

**Beyond Environmentalism:  
Exploring the role of community-based environmental  
organizations as agents of 'place' in rural British Columbia**

**by Emma Squires**

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## Declaration of Committee

**Name:** Emma Squires

**Degree:** Master of Resource Management (Planning)

**Project No.:** 756

**Title:** Beyond Environmentalism: Exploring the role of community-based environmental organizations as agents of 'place' in rural British Columbia

**Committee:**

**Chair: Noe Penny**  
Master of Resource Management  
Candidate, Resource and Environmental  
Management

**Sean Markey**  
Supervisor  
Professor, Resource and Environmental  
Management

**Ryan Gibson**  
Committee Member  
Associate Professor, Environmental Design and  
Rural Development  
University of Guelph

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or

- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the role of place-based philanthropy in rural community development through a case study on the Skeena watershed, an ecologically significant region in Northwest BC that is confronting the complex and layered forces of change being experienced by many rural communities in Canada. Through qualitative interviews and document analyses, it documents how a robust ecosystem of community-based environmental organizations (CBEOs) is filling important structural gaps and playing an influential role in community development and environmental management. This research aims to fill knowledge gaps related to understanding the evolving role of philanthropy, the impact of foundation funding, and the effectiveness of locally led solutions. The discussion highlights opportunities and insights for philanthropic funders, CBEOs, and rural governments alike to contribute to building vibrant rural communities by centering local priorities and visions for the future.

**Keywords:** rural development, place-based development, community development, philanthropy, British Columbia

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## List of Acronyms

CBEO            Community-Based Environmental Organization

CBO            Community-Based Organization

NGO            Non-Government Organization

## Researcher Positionality

It is widely recognized that subjectivity is inescapable in qualitative research. All forms of research require the researcher to make choices throughout the research process, and these choices are informed by the researcher's beliefs, ideologies, values and lived experiences (Holmes, 2020; Manohar et al., 2019). As such, I wish to situate myself in my research.

I am a 10<sup>th</sup> generation settler on Turtle Island with mixed European ancestry. In the early 1700s, my ancestors arrived to so-called Newfoundland, eventually settling in Quebec then Ontario, where I grew up, on the traditional, unceded territories of the Omàmiwininì (Algonquin) Nation. I spent my childhood summers on a lake in rural Ontario with my family, which has shaped my identity and my interest in environmental issues and eventually led me to pursue my graduate degree in Resource and Environmental Management.

My identity has certainly had implications on my research process and outcomes, from the selection of this topic to my interpretation and communication of the results. One piece of my positionality that I have reflected significantly on is my placement as an “outsider” to my region of study, which has undoubtedly affected who participated in my research and what was shared. Insider/outsider researcher placement has been subject to much debate in academic literature, but ultimately both placements have their benefits and limitations (Bishop, 2011; Manohar et al., 2019). Outsider placement is particularly troublesome when conducting research related to Indigenous communities, as it has long been used by settlers as a tool for perpetuating extractive colonialism (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). To offset my outsider placement, I aimed to be flexible, open, and responsive to corrections from research participants throughout the interview process. I

have also included numerous direct excerpts from interviews throughout the following pages, both to ensure that I accurately capture participants' knowledge and perspectives, and to help readers appreciate that the knowledge synthesized in these pages does not belong to me as a researcher, but rather to the interview participants from the Skeena who generously shared it with me.

“Honestly, this topic, in this region of the world, is not easily summarized.”

*-Research Participant #3, 2020*

# Chapter 1. Introduction

Place-based approaches to rural development have gained significant attention in academic and practitioner literature and are considered a critical pathway to building rural resilience. As rural governments are often limited in their human and financial capacity to pursue place-based strategies, the United Nations and OECD have pointed to the potential for strategic partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) to help alleviate these capacity challenges and co-create solutions that are tailored to unique community contexts. CBOs go by many names, including place-based philanthropy, community philanthropy, participatory philanthropy, grassroots philanthropy, and horizontal philanthropy (Doan, 2019). They include non-profit, non-governmental, or charitable organizations that operate at a local level and work to address community needs. CBOs may be uniquely positioned to serve as partners in resilience-building efforts, due to their understanding of local contexts and the community trust that they hold. However, much of the data available on the philanthropic sector lacks a rural lens altogether, limiting its applicability to diverse rural contexts. This research responds to calls to better understand the role of the philanthropic sector in the COVID-19 recovery and in community resilience as a whole (Barr, 2020; Glennie, 2019; Hall et al., 2020).

To do so, this research offers a case study on the Skeena region of Northwest British Columbia (BC), a region that is richly endowed with natural assets. The region is also home to numerous community-based environmental organizations (which I will refer to as CBEOs for simplicity), which are the focus of the study. I explore the role of CBEOs through the lens of rural development, transitions, and reconciliation, beginning first with a literature review followed by interviews with individuals in the Skeena region who work

for or engage with CBEOs, including governments and First Nations. The objective of documenting this case study is to advance dialogue, highlight opportunities and challenges faced by CBEOs in the Skeena, and offer insights to other jurisdictions facing similar issues of rural restructuring and barriers to place-based development.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. A Profile of Rural Regions

#### a) Rural Restructuring & Development

There are many varied definitions and characterizations of what constitutes “rural”. However, a commonality across most definitions are shared features of low density populations and/or long distances to larger urban centres (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2021). These features exist along a continuum and encapsulate a wide diversity of places, geographies, climates, and cultures. Despite the diversity of rural regions, many rural communities have experienced similar patterns of development, triggered by a combination of macro-level forces and ideological shifts since the 1950s. In the Post-WWII era, rural regions were recognized by W.A.C. Bennett’s provincial government as sites of significant natural resource wealth that could support the province’s post-war recovery (Halseth et al., 2019). This led to massive investments in rural communities and infrastructure and the construction of enormous resource projects such as dams, mills and mines (Markey et al., 2008). Under continued policies of racism and assimilation, traditional territories of First Nations across the province were flooded to make way for mega dams, while senior governments falsely declared the Sinixt extinct (Gunn & McIvor, 2021; Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, n.d.).

As globalization fundamentally altered resource markets, the 1980s ushered in a new phase of rural development characterized by neoliberal policies and a considerable rollback of supports and investments in rural infrastructure and services (Douglas, 2005; Halseth et al., 2019; MacKinnon, 2002). The deep dependencies of rural communities on senior government investments and continued resource extraction were acutely exposed and rural communities came to be treated as Canada’s ‘resource banks’ from which

value was extracted and not reinvested (Markey et al., 2008). As a result, rural communities across the province began to experience rural decline as infrastructure and service deficits grew and the working age population migrated to urban centres (Gadsby & Samson, 2016; Gibson & Barrett, 2018; Speer, 2019). Meanwhile, the struggle of Indigenous peoples for legal equality and recognition of their rights had intensified and led to some successes, including *Calder v. British Columbia (Attorney General)*, a landmark ruling that acknowledged that Aboriginal rights existed in British Columbia prior to colonization (Bowles & Wilson, 2016; Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, n.d.).

b) Resource Economies

Economic development patterns centered on natural resource exploitation has led to many undiversified rural economies across BC that are highly vulnerable to external shocks and fluctuations in global resource markets. Many rural places are entrenched in a “staples trap”, or a state of deep dependence on natural resources that makes economic diversification both challenging and costly (Carson, 2011; Ryser et al., 2014). There are 140 communities across the province that are considered “forest dependent”, relying on forestry activity such as logging operations or mills for local employment (BC Council of Forest Industries, n.d.). These dependencies were accentuated in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the consequences of the trade imbalances in rural places were laid bare: many rural communities saw their export incomes plunge and simultaneously experienced import shortages for essential goods and services (Foster, 2020).

The boom and bust economic cycles that have defined rural development in recent decades have also been identified as playing a significant role in exacerbating health inequities in the province (Aalhus et al., 2018). Researchers and practitioners

alike have raised questions about the cumulative impacts of resource extraction on both human and ecological health, particularly in rural, remote and Indigenous communities (Brisbois et al., 2019; Parkes et al., 2019; Reschny et al., 2017). Many Indigenous peoples, who live in rural places at higher proportions than the general population, rely on the natural assets in their traditional territories for food, medicines and cultural practices (Assembly of First Nations, 2008; Ministry of Citizens' Services, 2017). The cumulative impacts of resource extraction, such as oil and gas, forestry, have been identified as rapidly degrading the capacity of ecosystems in North America to provide critical services (Allred et al., 2015). At present, a large proportion of Canada's ecosystem service hotspots (54-66%) overlap with current and planned resource extraction activities (Mitchell et al., 2021). Sectors such as forestry, fish farming, mining and oil, coal and gas extraction that are central to many resource-based economies have all been recognized as having a major impact on biodiversity (Gayton, 2007).

A report on species at risk prepared by the Government of British Columbia acknowledged the tensions between supporting resource-dependent communities and protecting biodiversity:

“We know that species at risk need protection and we also know we need to support thriving communities and livelihoods. Supporting the need for economic prosperity along with protecting species at risk is complex. We don't yet know the best way to harmonize those two goals...” (British Columbia Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, 2018).

