigenous Guardian Shared Compliance and Enforcement programme. This programme trains Indigenous Guardians alongside Park Rangers and grants them equivalent legal authority while they remain employed by their Nations. As Dennis (Operations) explained: "There's a shared compliance and enforcement pilot programme role where we ... appoint select Indigenous Guardians from each Nation with Park Act authorities – similar to that of a Park Ranger – but they are employed by their Nation, not BC Parks." This initiative represents a practical step towards supporting Indigenous self-determination and partnership in park governance.

Thirteen Gitksan participants and eight BC Parks participants identified IPCAs as a tool for asserting self-determination. Herb (Chief, Gitanyow) discussed Wilp Wii Litsxw Meziadin IPCA: “There was much pressure on us to ... protect that area to ensure food security for our Nation ... When BC was taking too long ... we had to act.” Stanley (Planning) acknowledged: “From a self-determination standpoint, I can see why Nations proceed with designations that they see as necessary.” Although BC Parks employees expressed support for greater Indigenous governance, existing policies continue to impose constraints, and six participants specifically noted these limitations in their interviews. Theresa (Planning) admitted: “We are not lined up for legislative changes at least for five years. That’s really challenging because we have to navigate that while Nations are wanting to do all sorts of interesting things in parks that have never been done.” Eight BC Parks participants noted the likelihood of new legislation and major policy changes in the coming years. Kenneth (Planning) offered cautious optimism: “We could be looking at new designation tools for First Nations-run parks and protected areas.” These findings show that while BC Parks recognises the significance of self-determination, it remains constrained by existing policy frameworks – leaving IPCAs as a promising, community-led solution for now.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study align with previous research identifying policy, programme and hiring capacity challenges faced by park planners and operations managers in including Indigenous Peoples (Kadykalo et al., 2021; Spielmann & Unger, 2000). Gitksan members emphasised the importance of BC Parks staff becoming educated about their laws, culture and history, noting that this improves engagement and builds trust. They stressed two critical laws – the prohibition of trespassing and ban on recreational fishing on the Anaat – which are overlooked by government policies. The continued issuance of licences permitting anglers to fish and trespass on Gitksan lands undermines the Nation’s rights, sovereignty and reliance on their traditional fishing holes. In Gitksan Territory, all BC Parks allow fishing, and some allow hunting, directly conflicting with Gitksan laws forbidding trespass and sport fishing to safeguard resources. To uphold DRIPA (2019), BC Parks should recognise and implement Gitksan laws alongside provincial regulations to sustain cultural practices, stewardship and food sovereignty – key elements of First Nations’ identities and rights. BC Parks employees noted that historical injustices and mistrust complicate their relationships with First Nations, challenges made worse by frequent staff turnover and limited regional capacity.

Relationship-building is time-intensive and often occurs without formal recognition, dedicated resources or performance incentives, placing additional strain on staff capacity. Hiring regionally based Indigenous Relations specialists was identified as a way to support planners and operations staff in consultation, engagement and relationship-building.

A central finding was that reconciliation is a complex, multifaceted and context-specific process that is difficult to define, measure and achieve, especially within the realm of park planning and management. Gitksan members emphasised that reconciliation varies across Indigenous communities, reflecting diverse values, histories and priorities. This insight aligns closely with Finegan (2018) and Cornthassel et al. (2009), who argue that reconciliation must be rooted in community-based forms of justice that go beyond universal or governmental definitions. Meaningful engagement, territorial acknowledgements that name Indigenous communities and recognise colonial harm (Finegan, 2018), and education about colonial histories are crucial for advancing reconciliation. However, critiques from LaPorte (2023) and others caution that acknowledgements without concrete actions risk tokenism. Tokenism is the practice of doing something at a minimal, symbolic level to mitigate criticism and give the appearance that people are being treated fairly. Genuine reconciliation must involve acknowledging past atrocities, engaging with intergenerational trauma (Snelgrove et al., 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012), and transforming parks from sites of colonial exclusion to places of Indigenous presence, healing and self-determination (Rebonne, 2024).

Building respectful relationships and partnerships with Indigenous communities is indispensable to reconciliation, with Gitksan participants and BC Parks employees highlighting co-management as one approach. Yet, literature has critiqued co-management for maintaining colonial power structures and not fully restoring Indigenous authority or addressing restorative justice (Finegan, 2018; Langdon et al., 2010). Nevertheless, Parks Canada’s (2023) guide for supporting Indigenous leadership in park planning outlines opportunities for co-management. A similar guide from BC Parks could help advance Indigenous self-determination and make opportunities for collaboration more accessible to First Nations. Furthermore, IPCAs represent an emerging pathway for reconciliation and self-determination when supported in line with Indigenous leadership’s vision, requiring dismantling settler institutional barriers to enable



Tā Ch'ilā Provincial Park (formerly Boya Lake Provincial Park) in BC Parks North Coast Skeena Region. This scenic and remote park is located on the Stewart-Cassiar Highway in Northern BC © Sophia Graham

Indigenous stewardship and decolonial futures (Townsend & Roth, 2023).

