

# The Cheslatta resurface as economic force

by Heather Ramsay

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By taking advantage of unique opportunities like underwater 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 B.C.

Fifty years ago, the Cheslatta people were given four days' notice that Alcan's new dam would raise the water level, flooding their villages on Cheslatta Lake southeast of Vanderhoof forever. With little other choice, confused and angry family members gathered what possessions they could manage 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 Plains above Ootsa Lake, are successfully dredging value out of their murky past. An incredible, new remote-controlled submarine known as the Sawfish, and a progressive logging company called Triton, are part of this new reality.

It was a long, hard struggle, says Cheslatta's economic development officer Mike Robertson, but the tiny nation, with a scant 120 members on reserve, is now the largest employer in the southside area of Francois Lake. The band has been instrumental in partnering with the local community and industry in projects, a community health centre, a water system, a forestry company and a sawmill. Now they are poised to reclaim an underwater treasure, once thought to be lost, as diverse as the only aboriginal-owned community forest in B.C.

Thousands of acres of B.C.'s standing forest were water-logged by hydro-electric projects over the last century. Although the submerged trees are long dead, the lack of oxygen in the water has kept them from decay.

"It was very controversial that they didn't log it [at the time]. But the scale of the flooding was so huge, it was an impossible task," says Robertson of the submerged trees.

For years, the Cheslatta struggled with legal and emotional challenges related to the 1952 flood. The dam, which was built to provide hydro-electricity to Alcan's aluminum smelter in Kitimat, disrupted three quarters of the natural flow of the Fraser River's largest tributary, the Nechako, along with the migratory path of thousands of sockeye salmon.

The Cheslatta River and Lake systems were also dammed to provide a spillway system to allow huge releases of water to enter the decimated Nechako. Cheslatta gravesites were destroyed along with traditional territory and traplines.

In 1995, when Kemano II, the second phase of Alcan's hydroelectric plans, was cancelled, this further threat to their traditional way of life was relieved and the Cheslatta were able to move on.

"We always had dreams of carrying out our economic development plans, but being so small, the only thing we had to do was fight Kemano II. It was a matter of survival," says Robertson of those days.

But the real turning point came in 1997 when the band was awarded salvage rights to the very trees submerged by the flood that destroyed their lives so many years before.

Enter Triton. Before work began with Triton in the summer of 2005, the Cheslatta had been underwater logging for several years. Using traditional logging equipment, they would grasp the tree, yank it out of the mire, and buck it off. While this wasn't the most efficient method, nor the most ecologically sensitive to the lakebed, it proved what a good product the lumber is.

Robertson says the difference is obvious when the trees are run through the mill.

"We've always felt this is a very high-end product. The potential for this is quite substantial."



triton logging



## 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 Ootsa Lake.



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

The minivan-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's grapple to grasp the tree and a chainsaw to set it free. Prior to the cut, the Sawfish attaches an inflatable bag to the stem, which will float it to the surface, while the machine goes looking for more.

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 solid working

relationships with local communities in harvesting and marketing this remarkable product. The tight-grained wood is perfect for panelling, flooring and furniture, and studies are being done on the acoustical properties for use in musical instruments.

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

He'd like to see underwater wood marketed as a distinctive and environmentally friendly brand. These recovered trees give consumers the ability to feel good about where 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, thanks to the Sawfish's ability to hover above the lakebed, not disturbing sediment. What's more, they use biodegradable vegetable oil fluids in the machine.

Hayhurst says the company also maps where it has logged creating a safe recreational passage for small boats, in what was once a reservoir of tangled dead wood. And they certainly don't cut near osprey nests, which are often found in drowned snags.

As for the Cheslatta, their plans for the future are to keep working and providing local opportunities for the local community. Robertson would like to see more value-added to the wood they harvest, but he feels the government is geared too far toward big companies and not toward helping local entrepreneurs.

"Quit paying attention to the big guys and pay attention to the little ones. They're the ones who are going to sustain our communities in the long run," he says from hard-won experience.

When the Cheslatta decided to take the economic future of their people into their own hands, the elders designed a meticulous strategy to achieve their goals.

Their first goal was to change the nation's renegade image. Having spent more than 15 years fighting with government and industry, the Cheslatta had no track record of working with them, says Robertson.

"Even local people would drive by and shake their head at us for banging our head against the wall," he adds. "Now those same people are coming knocking on our door and wanting jobs."

To get to this point, the band carried no favours. "We wanted to prove to industry that we're not just a bunch of token Indians. We are potential business partners that can create a successful business," says Robertson.

The proof is in the results. Cheslatta Forest Products, a three-way partnership with non-native community members, Carrier Lumber and the band, holds some of the largest volume of any non-treaty group in Canada. Robertson points out that the band refused grants, interest-free loans and other incentives, preferring to gamble on what they knew was a viable business.

"We went into debt doing this mill and we are reaping the benefits of it now... and we did it ourselves without any help. We are very proud of that."

All in all, he's seen an amazing turnaround in the lives of the Cheslatta, who had 85 per cent unemployment in 1995. Today, it is the exact opposite.

Cheslatta Forest Products provides 150 full-time jobs for the 1,500 people living in the region. The mill produces 90 million board feet of lumber a year and the company has over 400,000 cubic metres in timber licences.

For a small and remote community that's a ferry ride and a 32-kilometre drive from a large post office, the Cheslatta have made a habit of turning their disadvantages into advantages. Being small means you don't have to answer to a lot of competing voices, says Robertson. It also means they don't have basic amenities 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 Alcan, who are now their partners, not only in the underwater logging, but in other economic initiatives.

"It was a tough time for 50 years, but the people are going back and making good out of the resource that was flooded back then," says Robertson.