For regions that are intricately linked to natural resources, climate change brings another suite of challenges projected to disproportionately affect rural regions. Climate impacts are predicted to cause significant economic disruptions to the agricultural and forestry

sectors, and a potentially catastrophic loss of ocean resources (BC Climate Action Secretariat, 2019; Wall & Marzall, 2006). For example, the increased prevalence of wildfires has been identified as a threat to the health and safety of forest-adjacent and forest-dependent communities across Canada (Kipp et al., 2019). Characteristics of rural regions, such as demographics, remoteness, and under-resourced social and physical infrastructure may increase vulnerability to climate-related health risks (Kipp et al., 2019). Rural communities, on average, tend to have higher proportions of populations such as seniors, low-income and Indigenous peoples, all of which have been identified as factors influencing community vulnerability to climate change (ibid.).

c) Rural Transitions & Revitalization

As Gadsby and Samson point out, “once a community’s assets are below a certain point, it is very difficult to reverse” (Gadsby & Samson, 2016). As such, the present phase of rural development has been coined as one of “reactionary incoherence”; rural policy approaches are disorganized in nature, lacking in regional knowledge and vision and subject to competing and divergent objectives (Halseth et al., 2019). Rural communities face unique challenges and opportunities in responding and adapting to major overlapping crises, including infrastructure deficits, climate change, demographic shifts, and biodiversity losses. Although rural governments are eager to take control of their own development, they often struggle to bridge the planning-to-implementation gap (Connelly et al., 2009; Manson et al., 2015; Sorensen, 2016). Capacity limitations, both human and financial, have repeatedly been identified as a significant barrier to rural revitalization (Connelly et al., 2009; FCM, 2018; Infrastructure Canada, 2019; Markey et al., 2008; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2012).

Many researchers have characterized the challenge of building rural resilience as a “wicked” problem, calling for a systems approaches that are integrative and multi-discipline in nature (Chirisa & Nel, 2021; Fazey et al., 2017; Parkes et al., 2019). Extensive literature provides evidence that conventional top-down interventions often fail to produce successful and lasting outcomes, and can even be counterproductive by undermining their intended goal (Gilbert, 2018; Halseth & Booth, 2003; Reimer & Markey, 2008). Without rethinking development strategies, patterns of rural decline are unlikely to change their course.

d) Place-Based Community Development

As globalization, international supply chains and the mobility of information and capital have led to widespread homogenization of landscapes and cultures, they have also sparked a cultural renaissance that engenders an appreciation for all that makes a place unique (Cairncross, 1997; Douglas, 2005). This centring of ‘place’ has become a central theme in contemporary community development and holds promise as a mechanism for rural renewal (Baldacchino et al., 2015). Rural and remote communities tend to cultivate particularly strong senses of place, and place-based approaches have been widely recognized as essential to rural revitalization and resilience (Douglas, 2005; Gadsby & Samson, 2016; Markey et al., 2012; OECD Regional Development Ministerial, 2019; Turcotte, 2005). Place-based approaches are built upon the assertion that local people are best equipped to respond to local problems, and they therefore embrace the natural, human, and physical assets that make a community unique. (Layton, 2016; Markey, 2010).

Despite the willingness of rural governments to explore innovative and experimental approaches, the complex suite of challenges faced by rural institutions

hinder the uptake of place-based approaches (Gibson & Barrett, 2018; Halseth et al., 2019; Markey et al., 2015). In addition to the capacity challenges and infrastructure deficits outlined above, rural places also lack access to locally-relevant data that can support informed decision making (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2019).

One promising opportunity to overcome these capacity challenges while maintaining local contexts is through strategic partnerships with other place-based actors (Connelly et al., 2009; Markey et al., 2012). In particular, involving civil society organizations in resilience-building efforts has been characterized as critical to supporting place-based development (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2012). The strategic engagement of and support for place-based philanthropy may assist in bridging the planning-to-implementation gap in rural places by bolstering local capacity and expanding the local asset pool (Connelly et al., 2009). However, a lack of understanding and awareness of the sector in rural communities often impedes such strategic engagements.

#### e) Reframing Natural Assets

Rural Canada is home to vast stores of ecological wealth, which has predominantly been leveraged through natural resource extraction. However, a growing body of research is providing evidence that natural assets are often more valuable when left in-tact: for example, the non-market value of ecosystem services from Canada's boreal region was found to be 13.8 times greater than the net market value of natural capital extraction (Anielski & Wilson, 2009). Natural assets are also central to nature-based tourism in B.C., which is becoming an increasingly lucrative industry: direct spending from nature-based tourists generated \$2 billion in 2016 (Province of British Columbia, 2019).

The natural capital in rural regions also provides critical ecosystem services that “travel” great distances and benefit rural and urban citizens alike, including carbon sequestration, food and water provisioning, sustaining biodiversity and providing opportunities for recreation (Robertson et al., 2018). As the impacts of climate change continue to become increasingly damaging and costly, natural assets and green infrastructure are gaining increasing attention in academic and practitioner discourse due to their proven ability to build resilience, save costs and provide a host of co-benefits (ACT, 2020; Swanson et al., 2021).

For rural communities across Canada who are reliant on natural resource extraction for economic viability, conserving natural capital and ecosystem services is both a complex undertaking and a strategic imperative to community sustainability and future resilience.

## **2.2. The Philanthropic Sector & Community Development**

Philanthropy is a broad term used to describe a range of forms of giving. Often used interchangeably with ‘civil society’, the ‘voluntary’ sector, or the ‘third’ sector, philanthropic organizations seek to advance the public good through philanthropic assets (Johnson, 2018). The sector includes, but is not limited to, registered charities, non-profit institutions, as well as public and private foundations. Across these diverse organizational forms, sources of income vary widely, distributed across a mix of government funding, earned revenue, membership fees, investment income, and individual donations (Statistics Canada, 2019). In recent decades, the philanthropic sector has experienced unprecedented growth and has become an integral force in advancing Canada’s social, environmental and economic objectives (Emmett, 2018). With over 170,000 registered charities and non-profits, the sector represents 8.1% of

GDP, or \$151 billion (CanadaHelps, 2020; Imagine Canada, 2018). Its economic contribution exceeds the respective values of key industries in Canada such as retail trade, agriculture, and mining, oil and gas extraction (Statistics Canada, 2009). Approximately 2 million Canadians, or 11% of the economically active population, are employed by the sector (Imagine Canada, 2018).

As their momentum and visibility have grown, so too has the recognition that philanthropic organizations may be uniquely positioned to contribute to lasting, structural change in society (Johnson, 2018; Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2019). The nature of global philanthropy is shifting as organizations increasingly seek to address complex and interconnected issues (Rural Development Institute, 2011). There has been a passionate effort across the sector to spearhead initiatives geared toward systems change, leading to new models and innovative approaches to philanthropic activities (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2019). Approximately half of philanthropic institutions have aligned their programs with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Johnson, 2018). Recent literature highlights the distinct characteristics of the sector that support innovation, including its freedom from short-term electoral cycles that allows for longer-term strategies and planning, its long history of operating with limited resources and thus challenging orthodoxy to fulfill mandates, and its flexibility and agility due to less red tape and compliance requirements than government equivalents (Dodgson & Gann, 2020). Much of the budding innovation is inspired by maximizing outcomes, sparking a growing interest in evaluating and monitoring the sector's impact (Johnson, 2018).

This new philanthropy paradigm has significant implications for community development. In numerous examples around the world, philanthropic organizations have sparked community revitalization, fostered neighbourhood renewal, and influenced

policy, often for underserved communities (Martinez-Cosio & Rabinowitz Bussell, 2013). However, unlocking this potential requires a deeper understanding of the nexus between philanthropy and community development and a bold commitment from senior governments to support on a regulatory and policy level (Martinez-Cosio & Rabinowitz Bussell, 2013; The Senate Special Committee on the Charitable Sector, 2019).

a) Rural and Place-based Philanthropy

Place-based philanthropy goes by many names in academic and practitioner literature, signaling its position as an emergent discourse. It is commonly classified as community philanthropy, participatory philanthropy, grassroots philanthropy, and horizontal philanthropy, among other names (Doan, 2019). It also takes on a variety of institutional forms, such as community-based organizations (CBOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charitable organizations, voluntary societies, and community foundations. As such, there are many definitions that describe the sector. Doan defines it as 'both form of, and a force for, locally driven development that strengthens community capacity and voice, builds trust, and most importantly, taps into and builds upon local resources, which are pooled together to build and sustain a strong community' (Doan, 2019). The European Foundation Centre describes place-based philanthropy as 'the act of individual citizens and local institutions contributing money or goods, along with their time and skills, to promote the well-being of local people and the improvement of the community in which they live and/or work' (European Foundation Centre, 2004). Notably, all names and definitions for the sector are rooted in analogous concepts of mobilizing local capacity and assets for the wellbeing of the community.

