by Heather Ramsay
heather@northword.ca

By taking advantage of unique opportunities like under-water logging, not only is the Cheslatta Nation back from the brink, they may also be poised to help kick-start an eco-wood economy in northern BC.

Fifty years ago, the Cheslatta people were given four days notice that Akam's new dam would take the water level of flooding their villages on Cheslatta Lake, southeast of Vanderhoof forever. With little choice, confused and angry family members gathered to see what possessions they could manage to take with them. They left the rest to the water, and walked to higher ground, those who had been out hunting or on the trapline, returned to find their homes destroyed and their people gone.

Today these same families, now settled at Grassy Rain above Oota Lake, are successfully dredging value out of their muddy past. An incredible, new remote-controlled submarine, known as the Sawfish, and a cooperative logging company called Triton, are part of this new reality.

Robinson says that the company also maps areas where they have installed in-ground electrical power generation systems. They have installed the power generation systems in a unique, new remote-controlled submarine, known as the Sawfish, making the submarine a valuable tool for the company.

The Sawfish comes up for air again (top), while a Triton employee inspects a log (above). Right, a log barge gets ready to cross Oota Lake.

underwater treasure

The Sawfish comes up for air again (top), while a Triton employee inspects a log (above). Right, a log barge gets ready to cross Oota Lake.

People at Triton feel the same way. That's why they have developed a deep-water logging machine capable of accessing the resources in a more efficient and environmentally sensitive way.

The minimum sized Sawfish uses sonar to get close to the submerged trees. Then, with the help of an underwater camera, the remote operator guides the Sawfish to locate the tree and a crane to lift it out of the water. The tree is then hauled to a mill, again without damaging the environment.

One hundred trees can be cut in an eight-hour shift, says Jim Hayhurst, the vice-president of marketing and communications at Triton.

He says the company is keen to develop sound working relationships with local communities in harvesting and marketing this valuable resource. The tight-grained wood is perfect for paneling, flooring, and furniture, and studies are being done on the acoustical properties of the hardwood for use in musical instruments.

"It's a waste to turn this into 2 x 4 lumber," says Hayhurst, "it's high quality wood with a story behind it.

He said to see underwater wood marketed as a distinctive, and environmentally friendly brand. Those recovered trees give the customers the ability to feel good about how the wood comes from.

This is a resource created by an industrial intrusion onto the land. People will know where it comes from and that it is not a live tree taken from the forest," he says. Furthermore, the young company is also committed to create the lowest impact large-scale logging system in the world.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans has commended Triton's operations under its marine habitat protection standards. So far, they have logged areas where the timber has been harvested in a more sustainable manner. The company has also been praised by environmental groups for its commitment to reducing the impact on the marine environment.

And they certainly don't want their logs to end up in open sewers, which are often found in drowned seeps.

As for the Cheslatta, they plan for the future and for the environment. Their economy is now based on the production of sustainable, high quality wood products. They have also been able to take advantage of the new economics of logging, which have opened up new opportunities for the community.

"We're in a much better place now," says Robinson. "We're not just a bunch of token Indians. We are potential business partners that can create a successful business," says Robinson.

The proof is in the results. Cheslatta Forest Products, a three-way partnership with Aboriginal community members, Carrier Lumber and the band, holds some of the largest volume of any non-First Nation group in Canada. Robinson points out that the band receives grants, interest-free loans and other incentives, providing a viable business. "We went into debt doing this and I am reaping the benefits of it now, and we did it ourselves without any help. We are very proud of that.

All in all, we have seen an amazing turnaround in the lives of the Cheslatta, who had 85 percent unemployment in 1995. Today, it is the exact opposite. Cheslatta Forest Products provides 150 full-time jobs for the 1,300 people living in the region. The mill produces 90 million board feet of lumber a year and the company has over 400,000 cubic meters in timber reserves.

For a small and remote community that's a heavy lift and a 324-kilometre drive from a large post office, the Cheslatta have made the most sockertud- ing to attractors. Being small means you don't have to answer to a lot of competing voices, says Robinson. It also means there is more focus, such as natural gas. But they've never been afraid to bring people in to help when needed.

They have even come full circle with Akam, who are now their partners, not only in the underwater logging, but in other economic initiatives.

"It was a tough time for us, but the people are going back and making good out of the resource that was flooded back then," says Robinson.