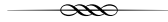


Chapter 6

Grief, Extinction and *Bilhaa* (Abalone)

bagwil hayetsk (Charles R. Menzies)



The feast hall was packed with people. My father and I were waiting at the entrance to be called in and seated. An usher checked he had our names right, then called them out, and two young men escorted us to our seats on the floor of the hall. We were back home in Lach Klan in 2009 for a memorial feast for my late uncle, Sm'ooygit He:l (Russell Gamble). As a child I had met Russell as I tagged along with my father in Prince Rupert. Both men had worked in the commercial fishery; Russell ran a gillnetter and my father a seiner. From the age of about ten I spent much of my spare time around the docks and my father's boat – helping as children do. I got to know my father's family by following him along. We would meet folk on the docks, or up town, or at the fishing supply store. Dad would stop and talk. I would wait and listen. Then as an adult I learned more about this part of my family through visits to Lach Klan. I count myself fortunate to have known my late uncle.

The trip my father and I took began on a plane from Vancouver to Prince Rupert, and then a boat to Lach Klan (Kitkatla Village). Like many other Indigenous people today (close to two-thirds) we do not live in our home village. Yet, Laxyuup Gitxaala (Gitxaala's national territory) is home. As we stepped off the boat at the village dock people greeted us and welcomed us home. We come home for many things; but coming home for funerals is a common reason. There is much important cultural work conducted at the memorial feast and the headstone moving feast that follows (albeit sometimes after an interval of many years). In addition to honour-

ing the memory of those who have passed, hereditary names¹ are put on people at these feasts.

These are moments of grief, but also hope. Grief for the one we have lost, but recognition that their memory persists, and that their name will carry forward once it is placed upon the next person. Hope rests in the persistence of the hereditary name; its continuance is an enactment of our deep history and our continuing future.

Grief is palatable. It takes hold of oneself; it lingers, fades, and then returns. We know grief when we lose a loved one. Gone now more than a decade, I am still reminded of my uncle's presence and think of him. His memory lingers. It is not as though our loved ones will return, but the traces of their lives remain as reminders of their role in our lives and our Indigenous history. Grief honours our loss and helps us to keep faith with the memory of those who have left. But it is not just people that we grieve. The colonial expropriation of Gitxaala land and water – without treaty or agreement – has widened the scope of grief we feel. Places that are no longer accessible. Forests that have been logged to the ground. Unkempt landscapes left in the wake of development. Cherished foods like bilhaa (abalone, a single-shelled mollusc prized for its meat found in the intertidal zone) are scarce or non-existent due to colonial legal restrictions and non-Indigenous overexploitation.

The sense of loss and desire for bilhaa is clear in the words of the late Sm'oogyit Jeffrey Spencer, a Gitxaala elder and hereditary leader, in a November 2001 interview: 'Seaweed and bilhaa and . . . ooh, I want to talk about bilhaa – chew it in my mouth. I never taste that for a long time. [laughter] Pretty hard to get. Not allowed to get it. Not allowed to get it. I just don't know why. I just don't know why'. Spencer's sense of grief and desire animate many of us as we survey the world we now find ourselves in. We hold memories of our ancestors within our life experiences as we chart ways to a shared future with those who came to colonize our world. The extirpation of bilhaa is a constant reminder of the wreckage wrought by colonialism. Yet, we know there is no going back to a moment before the settlers arrived. Our future necessarily involves reconciling to their presence, and requires us to find a common future.

Gitxaala is an Indigenous nation whose history and national territory is located along the north coast of British Columbia, Canada. Laxyuup Gitxaala is comprised of the lineage territories of house groups that make up modern-day Gitxaala. Lach Klan, the primary contemporary village of Gitxaala, is located on Dolphin Island, about fifty kilometres to the southwest of Prince Rupert (Illustration 6.1). Laxyuup Gitxaala is an expanse of land and ocean that stretches from Ts'ibassa's oolichan processing territory along the shores of the Nass River and then south to the house territories

