

“I don’t come from anywhere.” Using maps to rediscover a sense of place.

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Abstract

This presentation reports on a community-based research project that investigates the role of participatory mapping in rediscovering a sense of place within a geographically dispersed aboriginal community, the Tlowitsis Nation from Northern Vancouver Island. The research investigates how participatory mapping can be used to understand and reconnect with Tlowitsis land-related knowledge and examine the ways in which these technologies serve to re-present place-based memories and facilitate dialogue amongst community members located in different geographic settings.

Background and Relevance

The territory of the Tlowitsis Nation spans the coastal area of Northern Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Seasonal travel routes, food processing spots, burial and cultural sites and other named places extend across the entire territory. Karlukwees, located on remote Turnour Island, became a central settlement for the Tlowitsis Nation since the turn of the 20th century. In the early 1960s, the provincial government halted essential services to the island. With little prospect of schooling and access to health care, the Tlowitsis community began to leave the island. In the ensuing diaspora, community members have become culturally, as well as physically, removed from their traditional territories. A rising urban population with little attachment to these lands has reduced the opportunity and ability, for members to take an active and informed role in their community. Furthermore, many Tlowitsis members lack a deep sense of their national identity and are most often poorly acquainted with their relatives and other members of the Nation. One member expressed these feelings in a small group discussion during a Tlowitsis Nation meeting in 2006:

“It’s kind of hard to say where I come from because I don’t come from anywhere. To say that, being First Nations is important, but to say that I’m Tlowitsis doesn’t really have any significance for my family ... I went there as a child - but for me to pass anything on to my children, its really hard to explain to them where our extended family came from because there’s nothing, there’s no land, there’s nothing to go to.”

Furthermore, the Nation’s governing body has had difficulty in maintaining communication and participation of its members in Tlowitsis activities. Despite these issues there remains a core group of elders in the community with knowledge of the lands, resource use and language, as well as a number of community leaders and youth with a yearning to participate in planning and decision-making activities.

Methods and Data

The need to overcome these constraints became more urgent when the Tlowitsis' Statement of Intent to negotiate a treaty was accepted by the BC Treaty Commission in June 2006. The Nation is currently engaged in substantive negotiations and is positioned at stage four of a six-stage treaty process. Identification and acquisition of community settlement lands is a key priority of those negotiations and a major focus for the Nation. However, in order to inform the decision-making process, the Nation's leaders have identified the need to increase the participation of community members. The challenge is to develop information collection and presentation tools not only for engaging in dialogue with decision-makers, but also for assisting dispersed members to better understand their connection to the land and its memories and thus support an informed community input into the process.

In 2010 a core group of ten Tlowitsis members have begun crafting of a land selection and resource management plan. Corbett is working directly with this group using a range of cartographic tools to facilitate their engagement in this process. The research component of this project explores the role of the participatory mapping in developing greater literacy of the land and territory – a place that the group's members have never physically visited while simultaneously forming a core component of the sense of themselves. A place rich in personal and collective memories that they hope can act as a catalyst in recreating a sense of community, identity and belonging.

The investigation employed qualitative research techniques including focus group discussions, semi structured interviews and participant observation to investigate how participatory mapping might lead to the rediscovery of a sense of place.

Results and conclusions

The research project is ongoing, definitive results remain forthcoming. This presentation will report on the initial findings from two community workshops. Using, wherever possible, the voices of the Tlowitsis members and Corbett's, the talk will intertwine digital media, field note observations and photo collage as a way of articulating to the SKI audience the richness of qualitative inquiry and the varied, and at times subtle, role(s) of participatory mapping in rediscovering a sense of place.