Though place-based philanthropic organizations vary in size, mission and mandates, they often share a strong understanding of local contexts, a propensity

towards long-term and holistic thinking, and a strong network of relationships within their communities (Gilbert, 2018). Both purpose-driven and deeply committed to place, place-based philanthropy exists to create lasting change in the communities it serves. By blending local assets and capacity with external capital, the sector has an 'intrinsic advantage' over purely external sources of financing (Glennie, 2019).

In response to the social, political and economic restructuring that has taken place in rural communities in recent decades, the role of and opportunity for place-based philanthropy has been heightened (Gibson & Barrett, 2018). As senior government support withdrew and local government capacity declined, the philanthropic sector grew to fill the gaps and has since become a vital contributor to rural communities (Ryser & Halseth, 2014). Today, there are over 18,000 rural charities across Canada, from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to community foundations, voluntary groups and societies (Halseth et al., 2019). Rural communities tend to attract a higher proportion of philanthropic organizations: in recent years, 43% of all community foundations and 22% of all charities were based in rural areas, despite being home to less than 20% of the population (Gibson et al., 2014; Gibson & Barrett, 2018). Rural Canadians also tend to donate more to charities than those living in urban centres (Rural Development Institute, 2011). Evidently, rural communities have a distinct demand for philanthropic organizations to provide critical services and supports that would otherwise be unavailable (Gibson & Barrett, 2018). After decades of expansion to fill government gaps, the rural philanthropic sector has accrued noteworthy social capital and financial assets that are anchored in local communities (Hodgeson & Pond, 2018). As such, it is increasingly being recognized as a source of local capacity and a promising partner in rural resilience-building efforts (Gilbert, 2018; Harrow & Jung, 2016; Ryser & Halseth, 2014; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2012).

## b) Environmental Funding in Canada

Environmental funding still accounts for a relatively small portion of the overall philanthropic sector in Canada (Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, 2006). From 2011-2016, members of the Canadian Environmental Grantmakers' Network (now Environment Funders Canada) collectively granted more than \$517 million to environmental causes, primarily biodiversity and species preservation and ecosystem conservation (Environment Funders Canada, 2018). Comparatively, Canadian tax filers claimed approximately \$8.9 billion in charitable donations in 2016 alone (Statistics Canada, 2018). In 2019, only 4% of total online donations through CanadaHelps went environmental initiatives, up from an estimated 2% of total donations in 2004 (CanadaHelps, 2021; Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, 2006). However, this data is non-comprehensive, only depicting philanthropic donations made through specific networks and platforms; there is a significant data gap demonstrating the state of environmental funding, which makes a sectoral-wide commentary challenging (Lutter, 2010). It is well known, however, that environmental funding is unevenly distributed across Canada, with BC receiving approximately half of all environmental grant dollars despite being home to only 13% of the Canadian population (Lutter, 2010). This theme is consistent in the United States, where the Pacific Coast receives 31% of total environmental funding (Environmental Grantmakers Association, 2016).

## c) Environmental Philanthropy and Indigenous Relations

Environmental and conservation groups are influential actors in the resource landscape of BC. Since the late 1960s as the conservation movement gained prominence, environmental organizations have significantly altered both land use and forest

management practices in BC (Affolderbach, 2011). Recent decades have seen what has been coined a “professionalization” of environmental organizations, who continue to hold considerable power to reshape political agendas, economic development and regional land use planning (Affolderbach, 2011). There has also been a marked increase in partnerships between ENGOs and Indigenous groups, as demonstrated, for example, in the pipeline resistance movement over the last decade (Hague, 2019). While these partnerships have been central to the environmental movement in BC, notably since the ‘War in the Woods’ era of protests of the 1980s-90s, historical relations between environmental and Indigenous groups have faced significant complexity and tension (Davis, 2009). The origins of the conservation movement are rooted in colonization and Indigenous dispossession by presenting natural landscapes as a form of “wilderness” that is separate from people (Braun, 2002; Hamilton, 2017). This inherently colonial perspective contributed to the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their homelands in order to rebrand the territory as “parks”, or spaces designated for settler recreation (Barman, 2007). In advocating for conservation imperatives, certain environmental advocacy groups and philanthropic funders also contributed to colonization (Gordon, 2019). Relationships between environmental groups and Indigenous peoples have been described as having evolved through phases, from initial conflicts to relationship building and then allyship, with the most recent phase as one of “shifting terrains”, where the acceptance of environmental groups by First Nations depends on “demonstrating a continuing solidarity” with Indigenous groups (Davis, 2009).

## **Chapter 3. Methods**

### **3.1. Research Background**

#### a) National Research Context

This case study is part of a four-year, Canada-wide research project examining how place-based philanthropy is being used as a mechanism for rural revitalization and renewal. This project is funded by the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and includes researchers from Simon Fraser University, University of Guelph, and Memorial University. This case study contributes to further understanding of the research topic, with an added lens of place-based natural assets and environmental resilience.

Prior to this case study being conducted, the national research team gained insight into trends, challenges, and opportunities for rural philanthropy. A series of 22 key informant interviews were conducted with philanthropic funders from across Canada, using a semi-structured interview approach. Participants were selected based on their experience and involvement in the philanthropic sector. These national key informant interviews provided contextual information that guided the selection of the case region and the subsequent interview questions.

#### b) Case Study Approach

To achieve the objectives of the research project, a case study method was selected. Case study research approaches aim to provide a holistic and comprehensive understanding of a real-world example. Where other research methods within the social sciences struggle to address the complex contextual conditions— social, environmental, cultural, and institutional— that shape human affairs, case study research inherently

assumes that “examining the context and other complex conditions related to the case being studied is integral to understanding the case” (Yin, 2011, 2015).

c) Case Region Selection

The selection for the case study region was guided by the national research project’s case selection criteria, which include:

- I. The primary community/region meets the population definition of non-metro as measured by Statistics Canada. Non-metro population resides in smaller cities, small towns, and areas outside the commuting zone of metro (CMA) areas.
- II. The community/region has a public philanthropy and/or impact investing organization as demonstrated through an active charitable registration in the community/region.

In addition to the required criteria outlined above, the research team sought to achieve diverse case study region representation. This diversity was considered through three secondary selection criteria, outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Secondary Case Selection Criteria**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Criteria</b>
Geography	Province
New Rural Economy (NRE) Sampling Frame	Economy
	Distance to urban centres
	Capacity of local community
Philanthropic indicators	Value of endowment
	Tenure of organization
	Place characteristics

Finally, additional criteria, such as the prevalence of environmental philanthropy organizations, the extent of external funding of environmental initiatives, and the nature of the philanthropic work, were considered in case site selection. Using a combination of the above criteria, the region of Northwest British Columbia was selected as the case region.

## **3.2. Data Collection**

### a) Participant Selection

Participants were selected who were closely involved with the environmental philanthropic organizations that are based locally or have a history of work in the region; who serve as government representatives; and/or who are involved with Indigenous-led organizations and hereditary governments. These individuals were identified through the websites of organizations and governments, as well as through an analysis of relevant documents related to the research. Additionally, participants were invited to share any relevant contacts they felt should be included in the research.

Of the 25 people contacted, a total of 19 people participated in interviews. Due to COVID, all interviews were conducted over the phone or using Zoom and ranged from 35 to 70 minutes in length. Interview participants were distributed across communities in the region, including representation from Prince Rupert, Terrace, the Hazelton's, and Smithers.

Given the nature of capacity in rural communities, many interviewees intersected multiple categories below. They have been listed in the table under their "primary" role,

which represents the role through which I came to learn of their participation in or relation to the environmental philanthropy sector.

**Table 2: Breakdown of Research Participant Affiliations**

	Environmental organizations (staff and board members)	Government (all levels)	Indigenous-led organizations	Total
Number of participants	12	4	3	19

b) Semi-structured Interviews

The participants outlined above were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The interviews involved open-ended questions about the characteristics, landscape, and impact of environmental philanthropy. The nature of semi-structured interviews makes them well suited to exploring varied perceptions and asking probing questions to clarify and deepen responses. The question list was prepared in advance and was informed by responses from the national key informant interviews conducted by the research team. All interviews were recorded with consent from participants, and then later transcribed, before being added to the research team’s shared folder.

For the interviews conducted using Zoom, I used video calling whenever possible, unless audio-only was preferred by the participant or there were internet connectivity issues. Video calling allowed for a more personal connection and allowed me to pick up on body language cues that sometimes guided my probing and clarifying questions.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

#### a) Thematic Analysis in NVivo

Data analysis was done using NVivo software, which allowed for coding of the data by both question and by theme. In advance of coding, a codebook was prepared in collaboration with the research team to ensure consistency across case regions. To prepare the codebook, the research team met via Zoom after an initial review of the data to collectively identify common themes. These themes were then included as theme nodes. Several new themes emerged throughout the first round of coding; therefore, a second round of coding was completed across all interviews to ensure all themes were captured. Upon completion of coding, data from each “node” was analyzed and findings were extracted.