Gitxsan First Nation Chiefs and Elders and BC Parks employees concurred that Indigenous self-determination in park governance is vital and often intertwined with reconciliation. Many BC Parks staff equated increasing Indigenous agency with advancing reconciliation. BC Parks participants envisioned greater co-management frameworks or the return of ownership and management of parklands to First Nations. The Land Back movement strongly echoes these calls for Indigenous sovereignty and land restitution, framing self-determination as the restoration of Indigenous stewardship and governance over ancestral territories (NDN Collective, 2020). Within the Gitxsan communities, diverse perspectives on self-determination range from co-management agreements and Indigenous programmes to unequivocal demands to “get our land back”, underscoring the need for tailored, community-based engagement to support complex and varied Indigenous aspirations.

Programmes such as the Indigenous Guardian Shared Compliance and Enforcement programme exemplify practical steps towards increasing Indigenous governance by training First Nations members to exercise legal authority over land management alongside government Park Rangers (Government of British Columbia, 2022). Reed et al. (2021) found that such guardian programmes across Canada, Australia,

Aotearoa-New Zealand and the United States support Indigenous environmental governance by empowering Indigenous resistance and reconstituting power relations. IPCAs are a particularly promising mechanism for Indigenous self-determination, enabling Indigenous Peoples to govern lands according to their cultural values, laws and traditions while fostering economic development and cultural revitalisation (Murray & Burrows, 2017; Tran et al., 2020). The Wilp Wii Litsxw Meziadin IPCA, established by Gitxsan First Nation in response to environmental threats, illustrates how IPCAs can assert Indigenous authority in the absence of governmental support (Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs and Hlimoo Sustainable Solutions, 2023). BC Parks staff anticipated more IPCAs emerging and recommended supporting First Nations through partnership, public recognition and education initiatives to respect Indigenous laws and culture and promote self-determination within park governance.

Recommendations for park agencies and practitioners

The findings from this study highlight the urgent need for park agencies to move beyond consultation and symbolic gestures towards tangible actions that support reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination. Addressing structural barriers, recognising Indigenous laws and cultural protocols, and fostering long-term, trust-based relationships are essential to transforming parks into spaces of Indigenous presence and governance. Co-management frameworks,

Guardian programmes and IPCAs offer practical pathways for advancing Indigenous governance while respecting community priorities and knowledge.

Building on these insights, the following recommendations provide actionable guidance for park agencies and practitioners. To support reconciliation in park planning and operations management, agencies should recognise and respect the diverse cultural values, histories and priorities of Indigenous communities; adopt meaningful, community-based reconciliation approaches rooted in Indigenous justice systems and healing processes; document Nation-specific priorities to guide planning; improve consultation processes in line with modern reconciliatory legislation; engage consistently with Indigenous communities at the local level to understand varied perspectives and avoid one-size-fits-all strategies; incorporate Indigenous Knowledges, laws and cultural protocols into park management policies, educational materials and signage; promote public and agency awareness of Indigenous history, laws and the cultural significance of protected areas; ensure reconciliation efforts are ongoing, adaptable and context-specific; facilitate Indigenous participation in decision-making and co-create governance frameworks that reflect Indigenous worldviews; and employ regionally based Indigenous Relations specialists to strengthen consultation, engagement and relationship-building.

To enhance Indigenous self-determination in park planning and operations management, agencies should support the establishment and expansion of co-management frameworks that grant First Nations shared or full ownership and management of parklands; recognise and actively support IPCAs, including publicly partnering with Indigenous communities to advance their creation and stewardship; facilitate Indigenous Guardian programmes that empower Indigenous Peoples with authority to manage, monitor and enforce regulations on their territories; provide funding and institutional support for Indigenous-led stewardship initiatives; integrate Indigenous laws and Knowledge into park policies, operations, tourism management, wildlife stewardship and land-use planning, including economic and cultural aspects; engage in legislative reforms and policy development to enhance Indigenous inclusion and governance rights; and create accessible resources for Indigenous Peoples and Nations outlining opportunities for Indigenous engagement, collaboration and governance to support transparency, awareness and community-driven decision-making.

