

Halalt takes its water message to University of Victoria group

Interest in Halalt First Nation's water issues has spilled over to Victoria. Jack Smith made a presentation on behalf of Halalt at the University of Victoria in October.

He described the First Nation's concerns, rights and responsibilities related to water, in particular the Chemainus River or "Grandpa's River" as it is called by the people of Halalt.

Smith captured the attention of a large and diverse group of academics, lawyers and community members who attended the presentation.

Smith opened by quoting from a recent speech prepared for the First Nations Summit by Halalt Chief James Thomas.

"I would like to speak to you today about something that affects every living thing on this earth. It is the most valuable commodity in the world. Gold and diamonds have little value when compared to water," he said.

Smith said water is heavy on the minds of Halalt people. They have watched illnesses caused by development and logging seriously harm the Chemainus River that flows through Halalt lands, and seen the disappearance of fish and the rich plant and animal life over the last decades.

He explained Halalt's key concern is the plan by the Municipality of North Cowichan to drill wells into the Chemainus River aquifer – the same place where Halalt gets its water.

"It has been a David and Goliath type struggle for us."

Halalt sees its legal right to govern water as flowing from their traditional territorial rights.

But rights are only one part of the equation, Smith explained. There are also responsibilities – to past, current and future generations, as well as non-human creatures of the region.

In Halalt's view, meeting those responsibilities means working with local government, industry and neighbouring communities at the broader level of watershed management.

Smith talked about 'Honour Our River Day'

organized by Halalt in September as a successful step in building bridges with neighbouring communities. A 'Pledge to Our River' was signed, calling for stewardship and understanding of the river and also demanding a comprehensive watershed management plan before any further development goes ahead.



JACK SMITH

"Everyone learned a lot that day. Young and old people learned many things about a river they once took for granted."

Smith said Halalt also learned about the power of educating people.

"We don't have all the answers to the environmental questions. But there are bridges being built and I hope the next time you hear about the Chemainus River, you will be hearing that the plan to pump water out of our aquifer has been set aside until we all know more about the river, the aquifer and the watershed."

The key discussion point raised was: "How can we design or evolve institutions such as municipal governments to use the best available knowledge for decision-making and address the full suite of social, cultural, environmental and economic concerns?"

The presentation was part of the POLIS Discussion Series on Ecological Governance, organized by the POLIS Project at UVic (www.polisproject.org).

Jack Smith is project manager for Halalt First Nation. He has a law degree from University of Saskatchewan, is former executive director of the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, and has diverse university teaching experience.

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