#### b) Document Analysis

A document analysis was conducted throughout the duration of the study, beginning prior to interviews, and continuing through to the conclusion of the research. It included documents such as official community plans, websites, annual reports, and research reports published by local environmental organizations and/or Indigenous-led organizations. The intent of the document analysis was to build an initial understanding of the unique contexts of place in the region, key players, and relevant events. As the research progressed, the document analysis continued to supplement findings and deepen understanding of the region.

### **3.4. Research Limitations**

#### a) Qualitative Data

This case study is primarily based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews outlined above. Qualitative data is based on the perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs of individual participants. As such, it is subject to the biases, opinions, and motivations of participants. For this reason, questions were designed not to have a “right” or “wrong” answer, but rather to probe perceptions of trends, challenges and opportunities based on personal experiences and knowledge of participants.

#### b) Scope of Research

While semi-structured interviews allow for a deeper level of exploration, they are also more time-consuming and therefore limit the number of participants. Due to temporal limitations and individual capacity, I aimed for between 15-20 research participants in this case study; I was able to interview 19 people. The perspectives of people who did not respond to interview requests, or those who were not contacted for this research, are not reflected in the findings. Additionally, as an outside researcher not physically present in the community, my research was limited to individuals and organizations with an online presence and accessible contact information.

#### c) COVID-19 Circumstances

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Simon Fraser University restricted travel for research purposes during my period of study due to the health risks associated with traveling to outside and rural communities. As such, interviews had to be conducted remotely, via Zoom or over the phone, which may have introduced some limitations. For example, participants may have responded differently in in-person conversations, or I

may have been exposed to different information or contexts by being physically being present in the community and making personal connections. I aimed to offset this limitation as much as possible by using video-calling with willing participants to allow for a more personal connection and to be able to perceive body language cues. However, in some cases, only telephone or audio Zoom calls were available.

## **Chapter 4. Case Context**

### **4.1. Locating the Skeena Watershed**

The Skeena watershed ('the Skeena') is an ecologically significant region in Northwest BC that covers an area of 54,400 km<sup>2</sup> –roughly the same size as Nova Scotia. Its main stem is the renowned Skeena River, which originates at the Spatsizi Plateau, known as the Sacred Headwaters, and travels south before curving west towards its drainage in the Pacific Ocean. The watershed encompasses many lakes and rivers, including the Morice, Bulkley, and Kispiox rivers and Babine Lake. It also traverses three regional districts: Kitimat-Stikine, Bulkley Nechako, and the North Coast. Indigenous peoples have inhabited the territories of the Skeena since time immemorial, and the region is rich in Indigenous cultures and histories.

Although the Skeena watershed boundary is frequently used for ecological mapping, there are several alternative classifications with varied names and borders, such as regional districts, electoral areas, health authorities and tourism regions. The lack of consistent classifications presents challenges in finding comprehensive and directly comparable data for the watershed. As such, the following paragraphs apply both broader and narrower lenses, depending on the available data, to outline the economic, social, and environmental contexts within which the Skeena watershed is situated.

### **4.2. Community Contexts**

Home to approximately 60,000 people, the Skeena watershed is a diverse area that includes communities of different sizes, cultures, and climates. The Skeena encompasses the traditional, unceded territories of the Tsimshian, Gitksan,

Wet'suwet'en, Carrier Sekani, Ned'u'ten, Takla and Tahltan peoples (Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition et al., 2013). Their food, social and ceremonial fisheries are a constitutionally protected right.

The primary population centres within the watershed are Terrace (population 13,663) and Smithers (5,351); smaller communities include Kitwanga, Hazelton, Kispiox, Houston and Dease Lake (SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2017). The City of Prince Rupert (population 12,220) is situated just outside of the watershed itself but borders the Skeena River estuary, a critical component of the watershed. Municipalities in the Skeena watershed have a significantly higher proportion of Indigenous peoples than the provincial average of 5%. In Smithers and Terrace, respectively, approximately 14% and 22% of residents identify as Indigenous (City of Terrace, 2018; Town of Smithers, 2019).

Several First Nations in the Skeena have been at the forefront of advancing aboriginal rights and title through landmark negotiations and court rulings that have had enormous significance for the rest of Canada. For example, the Wet'suwet'en and the Gitksan nations brought the Delgamuukw case (*Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*) to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1997. The Supreme Court deemed that Aboriginal title could not be extinguished, clarified the government's duty to consult, and affirmed the legal validity of oral history (BC Treaty Commission, 1999). Most recently, the Wet'suwet'en Nation's protests against the Coastal Gaslink natural gas pipeline through their traditional territory sparked protests and rail blockades across Canada.

### **4.3. Ecological Context**

The Skeena River is the second longest river in B.C. and is among the longest free-flowing rivers in the world. The Skeena watershed encompasses seven biogeoclimatic

zones and is one of the most productive and biologically diverse watersheds in Canada (Pacific Salmon Foundation, 2015; SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, 2019). It is also one of the most important salmon watersheds in the world, providing spawning and rearing habitat for all five species of Pacific salmon (Chinook, Sockeye, Chum, Coho, and Pink) and Steelhead Trout, across over 50 genetically and geographically distinct populations (Pacific Salmon Foundation, 2015). As a keystone species, salmon also play a significant role in maintaining the ecological health of the watershed, transporting marine-derived nutrients inland that sustain ecosystems (Ecotrust Canada, 2010). Salmon are a cornerstone of local heritage and identity and have supported local First Nations' cultures and economies for millennia. Today, over 80 percent of residents in the Skeena interact with wild salmon in a given year (SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, n.d.).

The Skeena watershed provides an abundance of critical ecosystem services to areas both within and outside of the watershed, including supporting food production, carbon storage and sequestration, tourism and recreation, cultural and spiritual identities, and biodiversity, among many other services. However, the watershed faces continued pressures from both industrial development and climate change. It is widely recognized that human activity has degraded the forests, water quality, and fish habitat in the watershed (Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition et al., 2013). Over the last century, wild salmon returns in the Skeena are estimated to have declined by 70% (Price et al., 2019). By 2050, climate change is projected to reduce the snowpack in the Skeena by 56%, which will decrease summer flows of the Skeena River and will have dramatic effects on the ecosystem (Swainson, 2009). The Regional District of Kitimat-Stikine also expects to see faster snowmelts and glacier reduction, increased precipitation and heavy rain events, more extreme heat events, and an increased likelihood and intensity of forest fires, flooding and droughts (City of Terrace, 2018).

These pressures call for urgent protection against human-induced degradation may lead to irreversible damage to the Skeena watershed.

#### **4.4. Economic Context**

Like rural areas across BC, natural resources have long been the backbone of regional economic development in the Skeena. The region is a globally significant contributor of natural resources, and resource extraction makes up most of the economic base of communities within the Skeena watershed. Recent years have seen a boom of industrial development, including pipelines, transmission lines, mines, clean energy projects, port expansions and major Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) infrastructure projects. The construction of an LNG export facility in Kitimat by LNG Canada represents one of the largest energy investments in the history of Canada (LNG Canada, 2018). The regional access to the Port of Prince Rupert, the deepest natural harbour in North America and the shortest link to Asia, supports the export of natural resources to global markets (Prince Rupert Port Authority, n.d.). In 2019, 60% of all major industrial projects being built or proposed across all of BC –worth over \$150 billion– were located in Northwest BC (Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance, 2019). From 2012-2017, the Province of BC is estimated to have earned over \$500 million in revenues from major resource projects (Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance, 2018). However, the majority of the economic activity from resource projects ends up leaving the region and providing minimal lasting economic benefit to local communities. This has limited the capacity and services of local governments, and created an overreliance on commodity prices that makes communities vulnerable to global market fluctuations and external shocks (Northern Development Initiative Trust, 2021).

The region currently faces an estimated infrastructure deficit of \$600 million (Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance, 2019). Representatives from 21 municipalities and regional districts in the Northwest have formed the Northwest BC Resource Benefit Alliance to lobby the provincial government for a revenue sharing agreement that would allow local communities to economically benefit from the resources extracted from the region.

In addition to recurring periods of economic slumps, an overarching shift of global economic restructuring poses an additional threat to the region's economy. As highlighted in the City of Terrace's Official Community Plan, "changing economic trends and environmental policies at a national and global level have local impacts" (City of Terrace, 2018).

The natural environment throughout the Skeena watershed is increasingly being recognized as an important pillar for local economic development through nature-based tourism. In the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako, annual visitor expenditures increased by 25% from 2008 and 2015, amounting to nearly \$60 million, with hiking and fishing the most popular activities among visitors (Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako, 2017). The Skeena's wild salmon fishery has been valued at nearly \$110 million annually (Swainson, 2009). Guided fishing tourism in the Lower Skeena increased nearly 60% from 2013 to 2016 (Edinger & Britten, n.d.).