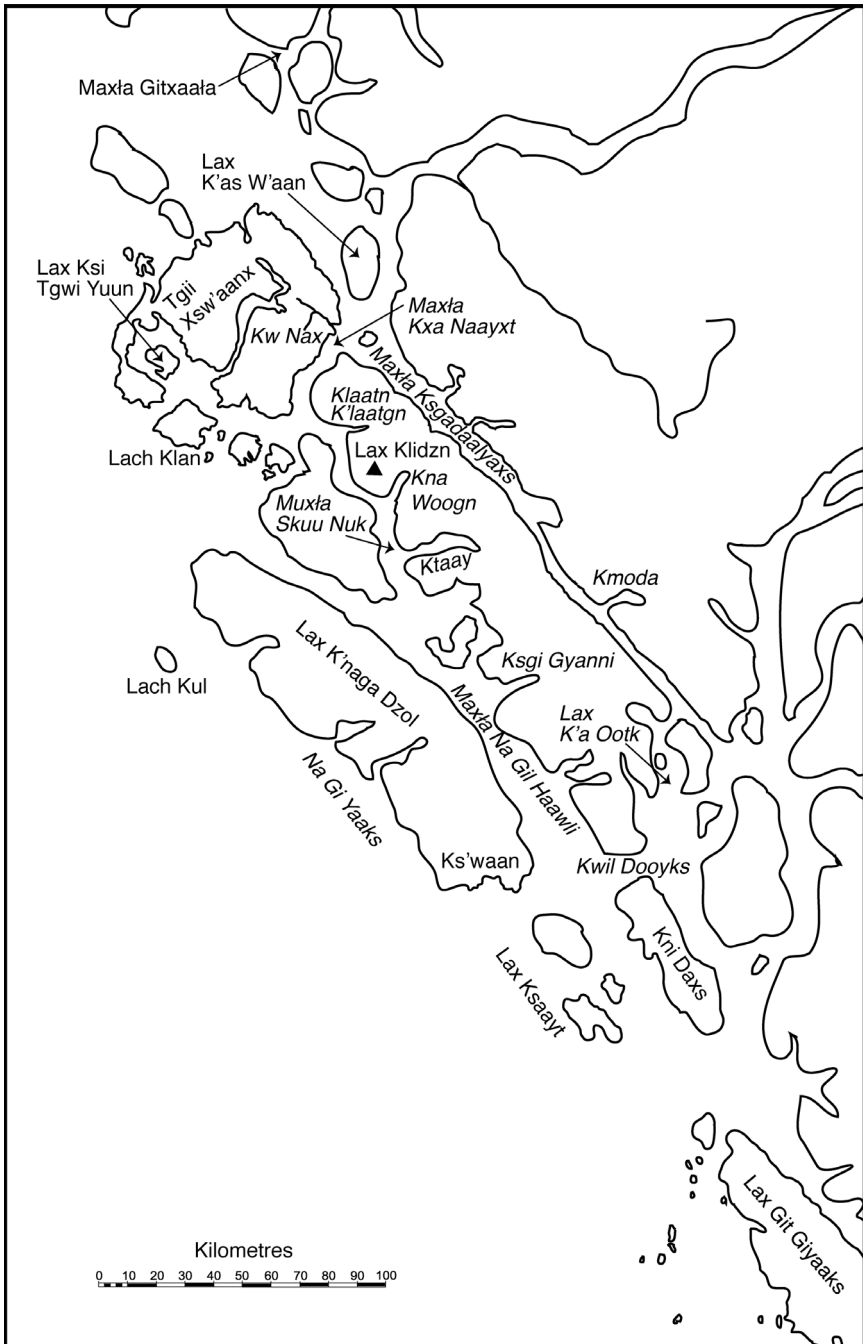


Illustration 6.1 Gitxaala place names. Created by Kenneth Campbell based on information provided by hagwil hayetsk (Charles R. Menzies).

of Txa-gyet, walp Gitnagunaks at 'To'tsip (Moore Island). The central core of the laxyuup extends about 240 kilometres north to south from around Prince Rupert into what non-Gitxaałans call the Great Bear Rainforest, and includes the islands of K'tsm Kaawada (Porcher), Pitt, Lax K'naga Dzol (Banks); Lax Ksaaył (the Estevan Group); Lax Git Giyaaks (Aristazabal Island); 'To'tsip (Moore Island); and portions of Kni Daxs (Campania Island) (Illustration 6.1). The laxyuup also includes much of the mainland to the east of Pitt Island around the laxyuup of He:l at Komodah (Lowe Inlet).

The legacy of colonialism has disrupted the customary respect accorded to laxyuup Gitxaał. This has had implications for the biological health of creatures such as bilhaa,² and for our community's well-being. Colonial forces, arriving first as merchant adventurers in the late 1700s and then as invasive colonists tirelessly working to displace and expropriate Indigenous peoples, have imposed their own laws, and replaced and erased pre-existing place names. Yet we persist and prosper.

