

A Completely Different Approach to Conflict Resolution

Merran Smith, Director, Tides Canada Energy Initiative



Merran Smith was involved in the discussions between First Nations, environmental groups, the forestry industry and governments about how to protect the precious ecosystems represented by the Great Bear Rainforest and Haida Gwaii when those discussions reached a level of intensity among the conflicting interests that earned the infamous title of “War in the Woods.”

“At a certain point, everyone realized it was up to us to find the solution—no one else was going to do it for us, and there was simply too much at stake not to work it out. In fact, I would say it was our responsibility to work it out, and we understood we had to do that.” Smith, who represented the environmental sector, recalls a “monumental shift” in the energy to a more positive outlook as everyone involved decided there had to be a way to not only protect the Great Bear Rainforest, but the rights and wellbeing of the people who live in and around it.

“The First Nations invited us to come to their communities and experience how they lived, to share a traditional meal and talk to the elders and youth about how it is to live in this unique region.

It became clear to us very quickly after spending some time like that how important it was to support their desire to continue to take care of their homelands and have viable economies and healthy communities at the same time.”

Together with other sector representatives, including Patrick Armstrong, Ross McMillan, Merv Child and Art Sterritt of Coastal First Nations, Smith worked on ways to find both conservation and government funding to support those goals. “Art played a huge role in moving the idea forward, and doing things like taking potential donors to the fund out to see the region and help them understand the First Nations’ interests. That was vital work that made all the difference to our success.”

The outcome was the creation of Coast Opportunity Funds. “It was an enormously exciting moment. Everyone loved the vision—it was a completely different approach that was nothing like the traditional outcomes of conflict resolution, which are win/lose, or else divide up the assets so everyone gets a little piece of them. Neither of those outcomes was viable

in this situation, which is why we came up with this new model.”

Smith describes the difference this way: “We moved beyond the limited vision of simply trying to find the balance between conservation of the environment and enough jobs for the communities, to creating a space for both to co-exist without compromise. With Coast Funds, the First Nations are investing in job creation hand-in-hand with conservation efforts.”

“It’s a very creative solution, and it shows that you can move from conflict to harmony if everyone pools their ideas. No single sector could have come up with this idea on their own.” It was risky, as any new venture will always be. “But everyone was prepared to take the risk, and I think everyone—the First Nations, governments, the environmental groups—can be very proud of that, what has been achieved is inspirational.”