## **4.5. Regional Transitions**

Like many rural places in Canada, communities in the region are experiencing both shrinking and ageing populations (City of Terrace, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2017). Between 2011 and 2016, most communities in the Northwest experienced population declines, except for the City of Terrace which saw growth of 2% (Statistics Canada,

2017). Higher rates of unemployment in the region are also consistent with broader national trends in rural areas. Between 2011 and 2016, average unemployment in the Regional Districts of Kitimat Stikine and the North Coast were close to double the provincial average (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Communities in the Skeena watershed are in a period of transition. Confronted with the layered forces of change associated with global economic restructuring, the climate crisis, demographic shifts and the advancements of Indigenous rights and title, local governments are overburdened and under-resourced. Continuous proposals for further industrial projects deplete the capacity of local governments while providing little local benefit in return (Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance, 2018). The Regional District of Kitimat-Stikine does not currently have a regional growth strategy (Regional District of Kitimat-Stikine, 2019). As stated by the Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance (RBA), “our communities are vastly unprepared to support what may come about in the immediate future.” (Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance, 2018).

These tensions have sparked important conversations about the future of the Skeena, and the need for building local capacity, sustainability, and resilience. The region has a growing list of proposed projects that have been halted due to environmental concerns, including the Kemano Completion Project, coalbed methane drilling in the Sacred Headwaters, the Pacific Northwest LNG facility on Lelu Island, and Enbridge Northern Gateway, all of which sparked a coordinated response from environmental organizations and First Nations alike.

#### **4.6. Environmental Place-Based Philanthropy**

The abundant natural capital in the watershed has attracted philanthropic dollars from national and international funders and has led to the formation and growth of many

locally based organizations dedicated to environmental conservation in the Skeena. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, an American foundation with over \$6 billion in assets, was active in the region for a decade through their Wild Salmon Initiative, granting over \$16.5 million from 2007 to 2016 to partners that work on conservation of salmon ecosystems in the Skeena (Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, 2017). Numerous Community-Based Environmental Organizations (CBEOs), including non-profit societies, foundations, trusts, and advocacy groups operate in the region, many of which have been instrumental in contributing to environmental conservation. Some prominent local organizations include SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, Northwest Institute for Bioregional Research, Bulkley Valley Research Centre, Skeena-Nass Centre for Innovation in Resource Economics, Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition, Watershed Watch Salmon Society, Ecotrust Canada, Morice Water Monitoring Trust, Northern Confluence Initiative, Skeena Knowledge Trust, Friends of Wild Salmon, and T Buck Suzuki Foundation, among others. These and other environmental groups, in partnership with local First Nations, have been active in regional environmental conservation for decades.

## **Chapter 5. Findings**

### **5.1. Characterizing the Sector**

#### **5.1.1. Size and Structure**

There are at least 13 active and operating CBEOs in the Skeena, with nearly half of them located in Smithers. Their work spans across three primary categories: environmental research and monitoring, policy and environmental advocacy, and environmental community programming. Several CBEOs conduct work across multiple categories. These organizations have diverse sources of funding, often combining multiple revenue streams. Most participants reporting leveraging a cross-section of funding, including individual and corporate donations, philanthropic foundation and government grants, interest-generating endowments, social enterprises revenues, and fee-for-service work. Of the CBEOs identified, 77% (10) have charitable status, and nearly 50% are based in the town of Smithers. For the five-year period from 2016-2020, the 10 registered charities in the region reported total revenues of \$9.7 million and creating 59 annual part-time and full-time jobs, representing a significant economic contribution to the region. However, this number does not account for the several larger charities that either (a) do not have charitable status, (b) only recently became registered charities and did not previously report financials publicly, or (c) have charitable status but are regional offices of larger charities that do not report their revenues by region.

Therefore, the actual total economic contribution from all CBEOs in the region over the same five-year period is likely much larger. Many organizations reported receiving funding from outside of the region. As such, the sector is responsible for a significant inflow of capital to the regional economy. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, in particular, was referenced by multiple participants as having seeded the region with a

major influx of philanthropic funding that supported the development of the sector. At least one organization continues to subsist on the interest from a large endowment from the Moore Foundation.

**Table 3: Geographic Distribution of Organizations**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of CBEOs</b>
Smithers	6
Terrace	3
Prince Rupert	2
Other	2

**Table 4: Grant funding to CBEOs from several major foundations**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Funding Period</b>	<b>Amount Funded</b>
Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation	2007-2016	\$ 16,504,059
Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia	2014-2020	\$ 204,914
Tides Canada/MakeWay	2018-2021	\$ 863,148.00

### **5.1.2. Strengths**

a) Commitment to Place

The place-based nature of CBEOs was seen as a major strength of the sector. People employed by the environmental sector were seen as being deeply committed to place, which is undoubtedly a major strength of CBEOs.

- “They’re run by people who are committed to this part of the world. And that’s how it really works, it’s that commitment to this place that drives and sustains a lot of those smaller groups.” (Research participant #3, 2020)

The strong connection to land among residents of the Skeena provides CBEOs with a foundation of shared interests with many individuals and groups in the region—including some uncommon allies. One participant noted the role of philanthropic funding in connecting people to the environment, which in turn, further builds support for conservation efforts.

- “I think having resources, especially in the environmental sector, that continue to connect people to the land is always good. [...] That’s what makes people care over the long-term. And when you don’t have that connection, it’s very abstract.” (Research participant #6, 2020)

#### b) Community Relationships & Trust

Many participants spoke of the trust held by CBEOs in the region, which is shaped by relationships with people in the community and the inherent understanding these organizations have of local contexts. Participants frequently noted the importance of relationships in moving work forward.

- “They have the local knowledge, and they have trust, and they have buy-in.” (Research participant #16, 2020)

Conversely, participants from all backgrounds noted that a general suspicion of outside interests was common in the region. Several people spoke of a lack of trust in external organizations, both industry and environmental organizations alike, and shared stories of outsiders who “blundered in” without the context or understanding of what it is

like to live in a tight-knit community. The lack of regional knowledge frequently limited the ability of external organizations to engage in meaningful work.

Numerous comments were also made about the dynamics of living in a small town that shape environmental work in the region, including how it creates opportunities to connect with diverse people in the community. This was thought to build trust and promote respect and understanding of differences, even when values are not aligned.

- “I work on mining law reform, and I can go for coffee and there’s an engineer from a mining company, and there’s the diamond driller company guy there. [...] I think there’s lot of strength to that, to be able to come at it from a place of, you know, respecting other values and opinions and just being sort of more grounded in reality.” (Research participant #7, 2020)

#### c) Regional Significance

The Skeena is also a region that has received international attention and exposure due to its valuable ecological assets, the degree of investment in industrial projects, and the efforts of local First Nations whose actions have altered the national political and legal landscapes of Indigenous rights and title and environmental management. The combination of these factors, which I refer to broadly as ‘regional significance’ was cited by multiple participants as critical to cultivating a strong local philanthropic sector that is more easily able to access funding and supports from larger national and international organizations. However, several participants also commented on the complexities and uncertainty that comes with navigating such uncharted territory. One participant felt that the nature of this landscape has been a driver of philanthropic funding to the region, to CBEOs and increasingly, directly to First Nations.

- “We’re the centre of the universe as far as global energy, Indigenous rights, conflicts between resource development and First Nations or Indigenous peoples—show me another place on the planet that has these issues and this level of attention and conflict right now.” (Research participant #3, 2020)

d) Collaboration

The degree of collaboration across the local environmental sector is a both a defining feature and strength in the Skeena. The place-based nature of the sector promotes collaboration, co-operation, and partnerships, borne out of both necessity and opportunity. Collaboration is common in the Skeena both among CBEOs, between local and external philanthropic groups, as well as with local First Nations. Multiple participants involved in environmental advocacy and policy reform work noted the benefits of their tight-knit collaboration with other local organizations.

Several participants commented on the efficiencies achieved from combining efforts and pooling resources, and the benefits of avoiding duplicated efforts. Having “strength in numbers” was noted as being particularly important when advocating for policy changes at the provincial or federal levels. Several participants felt that the number of high-profile industrial projects that have been proposed over recent decades have contributed to building momentum and capacity in the local environmental philanthropy sector, fostering a culture of coalition-building, and promoting partnerships with First Nations.

However, while collaboration within and across the philanthropic sector was found to be widespread in the Skeena, collaborations between CBEOs and local governments were minimal. The select organizations who did reference collaborations

with local governments cited those partnerships as critical to getting meaningful projects off the ground. Several participants cited early examples of governments, both First Nations and settler governments alike, working closely with environmental groups, which included local organizations providing proof of concepts that inform policy changes and leveraging data from a local environmental research organization to inform decision making on a First Nation's traditional territory.