In this chapter, a Gitxaał perspective is taken as the underlying and guiding principle with regard to understanding the extirpation of bilhaa. This is a story about bilhaa and grief, but also bilhaa in our future. Just as hereditary names persist (sometimes changed) and are renewed through being placed upon younger people, so too can we see a renewed place for bilhaa in Gitxaał's future. This story concerns Gitxaał (and by extension the wider Indigenous world) and laxyuup Gitxaał. In what follows I describe the place of bilhaa in Gitxaał's history; then the history of twentieth-century commercial bilhaa fishery is outlined; and finally, I argue for a return to Indigenous place-based relations and values, which, unlike capitalist values, is the only way we can put a brake on the impending mass extinctions in our global climate crisis.

The Place of Bilhaa in Gitxaał's History

Visiting with my father in late December 2014, I asked him when he first remembered eating bilhaa. 'I was two', he said without a blink.³ 'We always had them. Someone would get them. Ed [Smoygyet Tsibassa, Edward Gamble, my father's maternal grandfather] would bring them to us. Family, friends, they got them. We would get them. When I ran my own boat, I knew where to go. We always had them.'

Bilhaa have always been there (Illustration 6.2). We have always had them, have always known how to find them, have always eaten them, shared them and traded them. We have always known this. It is only in the context of colonization that our memories have been challenged. Experts on culture, history, language and laws think that they can correct us with



Illustration 6.2 Bilhaa onshore, overlooking Laxyuup Gitxaala. © hagwil hayetsk (Charles R. Menzies).

their external systems of disbelief, and compel us to deny what we know. This is one of the problems we have faced – the doubt and denial of the colonial experts who proclaim that for most of our history we did not and could not harvest, exchange or consume bilhaa.⁴

I have written previously about the bilhaa scepticism of ecologists and other colonial experts.⁵ For ecologists, the pivotal moment is the extirpation of sea otters in the early 1800s, which resulted in an ecological crash of kelp forests following on from the removal of sea otters. In this natural system the otters kept sea urchin and abalone at bay, and under the management of otters rich, diverse, kelp forests were able to prosper. However, the removal of the sea otters by the maritime fur trade (late 1700s to early 1800s) allowed urchins and abalone to expand their ecological niche and thus reveal themselves to our ancestors. Yet, our own histories and the empirical archaeological record tell a very different story.

Sigidmnaa'nax (matriarchs) Agnes Shaw, Charlotte Brown and Violet Skog all describe in some detail the old ways of harvesting bilhaa: steaming the harvest on the beach in the sand with heated rocks, skunk cabbage leaves, and water, and then drying the cleaned meat in the sun or near a slow fire. These women insisted that bilhaa was something that Gitxaala had always harvested. They were puzzled by claims of ecologists and other non-Gitxaala who suggested that bilhaa was a post-sea-otter-extirmination food.⁶ “How could our grandmothers’ grandmothers have taught us how to prepare bilhaa if it was something we only just learned to do”, one matriarch asked.

Following the advice and suggestions of community knowledge holders, like the *Sigidmnaa'nax* named above, I had the opportunity to coordinate a community-based field archaeology project (2010–15), which, among other things, demonstrated conclusively the deep empirical evidence of the ancient and ongoing practice of bilhaa harvesting in laxyuup Gitxaala.⁷ Our field archaeology programme combined university technical expertise with community knowledge holders in a collaborative coastal archaeology project. We travelled throughout laxyuup Gitxaala on board community-based fishing boats to a long list of old Gitxaala villages and contemporary fishing stations. At each of these locations we used the techniques of archaeology to examine the ancient soils. Later, at the University of British Columbia’s archaeology labs, we sorted and identified the materials collected.

One village in particular overturned the settler stories of denial and scepticism. At the ancient village of Ks’waan we found the material evidence that archaeologists and ecologists had, until now, denied was possible: actual identifiable bilhaa shells in cultural soils in significant quantities. Putting the lie to the kelp forest myth (that it was only after the extermination of sea otter that Gitxaala discovered bilhaa), we revealed a faunal assemblage that supported the existence of the Gitxaala practice of bilhaa harvesting for at least two millennia. The faunal assemblage included marine mammals like seal, sea otter and sea lion; invertebrates such as urchin, chiton, and a host of snails; and deepwater fish such as halibut, cod and greenling. These

are all species that reflect the ocean facing environment of deep-sea fishing and the coastal kelp forests that Gitxaʼaʼa have stewarded for millennia.