These recommendations respond directly to the power imbalances, policy barriers and socio-political factors that continue to limit Indigenous inclusion in protected-area governance. They are intended to support concrete action towards reconciliation and self-determination by promoting structural change in park planning and operations management.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that advancing reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination in parks requires moving beyond symbolic gestures towards structural transformation and meaningful actions. Respectful, long-term engagement, empowerment of Indigenous governance through shared authority, and support for Indigenous-led initiatives are central to building more equitable, inclusive and socially just protected-area systems. The findings highlight how settler-colonial histories and ongoing political dynamics continue to shape trust and engagement between First Nations and park agencies and reveal the diversity of Indigenous perspectives on reconciliation. While territorial acknowledgements and Indigenous language signage are meaningful, participants stressed that these gestures are insufficient without sustained collaboration, structural change and governance that reflects each Nation's laws, values and priorities.

Future research should continue to explore Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation and self-determination in parks and environmental governance, especially in relation to shifting political contexts and evolving legislation around reconciliation and self-determination. Studies that examine how co-management frameworks, IPCAs and Indigenous Guardian programmes are operationalised across regions will help illuminate how Indigenous governance can be strengthened in practice. Expanding research to include a wider range of Indigenous perspectives will deepen understanding of community-specific reconciliation goals and governance aspirations. Further investigation into the recognition and application of Indigenous laws in park management, and the balance between visitation, conservation and cultural rights and values, will be essential to developing policies that support Indigenous sovereignty.

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RÉSUMÉ

La réconciliation et l'autodétermination autochtone revêtent une importance mondiale pour la gestion des réseaux d'aires protégées, car ces espaces constituent des lieux clés où se croisent la conservation, l'histoire coloniale et les luttes contemporaines pour la gouvernance et l'autorité autochtones. Cette étude de cas examine le rôle de la réconciliation et de l'autodétermination autochtone dans la région du Nord-Ouest du réseau des parcs provinciaux de la Colombie-Britannique (C.-B.), au Canada. Les objectifs étaient d'identifier les obstacles sociopolitiques à l'inclusion des Autochtones dans la planification et la gestion opérationnelle de BC Parks, et d'élaborer des recommandations pratiques à l'intention des planificateurs et des gestionnaires opérationnels des parcs afin de soutenir la réconciliation et l'autodétermination autochtone dans leur travail. Vingt-huit entretiens semi-structurés menés auprès de chefs et d'anciens Gitksan ainsi que du personnel de BC Parks ont révélé que le colonialisme des colons, les pensionnats indiens et les politiques d'assimilation ont engendré une méfiance de longue date dans la province. Les participants de BC Parks ont appelé à la mise en place de spécialistes des relations avec les Autochtones au niveau régional, à la cogestion des parcs et des zones protégées et conservées autochtones afin de soutenir l'engagement et l'établissement de relations. Les participants gitksan ont souligné que la réconciliation est spécifique à chaque communauté et que l'autodétermination nécessite un contrôle, une capacité d'action et une gouvernance accrues sur leurs territoires. L'article soutient qu'une inclusion significative des peuples autochtones dans la planification et la gestion opérationnelle des parcs est essentielle pour faire progresser la réconciliation, en soutenant l'autodétermination et en s'attaquant à des enjeux sociaux et environnementaux plus larges.

RESUMEN

La reconciliación y la autodeterminación indígena revisten importancia a nivel mundial para la gestión de los sistemas de áreas protegidas, ya que estos paisajes constituyen escenarios clave en los que convergen la conservación, la historia colonial y las luchas contemporáneas por la gobernanza y la autoridad indígenas. Este estudio de caso examina el papel de la reconciliación y la autodeterminación indígena en la región noroeste del sistema de parques provinciales de Columbia Británica (CB), en Canadá. Los objetivos eran identificar las barreras sociopolíticas que impiden la inclusión indígena en la planificación y la gestión operativa de BC Parks, así como elaborar recomendaciones prácticas para que los planificadores de parques y los gestores operativos apoyen la reconciliación y la autodeterminación indígena en su trabajo. Veintiocho entrevistas semiestructuradas con jefes y ancianos gitksan y con personal de BC Parks revelaron que el colonialismo de los colonos, los internados y las políticas de asimilación han generado una desconfianza de larga data en la provincia. Los participantes de BC Parks pidieron especialistas en relaciones indígenas ubicados a nivel regional, así como la cogestión de los parques y de las áreas protegidas y conservadas indígenas para apoyar la participación y el establecimiento de relaciones. Los participantes gitksan hicieron hincapié en que la reconciliación es específica de cada comunidad y que la autodeterminación requiere un mayor control, capacidad de acción y gobernanza sobre sus territorios. Este artículo sostiene que la inclusión efectiva de los pueblos indígenas en la planificación y la gestión operativa de los parques es esencial para impulsar la reconciliación, apoyar la autodeterminación y abordar cuestiones sociales y medioambientales más amplias.