

Heated arrests. A pristine territory. Inside the Wet'suwet'en nation's fight against the Coastal GasLink fracked gas pipeline

[By Alex McKeen, *Toronto Star*, Nov 27, 2021](#)

WITSET, BC—In the territory of the Wet'suwet'en, a blanket of snow muffles the footsteps of deer, bears and the people whose ancestors have lived here for thousands of years.

To travel through this land is to watch the ancient history of a continent unravel over an area four times the size of Prince Edward Island and further north than any major Canadian city. Rolling hills eroded by millennia surround the long and skinny François Lake, called Nee-Tahi-Buhn. It gives way to the foothills, then jagged peaks, of the younger Bulkley mountain range.

Distinct Wet'suwet'en communities dot this vast terrain. Small villages, such as Wet'suwet'en village and Nee-Tahi-Buhn, house a couple of hundred people each. In between, Wet'suwet'en people, Indigenous people from neighbouring communities, and non-Indigenous residents keep cattle or horses and host small businesses selling supplies and offering motel stays to truckers.

The Wet'suwet'en, a nation of about 3,200 members, live on and off reserves, in mountainside towns and on secluded lakeside outposts. Some move to bigger cities such as Prince George, or Victoria; others stay close to home, or else return there after time away.

Amid an array of priorities and preferences, they're united by their ancestors, who cared for this territory for thousands of years, and by traditional ways of life and governance that bring them back to what is called their *yintah*: 22,000 square kilometres of land in parts of the Nechako watershed and the headwaters of the pristinely flowing Wedzin Kwah River.

As an Alberta-based company, TransCanada Energy, readies to lay the Coastal GasLink gas pipeline through Wet'suwet'en territory — including by drilling under the untouched Wedzin Kwah River — to steadfast opposition from the nation's leading hereditary house chiefs, Wet'suwet'en voices have never echoed as loudly throughout this land, the country and the world as they do now.

The arrests of about 30 Indigenous land defenders and their allies attempting to block work on the pipeline this month, has provoked calls from hundreds of urban protesters in places such as Toronto and Montreal, and from celebrities such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Greta Thunberg, to stand with Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs in opposing the pipeline.

The public gaze has added urgency and momentum to what is a local exercise: Wet'suwet'en people practising self-determined governance over the territory they have never ceded, and for which no treaty has been signed with the governments of Canada or British Columbia.

Adam Gagnon of the Wet'suwet'en Likhts'amisyu Clan, whose hereditary name is Chief Dsta'hyl, inches his feet toward the edge of a steep canyon that drops down to the Wedzin Kwah

River. As Gagnon nears the canyon edge, wearing a sweater and vest as snow comes down around him, he recalls some of his earliest memories on this plot of land: as a six-year-old, perching himself precariously on the edge, where owls and eagles glide by at eye-level.

“I was thinking, ‘Boy, this is a beautiful place,’ even at that age,” he says. “I just admired this place and it just felt like heaven here.”

Gagnon built his home here after the local Witset First Nation, a Wet’suwet’en community with an elected council, said they wanted to buy the land from Gagnon’s family to build a restaurant on the canyon. His decision to build wasn’t a protest, but an assertion, he explains: That if any developer wanted to come into this pristine square of land, they would find it already taken by a descendant of the land’s original occupants and stewards.

Wet’suwet’en chiefs and their supporters, including Gagnon, have been trying to stop the construction of the 670-kilometre pipeline meant to carry natural gas across northern British Columbia for more than two years — longer, if you include the project’s predecessor, which was meant to carry oil instead of natural gas. They say Coastal GasLink, the company building the pipeline, has [no right](#) to proceed because the project was not approved through traditional government systems.

Elected chiefs have signed agreements to support the project and receive compensation in return, and a BC court has issued an injunction against those seeking to interfere with the project.

But those approvals, say Gagnon and others who oppose the project, reflect only the opinions of elected Wet’suwet’en leaders, who are the chief councillors of the many Wet’suwet’en nations recognized by the government of Canada under the Indian Act, including Wet’suwet’en First Nation, Skin Tyee Nation and Witset First Nation. Pipeline opponents are quick to point out that’s a system of governance imposed by Canada’s Indian Act. And a 1997 Supreme Court of Canada case, *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, established that the government of BC had no right to extinguish the title of hereditary chiefs, the leaders of the Wet’suwet’en traditional governance structure, which centres around houses and clans gathering in a feast hall.

“That’s our goal in our lifetime, and our children’s goal, is to try to nurture the lands and start doing sustained, sustainable development,” he says. “And I think that’s going to be the key thing that we’re going to all have to work toward, you know, all of your Canadians and the First Nations there that are from here. And we have to nurture the land back together and make a place that is going to be wonderful for their children as well as ours.”

In his lifetime, Gagnon says he’s seen the destruction extractive industries can do. Growing up on Wet’suwet’en territory, he says, he witnessed how towering old-growth forests, for example, were logged to their roots. “Yes, it’s just like a moonscape all throughout the Houston area, and now they’re in the western part of our territory,” he says. “It’s under nuke, all of that which was all pristine.”