Bilhaa, while conspicuously absent in the conversations of Northwest Coast archaeologists, turns up everywhere in Gitxaʼaʼa conversations. Most telling is its presence in the cautionary tale about external research.⁸ Here bilhaa figure as an object of a study conducted by community outsiders; government biologists who want to save bilhaa from overfishing yet whose research and management practices contributed to the extirpation of local bilhaa stocks in the first place.⁹ But bilhaa is also part of our system of crests, our oral history, and, of course, a cherished food. Back home when we talk to each other about bilhaa, it is about experiences harvesting it, how it tastes, how the old people preserved it and traded it. Never is it spoken of as a question or presented as a doubt. For us, we know bilhaa has always been there. As my father said, ‘we always had them’.

The presence, power, and importance of bilhaa in Gitxaʼaʼa is recorded in our *adawx* (oral histories). Bilhaa are used on ceremonial regalia as historical references to *adawx*, and to denote power and prestige. The cultural importance of bilhaa plays a role in shaping resource-harvesting practices. In combination with the principle of *syt güülum goot* (being of one heart),¹⁰ the high value placed on bilhaa as a symbol of prestige and rank acts to impose a cultural limitation on harvesting levels. This is so in two ways: firstly, the use of bilhaa as decoration and adornment is restricted to a minority of high-ranking community hereditary names and associated crests; secondly, the cultural importance of bilhaa as a signifier of rank obligates harvesters to treat bilhaa with respect such that unrestrained harvesting was and is a violation of social norms, and is subject to community sanction.

Throughout Gitxaʼaʼa *adawx* are accounts of how bilhaa and bilhaa-adorned objects became important cultural markets. For example, ‘Explanation of the Abalone Bow’ is an *adawx* recorded by Franz Boas that describes how the Bilhaa Bow became a chief’s crest.¹¹ In the narrative *G-it-na-gun-a’ks*, bilhaa also feature as an inlay on ‘a good-sized box’, which is one of several gifts exchanged between a *naxnox*, *Na-gun-a’ks*, and the people of *Dzagam-sa’gisk*.¹² Drawing upon his work up to that point,¹³ Boas also notes that ‘ear-ornaments of abalone shell’ are mentioned in several important *adawx*. Viola Garfield, an early twentieth-century ethnographer who studied with Boas,¹⁴ also notes: ‘At any ceremonial, large wool ornaments with abalone-shell pendants were worn in the ears of the women who sing in the chief’s choir, so that the status of each was clearly indicated to the tribes at large’. Anthropologist Marjorie Halpin documents how crests that were restricted to high-ranked individuals often had names that included shiny/shining/bright, and the individual’s associated regalia would often use bilhaa shells to indicate their high status.

In a description of a mid-nineteenth-century feast, Halpin explains: 'We would have noted that the men who made the speeches wore the more elaborate headdresses, richly decorated with shining abalone'.¹⁵ Bilhaa, in addition to being an important food, were also tightly incorporated within our cultural complex as a critical material manifestation of our cultural history and ancient spiritual practices.

All of these aspects of bilhaa for Gitxaala have been undermined in a reckless manner by non-Indigenous resource extraction and overexploitation. Our cultural practices and values continue, but our access to bilhaa has been undermined. The following section describes how the intersection of the global capitalist market for exotic seafood combines with inept resource management to extirpate bilhaa in laxyuup Gitxaala.

The Twentieth-Century Commercial Bilhaa Fishery

Bilhaa have not fared well under the commercial pressures of the global economy.¹⁶ Traditional harvest practices and historical limitations in technology served to restrain human harvests to extreme low tides.¹⁷ The advances of a capitalist market economy and twentieth-century developments in underwater diving have almost universally destroyed the global bilhaa stocks. This is no less true in the traditional territories of the Gitxaala where bilhaa had been harvested sustainably for millennia. Then, in the space of three decades, bilhaa were fished to the edge of extinction by a non-Indigenous commercial fishery.