- “The city is really looking to us to create case studies, proof of concepts, that these ideas can work. And then they can hopefully change policies to reflect the successes of those case studies.” (Research participant #2, 2020)

### **5.1.3. Challenges**

#### a) Local Capacity

Numerous participants commented on the capacity limitations of smaller organizations. This was noted by one interviewee as a barrier for some larger philanthropic groups seeking to partner with CBEOs and First Nations in the region:

- “I see a lot of missed opportunity and I see a lot of interest from philanthropic organizations to work in this area. And there isn't always the person on the other end to sort of make that partnership. So that's the only challenge I see is that there's a lot of missed opportunity, that we're just lacking in people power sometimes.” (Research participant #6, 2020)

Limited capacity was also referenced as a barrier to the sector adapting to new environments and contexts, such as shifting to virtual work due to COVID-19 and advancing approaches to reconciliation efforts with First Nations. Volunteer capacity was

identified by two participants as a barrier for the smaller organizations that rely more heavily on volunteerism.

b) Public Perceptions

Another commonly cited challenge associated with funding was combatting the narrative that the large environmental foundations that are funding local environmental groups and First Nations are ultimately funded by foreign interests aiming to halt resource development in Canada. While CBEOs hold considerable community trust, there is also a subset of residents in the region who are skeptical of their funders' underlying interests and motives. Participants in this research were firm in their repudiation of this narrative and fervent in their stance that initiatives were led by locals, for locals. It was noted that this influx of external funding empowers the community's voice, and without it, the region would be beholden to the decisions of big industry.

- “There’s this assumption that we’re just sitting here all naive and waiting to be told what to do by somebody from the outside, when it’s really not the case. We set our agenda. We set our conservation priorities. We see a project and say, is this good or bad for the region? If it’s bad, then we’re going to need some resources to fight it, probably. And so, yeah, I just I don’t agree with the accusations that have been made, and I think that they’re pretty baseless.”

(Research participant #6, 2020)

c) Systems Change and Complexity

Although environmental protection and conservation has historically been the primary focus of the local environmental sector, the work of many environmental philanthropic organizations in the Skeena is increasingly stretching beyond causes that are purely

“environmental” in nature. Many organizations in the region not only demonstrate a strong understanding of the interconnectedness between environmental, social, and economic issues, but they are actively incorporating this systems lens into their programming and initiatives. This has led to a significant expansion in the scope of work of environmental organizations in the region, which brings new layers of complexity that are difficult to navigate. For example, several interviewees commented on the challenges of operating within the evolving landscape of First Nations reconciliation and rights and title.

- “Much the issues that we work on have become more complex in a way.”  
(Research participant #4, 2020)

The length of time required to advance systems-level change was cited by two participants as a challenge, particularly as it relates to measuring and communicating progress to supporters and funders. It was noted that people like to see tangible impacts, which is not always possible when dealing with long-term change. Additionally, access to long-term and innovative funding to support systems-change initiatives was cited as a challenge. One participant noted that funds continue to go towards the “status quo”. One organization cited challenges in sourcing funding for initiatives that embedded elements of community economic development into natural resource projects, particularly in the forest and salmon sectors.

- “If you go and pitch a 30-year project to somebody, there’s only a few philanthropic groups, in my experience that have the kind of stomach for that.”  
(Research participant #5, 2020)

## 5.2. Role of CBEOs in Environmental Management

### a) Filling Government Gaps in Natural Resource Management

Participants felt that the environmental philanthropy sector has played, and continues to play, a critical role in the region. When asked to reflect on the relationships between governments and the local environmental philanthropy sector, many participants spoke of the impacts of government withdrawal in the region and the offloading of government responsibilities to the philanthropic sector. Numerous participants, including government staff and elected officials, commented on the limited staff time and resources at the local and regional governments' engagement with environmental issues. It was broadly felt that the demand for resource extraction in the Skeena has not been coupled with sufficient government resources to monitor and evaluate environmental impacts. Several participants responded with notable frustration and disappointment when speaking of the abdication of government from environmental management. Many participants noted how the environmental sector is playing a significant role in addressing the gaps.

- “Part of the challenge is that government agencies that are responsible for resource management have been severely gutted over the last several decades and just lack capacity.” (Research participant #13, 2020)

One specific gap that numerous participants brought up was the government's lack of investment in environmental research and monitoring in the region. This research was seen as critical to informing responsible resource management. One participant also commented on the burden that this places on local First Nations to respond to and assess a high number of industrial proposals for projects in their territories.

- “There's more pressure on First Nations to, you know, if it's a bad project, we have to be the ones to fight it. We have to be the ones to find the resources to do

this and to do that and do all the studies.” (Research participant #6, 2020)

b) Identifying and Advocating for Place-based Natural Assets

The environmental non-profit sector in the Northwest was noted as playing a key role as the conveners and facilitators of important discussions about regional development that are centred around place-based assets. This role is filled through hosting events, conferences, and seminars, and providing the public with different perspectives and information—referred to by one participant as “the other side of the story”. Participants noted that environmental organizations can act as translators, communicating information and science in lay language in a way that is digestible and accessible for the public. One participant referred to this as “information democracy”, which is a core pillar of their organization’s values. The public dialogue and knowledge dissemination from local environmental organizations was seen as critical to holding industry and government accountable and promoting transparency.

- “They really form this kind of rudder, that can really keep the ship of development on the right course and not just barging through with willy-nilly projects, which is really what’s been proposed for up here.” (Research participant #12, 2020)

Several CBEOs have dedicated substantial time, funding, and energy to advocating for change in policies and management practices that affect the integrity of the natural assets in the region, including salmon. A number of CBEOs work on Skeena salmon conservation, including through salmon research, monitoring and sustainable fisheries, often in partnership with local First Nations. Numerous participants spoke of how salmon are at the heart of many conservation efforts in the Skeena, and the important role of CBEOs and other philanthropic groups have played in sparking important changes to fisheries management:

- “As the conservation movement as a sector really started to gain prominence, it resulted in a lot of management reforms to fisheries. And that really improved things in terms of preventing certain salmon populations from collapse, and helping other ones rebound. So, it was really positive.” (Research participant #14, 2020)

c) Conducting Environmental Monitoring and Research

Several organizations have explicit mandates to conduct environmental research, and many engage qualified scientists or academic researchers to conduct the work. One organization feeds the data they collect into the provincial government’s environmental monitoring system. In one of my conversations, a participant who conducts environmental research commented on the value of having environmental research being advanced by local organizations, noting that it allows for research objectives and knowledge gaps to be informed by community priorities. Another participant highlighted the role this research plays in informing Indigenous governance and territory management strategies. However, this evolution of responsibilities within the environmental sector has not come without tensions. Some participants, both from inside and outside of the environmental sector, saw environmental research and monitoring as a role that should inherently be filled by government in the long-term.

- “My only worry is that I’ve seen government pull back from responsibilities. They say it’s temporary, but then it ends up being permanent. That’s what I pay taxes for, is to have good science on which to base policy on. If we’re relying on foundation money, our philanthropic money, it can become a habit. And if that money goes away, then the science just simply doesn’t happen. And now what are you basing your government decisions on?” (Research participant #5, 2020)

Another participant noted how this role may evolve as local First Nations continue to build in-house capacity and assert their rights in governing their traditional territories:

- “As First Nations continue to build more capacity to have their own in-house biologists or wildlife experts, water experts, all of that expertise is growing in our region. And so, we rely less and less on those organizations. But they definitely are partners in a lot of different work that we do.” (Research participant #6, 2020)

Several participants expressed concern over environmental organizations conducting scientific research due to the bias that could be embedded in the results. However, two participants who work for different research-based environmental organizations in the region reflected on their intentional efforts to avoid advocacy-based work, ensuring that they purely presented scientific facts. These participants both noted their success in avoiding perceptions of bias and having their research leveraged by both governments and industry.

- “It’s really important for us to do non-advocacy-based work. That means the science or social science that we do, is just done. And whoever wants to take it and spin it in whatever political manner they want, they can. But that’s not what we do.” (Research participant #3, 2020)

#### d) Grounding Climate Impacts into Regional Contexts

Participants were asked to reflect on how the increasing urgency of the climate crisis has shaped the environmental philanthropy sector, and how the sector can support local climate resilience. Through this question and through reviewing the websites of local organizations, I learned that very few organizations have a primary focus or objective

related to climate change or building climate resilience. Rather, climate change is a secondary goal or underlying assumption that is embedded across all work. As one participant put it, climate change is a “hum undertone” in their work rather than the primary focus.

- “That’s the biggest challenge that I think we face as conservation organizations, or people doing this type of work here in the region, is that climate change is a global issue. And the scale of it is huge and it’s so complicated.” (Research participant #13, 2020)

Numerous participants spoke of how grounding a global, abstract problem such as climate change into regionally contextual issues, for example, salmon or wildfires, helps to make the impacts more tangible and relevant to residents. Several participants noted how salmon are a unifying force that receive broad support across the region, and thus provide a valuable entry point to explore and communicate regional climate impacts.

- “In my experience, organizing and motivating people around climate change has to have some concrete touch point to day-to-day life. It can’t just be parts per million, and you know, melting ice caps, those are in the head, they don’t touch the heart. And if you’re only talking to the head, it is very hard to organize and motivate.” (Research participant #5, 2020)

Several participants felt that climate literacy in the region had significantly improved in recent years, and that the conversation around climate change had evolved from a binary discussion to one that is more nuanced. Several participants noted that the growing urgency of the climate crisis may have increased available philanthropic funding for climate solutions, which was seen as positive for CBEOs.