Now, his opposition to the CGL pipeline is absolute. And he’s one of the Wet’suwet’en people with hereditary titles putting their bodies between the company and their territory. Gagnon was

arrested last month and held in jail overnight for this role in commandeering equipment used by CGL.

“You know, the way we look at it, there are all these Canadians that are trespassing on our lands,” he said. So when CGL brought excavators on Likhts’amisyu land, he took out their batteries, he explains.

RCMP arrested him and one other person on Oct. 28, and released him under the condition he promise to appear in court next Valentine’s Day with others arrested as part of the CGL opposition.

Most of the RCMP enforcement surrounding the pipeline opposition has centred on blockades. Long-standing camps that have served as checkpoints and blockades for those opposed to the project, the Gidimt’en Checkpoint, and the coyote camp, are led by Wet’suwet’en member Molly Wichham (hereditary wing chief name Sleydo’) and her husband, Cody Merriman, who is Haida.

They were two of the 30 people arrested this month for blocking the road leading to CGL workcamps, something that is restricted by a court-imposed injunction, and held for three nights in jail. They were released on conditions that they only return to the area for cultural purposes, or to go to their home on the land.

One of the people arrested was 22-year-old Shaylynn Sampson, who is Gitksan and grew up at a Wet’suwet’en village. She says said the conditions excluding Indigenous people from accessing their land except for cultural purposes is barefaced colonialism. “I will never be afraid to go to the territory,” she says. “It is where my family is and I feel it’s very important to be out there. It’s where healing can happen.”

Images and reports of RCMP officers in military dress arresting the people at the blockades — including a mix of Wet’suwet’en people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies — drew harsh criticism from other Indigenous groups this week, including the council of the Haida nation.

Inside his hill-topped home, reclining slightly in a lounge chair and surrounded by his collection of acoustic guitars, Gagnon thought about those arrests. And he thought about the people arguing that those arrests were justified in order to carry out a large industrial project that will provide jobs and money to Indigenous people and councils.

Those people are missing something, in his view. “A soul,” he says, letting out a hearty laugh before getting very quiet. “Whenever anybody puts a monetary value on things there (in the *yintah*), their whole spiritual life is gone.”

Shortly after the people arrested from the checkpoints were released, and as urbanites as far away as Toronto and Montreal took to the streets to protest the pipeline and its opponents’ arrests, Tilly Lolly, Phyllis Nicholas and Ralph Alec are sitting in a corner at the Office Pub in Burns Lake. It’s the only pub in Burns Lake, which is about an hour east of the forest service road on which the blockades took place.

The three friends, Lolly and Nicholas are actually first cousins, are all members of Lake Babine Nation, which neighbours Wet'suwet'en territory to the north, and is one of the largest nations in the area surrounding the CGL conflict. Lolly comments on the strange feeling she has when she thinks about their area making national — and even international — news. “If it helps get people some jobs, maybe that’s a good thing,” Lolly says.

The conversation, though, quickly turns to their more pressing concerns. The desire of Nicholas and Alec to move back to Lake Babine Nation land from the city, but their inability to find a home there. There is also, for all three, their deep concern over friends and loved ones who live on the street. Plus, there is the fact that lacking taxi service in the area makes it hard for people, especially women, to get home safe after dark.

It’s a reminder that the high-profile attention on the CGL conflict does not necessarily dwarf the many other concerns of people, especially Indigenous people, living in this part of the province.

As Wet'suwet'en hereditary house chiefs, who are the leaders of the attempt to stop CGL, aim to unify the members on this issue, they are met with these various perspectives and priorities.

The hereditary chiefs comprise an umbrella organization called the Office of the Wet'suwet'en, which organizes the traditional governance system. They’ve been holding regular meetings over Zoom since the Covid-19 pandemic began, about various topics, and especially about trying to unify Wet'suwet'en people around opposition to the pipeline.

Sandra Small, who is Wet'suwet'en from Laksilyu Clan, and whose grandparents all lived on the *yintah* outside Houston, is a regular attendee at the meetings, which she says tend to be small gatherings of 15 to 30 and concentrated with those folks who already agree that the pipeline should not go through their territory. “Back in the day, when there was a dispute of any sort, the chiefs would invite the people to tea and talk about whatever the issues were, all together,” she says. “We can’t do that anymore.”

If Covid-19 is one barrier, it’s far from the only one. The pipeline issue has been deeply polarizing for the community, Small said, with the result that people on one side or another of the dispute rarely speak with one another. “It’s not just in the community, it’s families as well. We have families that are fractured because of this,” Small said.

Her hope is that young Wet'suwet'en people who are becoming interested in the stories elders share about the *yintah* and the need to protect it will act as informal recruiters for their family members, bringing them to the feast halls.