The development of the non-Indigenous commercial dive fishery in British Columbia is a classic example of competitive greed combining with ineffectual resource management to decimate a resource.¹⁸ Prior to 1972, bilhaa harvesting was unregulated.¹⁹ Most harvesting in this period was either recreational or Indigenous. The pre-1972 annual harvest rates were estimated to be less than 20 tons.²⁰ However, the increased prices paid to fishermen for bilhaa, coupled with uncontrolled increases in fishing capacity, led to a rapid take-off of the non-Indigenous bilhaa fishery in the 1970s.²¹ Annual rates of harvest quickly shot up to 481 tons in 1977 and then were held to 47 tons from 1985 to the closure of the fishery in 1990.²² A significant portion – about half – of the non-Indigenous commercial fishing effort was concentrated on British Columbia's north coast in Gitxaala traditional territory.²³ During the period in which non-Indigenous commercial catch data was recorded (1977–90), the catch per unit effort declined by 46 per cent.²⁴ Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) calculated that by 1984 the bilhaa stocks had been depleted by more than 75 per cent.²⁵

The closure of the bilhaa fishery has had a significant impact upon Gitxaala people. It resulted in the loss of a critical food resource, the loss of a critical trade item, and an increase in surveillance of Indigenous harvesters. As with many other traditionally managed and harvested foods and materials, colonial legal restrictions and associated regulatory surveillance criminalized the harvest, exchange and consumption of bilhaa. This puts community members into harm's way if they persist in exercising their customary rights to pick bilhaa. These restrictions on Gitxaala followed in the wake of the disastrous non-Indigenous commercial bilhaa fishery, which had taken no account of Gitxaala's own long traditions and practices of respectful relations with beings like bilhaa.

Returning to Tradition under Gitxaala Authority

Capitalist forms of production are biased in favour of accumulation over sustainability.²⁶ So-called renewable resources, especially those considered common property, fair very poorly under regimes of the capitalist marketplace. While markets have existed within non-capitalist societies (such as the wealth-generating economy of my Gitxaala ancestors), capitalism differs from previous systems in the manner by which it is able to abstract value from the particular to the universal, and as such create insatiable demands for accumulation that act independently of the object of its exploitation. For renewable resources like bilhaa, this is particularly dangerous for their well-being.

Place-based management systems interfere with the universalizing tendencies of a capitalist marketplace. By instituting social constraints that limit harvesting practices (who, where, when) and investing them with cultural values (authority, prestige, obligation), Indigenous place-based systems of resource management have historically been able to sustain large volumes of harvest for lengthy durations.²⁷ For example, in examining Gitxaala's salmon harvesting practices,²⁸ it became apparent that Gitxaala have actively intervened in salmon ecology through modification of coastal watersheds to enhance spawning recovery. Furthermore, Gitxaala harvesting practices were oriented towards sustaining large harvests over long periods. Complementing Gitxaala knowledge-holders' descriptions of long-standing sustainable practices our adjoining archaeological research documented large stable harvests of salmon at multiple locations within laxyuup Gitxaala over the course of at least two millennia.²⁹ It is important to point out that Gitxaala had the technological capacity to extirpate salmon runs within the national territory. However, harvesting practices were kept within sustainable levels by social conventions that tied

harvesting groups to particular locations, and did not allow for movement beyond a person's fishing station.

Gitxaala's bilhaa harvesting protocols restricted harvesting to times of the lowest tides. This method uses natural environmental cycles to regulate human access.³⁰ While there were rudimentary traps used to augment harvest from time to time (such as setting out a seal skin, blubber side up, below the low tide mark), these traps provided only a modest harvesting advantage, especially when compared against dive fisheries, which face practically no environmental impediments to their practice.

All Gitxaala harvesting protocols operate within a needs-based harvesting model.³¹ The idea of community need is a long-standing guiding principle of Gitxaala harvesting. This is not simply a product of late modernity but can be documented through careful consideration of Gitxaala *adawx* in which excessive harvest is typically punished by the withdrawal of, say, salmon or bilhaa availability.³² To understand this, one must appreciate that we see ourselves existing in social relations with the animals we harvest, and our relationship is in some sense analogous to kin relations. Our ability to harvest in a sustainable way is contingent upon our animal relatives offering themselves to us for our use, and this entangles us in relations of obligation to treat them with respect. When we demonstrate disrespect by overharvesting, they withdraw their availability to us. Part of rebuilding a respectful harvesting relationship will involve returning the practice of harvesting bilhaa to Gitxaala's own jurisdiction. Clearly there is little to lose in reverting to a Gitxaala-controlled bilhaa fishery as the non-Indigenous regulators have not been able to rehabilitate bilhaa – and, one fears, they are unlikely to be able to do so as long as they continue to operate under principles of open-access, free-market harvesting models.