### 5.3. Beyond Environmentalism: Other Areas of Impact

#### a) Reconciliation and Indigenous Partnerships

The dynamics between the local environmental philanthropy sector and Indigenous groups in the region was a topic that prompted a great deal of discussion among nearly all participants. In interviews, I asked participants to reflect on the role of the sector in supporting reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination, as well as how the landscape has changed in light of growing commitments from senior governments to support reconciliation and Indigenous self-governance. As outlined in the literature review, relationships between environmental groups and Indigenous peoples in Canada, and specifically in B.C., have been sources of both significant tensions and successful collaborations in the province's history. Similar to this widely varied past, there were diverse perspectives, knowledge and experiences related to relations between environmental organizations and Indigenous groups. However, several key learnings and themes emerged which are outlined below.

Participants from most CBEOs noted that either most or all of their work was done in partnership with local First Nations, with several organizations noting that they had Indigenous staff or board members. Numerous participants felt that environmental philanthropy fosters opportunities for direct, tactical collaboration between settler and Indigenous peoples in the region and creates opportunities for relationship-building and partnership. This was broadly seen as supporting "reconciliation" efforts in the region.

- "The sector helps with people working together and developing that common understanding and common interests. So, from a reconciliation perspective, it provides funding for First Nations and non-First Nations people to work together,

which I think goes a long way in addressing reconciliation.” (Research participant #8, 2020)

Several participants suggested that partnering with First Nations was no longer a choice but rather an imperative for receiving philanthropic funding and gaining the ear of government. Numerous participants in this research emphasized the importance that CBEOs, particularly those who advertise their support for Indigenous rights, engage with First Nations in a more thoughtful and consistent manner. Several participants referred to a recent growth in awareness across the environmental sector related to Indigenous laws and governance. The notion of decolonizing philanthropy, and environmental work at large, was brought up by several participants and was mostly seen as a challenge. In particular, finding the capacity and funding to support decolonization and reconciliation efforts was cited by multiple participants as a barrier.

- “Money tends to go towards really colonial structures.” (Research participant #11, 2020)

Among many CBEOs, there is a strong interest in decolonizing organizational processes and practices, however efforts to do so remain limited to several individuals. Finding the capacity and resources to support decolonization and reconciliation efforts, for example by funding relationship and trust building with First Nations, was cited as a barrier by several organizations. Participants commented how reconciliation efforts require investing in relationships over the long-term, which take time, and ultimately, resources.

- “You know, try writing that in a grant! We’d really like to have better relationships, so we need to go to the land, we need to go berry picking. We need to have time to sit down and talk with chiefs and community members, if we’re talking

relationships with First Nations. You need to show up and be present and be genuine. And that just takes time.” (Research participant #18, 2020)

Several participants underscored the importance of CBEOs continuously reflecting on the space they occupy in the sector, which was thought to help avoid the common disparity between intent and impact. A number of participants also referred to the role that environmental philanthropy plays in supplementing the capacity of local First Nations, for example, through conducting land-based research that subsequently informs territory management strategies. However, this role also presents challenges: one participant pointed out that this can actually hinder Indigenous capacity-building, by keeping the control and decision-making power outside of Indigenous organizations.

- “We had environmental groups that were sort of acting as the middleman between philanthropic organizations and foundations and First Nations. And that really limited capacity building for First Nations, that limited the relationships that could be built. And so, a lot of my work has been trying to actually work more directly between First Nations and philanthropic foundations.” (Research participant #6, 2020)

Select environmental organizations are stepping into the realm of Indigenous advocacy and cited concerted efforts to educate others in the region on the topic. However, this approach was criticized by some participants, particularly due to the dissonance making broad statements of support but then offering selective support of First Nations based on values alignment. Another participant commented on the tendency for environmental groups to “do it in-house” versus engaging qualified experts to help navigate cultural matters.

- “When folks have an issue with fisheries, they call in a fisheries biologist. And if they have a wildlife issue, they call in a wildlife biologist because they’re the experts on those topics. But when it’s a people and a cultural thing, there’s this tendency to just do it themselves. They don’t look at sociologists or the anthropologists or the cultural geographers.” (Research Participant #3, 2020)

b) Economic Development and Diversification

Environmental philanthropy in the region was noted as a powerful force that can have significant influence over economic development decisions. As one government representative put it:

- “They can have the effect of shutting down a project or encouraging development. In terms of encouraging development, I think if you have the stamp of approval from environmental groups, that’s a huge win for industry. And they’re not against everything either. I’ve seen them support projects in a very strong way.” (Research participant #17, 2020)

It was noted that CBEOs, along with First Nations, were instrumental in stopping a suite of industrial projects over the course of recent decades.

- “If it wasn’t for that philanthropy, and for people supporting Indigenous rights and title, there would be ten thousand fracking wells in Sacred Headwaters. The Enbridge Pipeline would have gone through. There would be a coal mine in the Sacred Headwaters. There would be fish farms off the Northwest Coast of British Columbia. So, it’s had an impact significantly, our watershed would look very different if it wasn’t for the work of the people here.”  
(Research participant #11, 2020)

Increasingly, however, CBEOs have been active in putting words to action, moving from advocating for sustainable resource use, to demonstrating what responsible resource development looks like. There has been a concerted effort and a recent shift among environmental philanthropic organizations to “propose” instead of “oppose” economic development opportunities. That is, rather than only being reactive to and fighting big industry, environmental organizations have realized the importance of demonstrating and supporting what they believe to be truly sustainable economic development. This has manifested through the support and funding of local initiatives such as sustainable Indigenous-led fisheries, regenerative agriculture social enterprises, and business innovation programs and projects. One organization also convened a local Community Economic Development Committee to promote the social, economic, and cultural health of the area.

- “There’s increasing pressure around jobs and, you know, that that sense that we can’t say no to everything.” (Research participant #4, 2020)

Participants also frequently commented on the direct economic impact associated with local environmental groups, in terms of their job creation and recirculation of wealth in the local economy. One participant noted how their organization had brought in over \$10 million to the region over the course of its 20-year history. Supporting local businesses and consultants was a commonly held principle across participants, and several spoke of their organization’s prioritization of purchasing and hiring locally.

## **Chapter 6. Discussion**

### **6.1. Structural role of CBOs in place-based development**

This research demonstrates that the philanthropic sector, through community-based organizations, is playing an important structural role in rural regions, and provides evidence to support assertions that the sector may serve as a strategic partner in place-based development (United Nations Office for Partnerships, 2019).

CBOs in the Skeena region are advancing place-based community development in multiple ways. First, they are addressing and responding to senior government withdrawal, and the resulting rural government capacity bottlenecks, that have pervaded rural communities across the country (Douglas, 2005; Markey et al., 2008). The retreat of government in the Skeena is consistent with broader trends of rural restructuring in Canada (Connelly et al., 2009; FCM, 2018; Markey et al., 2008). In the wake of this withdrawal, CBOs are filling gaps and roles that traditionally would fall under government's purview: conducting environmental research and monitoring, collaborating with First Nations on sustainable resource management initiatives, convening public discussions on environmental management, and making policy recommendations, among other things. This allocation of roles offers some benefits, including freedom from short-term electoral cycles that allows for longer-term orientation, and greater flexibility and agility due to less red tape and compliance requirements than government equivalents (Dodgson & Gann, 2020). However, it also comes with drawbacks and challenges: research participants from outside of the sector were quick to raise concerns about the government's lack of participation or collaboration in these initiatives, including the potential for bias to be embedded in the work led by CBOs, and the sector's dependency on external philanthropic funding to conduct this work.

A second way in which CBEOs are advancing place-based development is by conducting their work with a distinctively place-based lens. The sector's work centres around promoting, understanding, and preserving the unique natural assets of the Skeena. In this way, CBEOs are contributing to a process of reframing community development around the assets that already exist in the region (Mathie et al., 2017). Similar to other place-based actors, the sector's rootedness in the community and unwavering commitment to local priorities affords it with an intrinsic advantage over external organizations (Gilbert, 2018; Layton, 2016).

Third, the work of CBEOs is directly reducing the barriers to place-based development, which may better position local governments to pursue place-based approaches in the future. The sector has accrued considerable local capacity, which the literature has shown to be a key barrier to place-based development (Gibson & Barrett, 2018; Halseth et al., 2019; Markey et al., 2015). CBEOs are providing examples of asset-based approaches to development, proof of concept initiatives and considerable research on natural assets, both of which can guide rural governments both in the Skeena and elsewhere. They produce considerable locally-relevant research and data—a lack of which in rural communities has been documented to hinder the uptake of place-based approaches (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2019). Multiple CBEOs in the region have a primary mandate of conducting environmental research and monitoring and generating data that is used to inform regional decision-making. A portion of this research relates to understanding the impacts of climate change at a local level, which is helping to ground a complex, global issue into regional contexts and increase understanding and dialogue about community resilience.

## 6.2. Opportunities and Barriers to Government Engagement

The grey literature highlights the importance of the philanthropic sector engaging the government in order to scale its impact (United Nations Office for Partnerships, 2019). Interestingly, one of the most effective strategies for engaging government is something that CBEOs in the Skeena have adopted in recent years: leading by example (United Nations Office for Partnerships, 2019). Numerous participants in this research commented on their organization's strategic shift from "opposing" industrial development to "proposing" sustainable resource management through scalable initiatives and proof of concepts. Accordingly, by continuing to demonstrate success, governments will eventually take note of the value being created by CBEOs in the region.