Feasts are official gatherings that still take place at community halls, where attendees are separated by their houses and spoken for by their hereditary chief. Everyone at a feast is fed.

The challenge of this runs deep. If those who oppose the pipeline, such as Small, express difficulty in reaching out to the other side, so do the people who support the project.

Coastal GasLink says it hired 84 Wet'suwet'en members to do field work for the project in 2014, and today employs 350 Indigenous people (both Wet'suwet'en and from other nations) on the project.

For the people who do this work, amidst the strong opposition in their community, they must find a way to balance their traditional way of life and the work that supports their families.

On a tiny patch of reserve land on the western tip of Nee-Tahi-Buhn, or François Lake, Shirley Wilson lives with her elderly uncle, whom she calls simply 'Uncle', and for whom she is the caregiver, as well as with her son and daughter-in-law, and their children.

A piece of young ones' art is fixed to Wilson's fridge, as is a memorial poster for Wilson's oldest son, Calvin, who died of cancer three years ago. A cozy and slightly cluttered living room has a couple of comfortable chairs, and a daybed from which Uncle watches TV with subtitles.

Wilson, who is 65 and a Wet'suwet'en member of the Skin Tyee Nation, was one of the people who did survey work for CGL in 2014. She also does site monitoring work for the project, but has been off work for the past several months while caring for Uncle and dealing with personal health problems.

Ever since taking her first industrial courses in 2003, she says, she's been grateful for projects that provide opportunities in northern BC. "You can work in the modern world, sustaining yourself (with) whatever is available. OK. Maybe it's not the (best) answer to have oil and gas and all this other stuff running everywhere. But any type of industry development will have impact on your land and on your territory," she says. "Like even building this house, there needed to be land clearing and trees destroyed to build this house on a minor scale. But in the larger scale industry, and our way of life can be balanced," she says.

Wilson's experience is personal. She raised four kids in her house, which is more than an hour from the closest town, Burns Lake, largely living off the land by fishing, hunting, picking berries, canning, and getting milk from a neighbour with dairy cows. For vacations and hunting trips, their family would often travel to Morice Lake, near the area CGL is going through.

"Morice Lake is the heart of where we go. To be out in the wilderness — it's basically the wilderness of the wilderness, pristine, eh? Morice lake is beautiful. You can fish right from the creek and river, get your dinner right there. And you can camp: There's a beautiful wilderness camp and it's grizzly-bear country; there are bears, of course. And it's just it's like paradise."

Wilson knows that the people opposing the pipeline are worried about damage to this pristine area, but having worked on pipelines before, she says she feels confident the area affected will be restored and that the benefit to Wet'suwet'en people — especially young people — should not be overlooked. Not everyone can be doctors and lawyers, she says. And the financial stability her work brought to her family has helped put them at ease.

"I try to be a role model, especially to the younger generation. I tell them 'Do some industry training if you can,' because that's what, in our country, we depend on," she says. "It's good to

live out on the land, but the reality is not everyone is going to live like that all the time. We live off the land as much as we can.”

Like Small, the woman who is opposed to the pipeline, Wilson wants to see people come together again. Not just the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs with the Office of the Wet’suwet’en, but matriarchs such as Rita George, who support the project, and elected leaders, too. Wilson and her sister don’t speak anymore because of the pipeline conflict. “It’s really happening with not only us, but it’s happening with a lot of families,” she says. “Yeah, there’s a lot of division because, you know, nobody’s respecting each other’s opinions.”



In a courtroom in Prince George, three hours away from the start of the service road leading down to the Wet'suwet'en blockades, Jen Wickham, Molly's sister, and Logan Staats, a Haudenosaunee musician who has been involved in the blockades, wait for a judge to speak.

Staats breathes heavily looking at his hands while Wickham stares straight-faced ahead. When the judge says five more people will be released from jail if they sign conditions, Staats lifts his hands to the air, bringing them to his forehead in a gesture of relief. Wickham stares straight ahead.

Wickham says after the hearing that she won't be relieved until everyone is released, and even then she says she'll still feel the gnawing anger of Indigenous people having to sign conditions limiting what they can do on unceded territory. Those in custody will all be released by the end of the next day.

A court hearing on Feb. 14 will bring people arrested in the recent RCMP raid — plus Gagnon and others who were arrested earlier — back to the courthouse in Prince George.

From Gagnon's point of view, that hearing has little bearing. They need to keep resisting Coastal GasLink on the ground, he says.

“We have no place to turn, you know, other than to do direct action and to try to stop them with whatever means we've got.”

Gagnon says this as the Wedzin Kwah rushes by, blue-green in its canyon. From his location in the far reaches of Wet'suwet'en territory, to the nearest of the Wet'suwet'en camps blocking CGL covers 140 kilometres and two hours at least by car. He has a yellow school bus ready to take people there.

Over that distance even now, thousands of litres of water rush through, bringing drinking water to people, habitats for fish, and a steady stream into the Skeena River, then the ocean.