Gitxaala's own fisheries department has for many years run monitoring programmes to observe, count and evaluate bilhaa stocks in *laxyuup* Gitxaala. What they have observed suggests that a Gitxaala-owned fishery is feasible and sustainable operating under Gitxaala protocols. Such a fishery could be tied to long-standing traditional methods and harvesting rules. It remains to be seen whether or not federal regulatory agencies have the maturity to relinquish their colonial controls, and reconcile themselves to the authority and jurisdiction and time-test protocols of Gitxaala's own harvesters.

Concluding Thoughts

Bilhaa face difficulties globally. They are a slow-growing marine mollusc, much prized for shell and meat, and this has made them vulnerable to

abuse. Bilhaa hold an important sociocultural place in Gitxaala history, practice and foodways. They figure predominantly in oral histories. They adorn our regalia. They are tasty, and we delight in talk about cooking, eating and sharing them. All of this has been tarnished by our experience with European colonialism. Lands have been taken, practices have been demeaned and denigrated, our foods have been regulated and extirpated. We stand with grief as we survey the wreckage of capitalist colonialism in our laxyuup. Yet we can look to our deep history in laxyuup Gitxaala and take hope. There have been moments in the past where the way was lost. In those moments the relations between humans and other social beings were disrupted. But by remembering who we are and what our obligations are, as one among many beings, those ancient crises were resolved. We can return to respectful relations with bilhaa. We can do this by taking back our place as one among many, and return to honouring our obligations to treat bilhaa as relatives.

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Notes

1. Hereditary names have a deep history in Gitxaala and the wider Tsimshian worlds (Menzies, *People of the Saltwater*; Roth, *Becoming Tsimshian*). Names are like people in their own right. When a name is placed upon a person it is as though they are that name – today, historically, and in the future. There is a recognition of the historical specificity of each individual who carries the name, but they are like chapters in the life history of the name itself.
2. Menzies, 'Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaala'; Menzies, 'Revisiting'.
3. Portions of this section on the place of bilhaa in Gitxaala's history are adapted from Menzies, 'Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaala'; Menzies, 'Revisiting'.
4. Menzies, 'Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaala'; Menzies, 'Revisiting'.
5. Menzies, 'Revisiting'.
6. Cf. Cannon and Burchell, 'Clam Growth-Stage Profiles'.
7. Menzies, 'Revisiting'.
8. Menzies, 'Putting Words into Action'; Menzies, 'Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaala'.

9. Menzies, 'Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaała.'
10. Menzies and Butler, 'Returning to Selective Fishing'.
11. Boas, 'Tsimshian Mythology', 284, 835.
12. Boas, 'Tsimshian Mythology'.
13. Ibid., 398.
14. Garfield, *Tsimshian Clan and Society*, 194.
15. Halpin, 'The Structure of Tsimshian Totemism', 16. See also Halpin, 'The Tsimshian Crest System'.
16. The section on the history of bilhaa in the global economy is adapted from Menzies, 'Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaała'.
17. Menzies, 'Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaała'.
18. Gitxaała people have been involved in the development of the cash economy in British Columbia. See Menzies and Butler, 'Working in the Woods'; Menzies and Butler, 'The Indigenous Foundation'. However, Gitxaała were not involved in the commercial dive fishery for bilhaa.
19. Adkins, 'The British Columbia Fishery'.
20. Campbell, 'Review of Northern Abalone'.
21. Ibid.
22. Adkins, 'The British Columbia Fishery,' Campbell, 'Review of Northern Abalone'.
23. Adkins, 'The British Columbia Fishery'.
24. Campbell, 'Review of Northern Abalone'.
25. Ibid.
26. Rogers, *The Oceans are Emptying*.
27. Troster, *Resilience, Reciprocity and Ecological Economics*.
28. Menzies and Butler, 'Returning to Selective Fishing'; Menzies, 'The Disturbed Environment'.
29. Menzies, 'Laxyuup Gitxaała'.
30. Menzies, 'Dm sibilhaa'nm da laxyuubm Gitxaała'.
31. Menzies and Butler, 'Returning to Selective Fishing'.
32. Menzies, *People of the Saltwater*.

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