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British Columbia News

B.C., First Nations unite to boost support for Guardians

<https://news.gov.bc.ca/28494>

With an investment of \$8.9 million over three years, the Government of B.C. is partnering with First Nations representatives to develop the first training initiative that will support co-management of land and resources.

This year, the Guardians and Stewardship Training Initiative will be co-developed with First Nations and will support the StrongerBC Future Ready plan to make post-secondary education and skills training more affordable and accessible.

“Since time immemorial, First Nations have been stewards of the water, land and wildlife in B.C., and Guardians play a crucial and growing role in stewarding those lands and resources today,” said Nathan Cullen, Minister of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship. “We’ve heard from First Nations there is a need for more supports and access to training for Guardians, and we are taking action to make that happen.”

“Guardians” is a term used to describe trained members of First Nations who undertake a wide variety of stewardship activities on the land base. Often called by different names (such as watchmen or rangers), guardians are employed by First Nations to serve as their “eyes and ears” or “boots on the ground” in their territories. Guardians are experts who help monitor and manage protected areas, restore animal and plant habitats, and offer Indigenous knowledge. In remote areas throughout B.C., Guardians are often the first to respond to environmental spills or other emergencies.

“First Nations have cared for their territories over countless generations, practising a holistic vision for stewardship that views all ecosystems as interconnected and inseparable, and treats all life with respect,” said Christine Smith-Martin, CEO, Coastal First Nations-Great Bear Initiative. “Today, Indigenous Guardians uphold this sacred tradition — and responsibility — by working together to monitor, protect and restore the cultural and natural resources of their territories. Across the Pacific North Coast, the Coastal Guardian Watchmen have proven for decades just how valuable this stewardship work can be – not just for ecosystems, wildlife and community well-being, but as a positive foundation for true co-governance of our lands and waters. This support for stewardship training will ensure Guardians can continue this crucial work into the future — for their Nations and for all British Columbians.”

Guardians increase the capacity of First Nations to steward their land and waters and partner with B.C. on co-management initiatives. Guardians also support land, marine and resource-use planning, which identifies areas for conservation and places where resource development and associated economic activity can be considered.

“We are pleased that the Province is responding to calls from First Nations, including the Union of BC Indian Chiefs Council, for expansion and funding of the Guardians program,” said Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, president, Union of BC Indian Chiefs. “The climate emergency and biodiversity crisis are the most pressing issues of our time, and we look forward to First Nations exercising self-determination in designing Guardian programs to best respond, and to manage their territories to flourish as they have since time immemorial. This new training plan is a positive step towards making the deep and lasting changes necessary to protect our lands and waters, and we encourage B.C. to continue down this path by committing to co-develop legislation for the protection of biodiversity and ecosystem health in co-operation with Indigenous Peoples and in full alignment with the UN Declaration.”

Budget 2023 invests \$480 million over three years to support Future Ready's goal to break down barriers to post-secondary training so more people can get the training they need. The Guardians and Stewardship Training Initiative is a key component of this broader plan.

Government will work with First Nations throughout 2023 to determine the parameters and structure of this new initiative, with a goal of launching the program in spring 2024.

Learn More:

To read the "What we Know" Summary Report on Guardians Engagement:
Collaborative Stewardship in British Columbia - Province of British Columbia (gov.bc.ca)
(<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/collaborative-stewardship-bc>)

Two backgrounders follow.
Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship

Media Relations
250 896-7365

Backgrounders

What people are saying about the Guardians and Stewardship Training Initiative

Chief Frank Brown, Indigenous Leadership Initiative senior advisor and Heiltsuk Hereditary Chief –

"We welcome this provincial commitment to co-create a training initiative for Guardians that supports our inherent rights and responsibility to take care of the land, water and resources within our territories. Expanding Guardian programs will offer much-needed and meaningful employment and economic opportunities in stewardship and foster social, cultural and ecological sustainability. We need this approach now more than ever as we collectively navigate this critical time of climate change and biodiversity loss."

Jordan Point, executive director, First Nations Fisheries Council of B.C. –

"The announcement of the Guardians and Stewardship Training Initiative highlights important efforts from the Government of British Columbia to implement the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act and recognizes the fundamental contribution of Guardian programs to safety, environmental monitoring and land management in the Province. The capacity provided by this initiative will support First Nations' ability to steward their lands and waters over which they hold inherent responsibility. This process is an opportunity for B.C. to enable meaningful co-development and design of pathways for monitoring and compliance partnerships with First Nations in B.C."

Dallas Smith, president, Nanwakolas Council –

"The benefits from this initiative will be phenomenal. The Guardians are well-placed to work with provincial officials in environmental management and protection. Our Guardians know the territories inside out, and they are completely invested in protecting them. They are already working in partnership initiatives with BC Parks and other provincial agencies to achieve shared goals. Supporting them in that work will mean a brighter future, not only for the Guardians and our territories, but for everyone in British Columbia."

George Heyman, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy –

"First Nations have been monitoring and looking after their territories for thousands of years, and the numerous Guardian programs established across the province strengthen their traditional stewardship responsibility for their lands. Building a strong, secure future requires a collaborative approach, and this new initiative co-developed with First Nations advances collaborative and effective stewardship of the environment, land and resources."

Murray Rankin, Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation –

“Through the Declaration Act Action Plan, we are working with First Nations to address self-determination, cultural revitalization and decision-making over lands and resources. This new training program, co-developed with First Nations, will increase the capacity of Guardians as stewards of their territories and respects Indigenous knowledge of lands and resources.”

Selina Robinson, Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills –

“Expanding and funding the Guardians program is an important step in reconciliation and self-determination of Indigenous Peoples. Investing in training opportunities so people can get the skills they need to work in high-demand sectors of our economy, such as resource management, is part of StrongerBC’s Future Ready Plan.”

Facts about the Guardians and Stewardship Training Initiative

In the fall of 2021 and winter of 2022, the B.C. government engaged with First Nations to gain a better understanding of Guardian and similar programs throughout B.C., which is summarized in the What We Know Summary Report: Guardians Engagement across the Province of British Columbia, June 2022.

- A need for education and training programs was one of the key findings, as well as ongoing and persistent funding, and support for Guardians to take on new roles and pathways.

Action 2.6 in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act Action Plan calls on government to co-develop strategic-level policies, programs and initiatives to advance collaborative stewardship of the environment, land and resources, including Guardians programs.

Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) supports Indigenous Peoples participating in decision-making matters that would affect their rights. Co-development of the Indigenous Guardians training initiative advances this article.

Articles 25, 26, 27, and 29 of UNDRIP speak to Indigenous rights to land, conservation of the environment and financial assistance to support Indigenous conservation of lands, territories and waters.

Acknowledgment

The B.C. Public Service acknowledges the territories of First Nations around B.C. and is grateful to carry out our work on these lands. We acknowledge the rights, interests, priorities, and concerns of all Indigenous Peoples - First Nations, Métis, and Inuit - respecting and acknowledging their distinct cultures, histories, rights, laws, and governments.