At present, however, the sector remains underrecognized and underutilized by governments. This is likely driven by several factors, including the limited capacity at the local government level to develop relationships and create such opportunities. The politicization of environmentalism in the region and the fault lines that have developed around industrial projects may also be contributing to a strategy of avoidance by local governments towards CBEOs. Participants from various levels of governments justified their lack of partnerships with CBEOs in the region due to their requirement to remain "neutral", particularly in reference to relations between environmental groups and industry. However, the assumption that collaboration and co-creation with CBEOs requires an abandonment of government priorities and adopting the "agenda" of another party is not only false but is limiting the progress of place-based community development in the region. In his 2017 book, *Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust*, Adam Kahane challenges the conventional understanding of collaboration, which "requires us all to be on the same team and headed in the same direction...". Kahane asserts that this assumption is

wrong and proposes an idea of “stretch collaboration” which is based upon the principles of embracing conflict, experimentation, and co-creation (Kahane, 2017). Rather than avoiding conflict and complexity, Kahane recommends plunging into it, while also embracing the notion of plurality, or “attending to multiple diverse wholes, multiple emergent possibilities, and multiple co-creators.” In an era of limited capacity, expanding mandates and increasingly complex and overlapping challenges facing rural governments, there is a significant opportunity for local governments to synergize with existing local assets to support place-based development through collaborations with CBEOs.

### **6.3. Reflections on the Philanthropic Sector**

The nature of the work being advanced by philanthropic actors in the Skeena, both CBEOs and funders alike, provides tangible evidence of the sea change underway across the global philanthropic sector. As the environmental philanthropy sector in Canada has undergone a period of “professionalization” in recent decades, so too have the organizations in the Skeena transitioned from grassroots and volunteer-driven efforts to influential actors in the community (Affolderbach, 2011). The global philanthropic sector has also been documented to be shifting towards a systems orientation and increasingly addressing complex and interconnected issues in society (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2019; Rural Development Institute, 2011). There is a growing acknowledgement that environmental philanthropy must continue to move beyond the siloed paradigm that it has operated in the past and link climate and conservation work with economic, health and social justice priorities (Lutter, 2010). A reckoning of the interconnectedness of priorities is well underway in the Skeena, so much so that the characterization of “environmental” may no longer be accurate for some organizations that have moved well beyond purely environmental objectives. Considerations of

political, economic, social, and environmental priorities are increasingly being embedded in the work of environmental groups, which marks a significant evolution from past approaches in B.C., where ENGOs narrowly focused on environmental issues and dismissed the intersections of “race, class, gender and sexuality... as ‘social’ issues” (Braun, 2002). CBEOs in the Skeena are increasingly conducting pilot programs, creating proof of concepts, and demonstrating alternative mechanisms for economic development that are rooted in local contexts. Whether they are co-creating sustainable fisheries with local First Nations or launching regenerative agriculture projects, these projects offer a host of co-benefits to the community that stretch well beyond environmental outcomes.

This research offers several key learnings for the broader philanthropic sector that can help funders to broaden their impact. First, it provides further evidence to support the rapid acceleration of a transfer of power to local actors and decision-makers. Despite the wide recognition of the importance of place-based development, external decision-makers continue to hold significant decision-making power in philanthropic funding allocation, even though foundation leaders are not as in touch with non-profits’ needs as they think (Centre for Effective Philanthropy, 2018). It is critical that philanthropic funding and grant-making is paired with local autonomy and control.

Second, it highlights the importance of rethinking funding strategies to reflect the new philanthropy paradigm. This includes increasing investments in multi-year, operational funding. Research shows that providing operational funding may have the greatest impact on strengthening organizations (Centre for Effective Philanthropy, 2018). As demonstrated in the Skeena, this can take many forms, including multi-year, long-term grants, or an initial large endowment that can perpetually earn interest, and is crucial to developing a robust and healthy place-based sector. It also includes taking

risks and being bold, funding innovative projects that can contribute to lasting systems change. While the sector's awareness of systems-orientation may be broadening, research participants highlighted barriers in the form of traditional funding streams that can limit access to funding for innovative, holistic initiatives.

## **6.4. CBEOs and Reconciliation**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) defines reconciliation as “an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships.” In the Skeena region, collaboration and coalition-building between the environmental philanthropy sector and local First Nations has been ongoing for several decades and has created substantial opportunities for the building and deepening of relationships between settler and Indigenous communities. Due to my positionality as an outside researcher, and the predominantly settler participants that I interviewed, I cannot comment on the nuances of such relationships, other than that they are definitively complex and evolving. Nonetheless, partnerships with First Nations are recognized by most CBEOs as imperative, and the sector is in a state of rapid transition with regards to how such partnerships are perceived and pursued. This transition is inherently complex, and CBEOs continue to learn and evolve through a process of trial and error.

As issues of racism and social equity have been thrust into the mainstream spotlight in recent years, the philanthropic sector is reckoning with racism and increasing considerations of racial equity in its work (Buteau & Orensten, 2020). For settler-run CBEOs that are committed to working with Indigenous partners, there is an opportunity to embed decolonization efforts into organizational culture, strategies, and processes. Efforts to decolonize the environmental philanthropy sector are piecemeal and remain highly dependent on individuals, which is consistent with findings on the broader

philanthropic sector that suggests that decolonization efforts tend to be led more by individuals employed by organizations, rather than organizations themselves (Hague, 2019). In today's landscape, change is perhaps the only constant for the sector if CBEOs wish to remain relevant and pursue meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples. As First Nations build their internal capacity and increasingly reclaim their rightful roles in territorial management and governance, CBEOs will be required to continuously adapt and reflect on the space that they occupy in the sector. Just as external funders cannot effectively understand and respond to community-based needs, CBEOs will struggle to support the priorities of local First Nations without having representation from those communities at the decision-table to lead or co-create solutions. CBEOs must also consider how the power they hold in the field of environmental management can be transferred or shared with Indigenous-led organizations. Engaging paid experts to navigate the complexities of this substantial shift may prove highly valuable for organizations.

Perhaps the most effective way for philanthropic funders to reconciliation is through the direct funding Indigenous-led initiatives. Several research participants underscored the opportunity for philanthropic funders to support the revitalization of Indigenous laws and governance structures. There remains significant room for improvement with regards to directing philanthropic funding to Indigenous-led organizations. One leading institutional funder in Canada recently undertook an audit of their funding history and found that only 20% of their granting had gone towards Indigenous-focused initiatives; of this 20%, only a small fraction of these grants went to Indigenous-led organizations (The Catherine Donnelly Foundation, 2020). This shift may already be underway in the Skeena: a review of grants made by MakeWay (formerly Tides Canada) in the Skeena between 2018-2021 shows that the organization allocated

36% more funding directly to First Nations (\$1.3M) in the region than to environmental groups (\$863K) (MakeWay, 2022). As this trend continues, it will be critical to allocate funding not only to band councils, but also hereditary leadership groups and other Indigenous-run organizations as funding recipients.

**Table 5: Comparing grant funding from MakeWay allocated to First Nations vs. CBEOs (2018-2021)**

Direct to First Nations	CBEOs
\$ 1,340,160	\$ 863,148

The TRC also states that reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians “also requires reconciliation with the natural world. If human beings resolve problems between themselves but continue to destroy the natural world, then reconciliation remains incomplete.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). From this perspective, there is undoubtedly a significant opportunity for the environmental philanthropy sector to contribute to advancing reconciliation, by promoting a long-overdue societal shift in how we interact with the natural world.

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

One interview participant shared a comment that perhaps best characterizes this research: “Honestly, this topic, in this region of the world, is not easily summarized.”

Undoubtedly, the complexity and scope of overlapping pressures in the Skeena offers a glimpse into the challenging landscapes that rural regions are presently navigating. But it also proposes a path forward, an opportunity to address these “wicked” problems facing rural development with local knowledge and a place-based lens.

This case study on the Skeena region of British Columbia reinforces the role for community-based organizations in community and regional development. In response to government offloading and withdrawal, CBEOs have developed a wealth of capacity rooted in local contexts, innovation and systems thinking, and are applying their skills to advance their vision of their region’s future. The sector is increasingly orienting towards systems-level change and holistic responses—an approach that is crucial to tackling today’s complex and interconnected issues. However, limited awareness and understanding of the sector’s role is hindering support for the sector that could help to accelerate regional transitions. Future research and improved data collection and reporting is necessary to properly evaluate and monitor the sector’s impact.

The compounding and overlapping pressures experienced at the local level has increased the speed and scale at which rural communities must respond and adapt. As rural regions continue to grapple with infrastructure deficits, government capacity challenges, and economic, political, and cultural transitions, building resilience to these and other shocks requires rethinking development strategies. By embracing the diverse capital and capacity offered by community-based organizations, rural places can co-create a future that is informed by local residents and their vision for the future.

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