



Johnston Research

Parks Canada

Indigenous Guardians Narrative Study

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Indigenous Guardians programs are community-led programs that are place-based expressions of First Nations, Inuit and Métis responsibilities to their traditional territories, treaty lands, and ancestral homelands. Programs are operated locally with funding provided primarily through contracts and contribution agreements. In 2021, Parks Canada received approximately \$60M over five years towards a new initiative to co-develop new or enhanced programs within Parks Canada administered places. By 2025-26, this initiative aims to support the creation of 30 or more distinct programs, with a range of stewardship activities that reflect the requirements of that particular place.

An evaluation of this initiative began in 2022, where it was uncovered that a two-part evaluation was required. The second phase of the evaluation, conducted between March and June 2025, focused on, exploring the impacts of Indigenous Guardians programs at Parks Canada administered places on Guardians and their communities, as well as assessing the support provided to Indigenous Guardians by Parks Canada (captured in a separate report¹).

Please note, while this report primarily refers to the programs as “Indigenous Guardians”, Indigenous communities across Canada have different names for this important role, including guardians, watchmen, earthkeepers, beachkeepers, monitors, etc. There are many different programs; each name reflecting local cultures, approaches and activities. Where appropriate, the programs will be described using their local language and/or name.

Project Objectives

The study aimed to explore the impacts of Indigenous Guardians programs including understanding any transformative effects of a program over the long term, such as effects on people’s wellbeing, human rights, or the environment. The study scope, goals, and research questions were co-designed with the Indigenous partners who chose to participate (*a complete list of Indigenous partner participants can be found in Appendix A*).

The evaluation sought to determine how and to what extent, the Indigenous Guardians have had long-term effects on people’s wellbeing, human rights and the environment. As well as to understand and highlight the successes, challenges and barriers to executing Indigenous Guardians programs, in order to find ways to further develop and strengthen existing programs and/or help in the development of new initiatives.

¹ Evaluation of the Indigenous Guardians Initiative: Internal Review, Parks Canada

Methodology

Johnston Research Inc. worked alongside the Indigenous Guardians to capture overall project learnings and develop/review the case study reports. To accomplish this a multi-phase approach was implemented.

Johnston Research Inc. conducted Indigenous analytical assessment and evaluation across the country coast to coast to uncover exactly what each of the Guardians initiatives are, and their true meaning to the communities. This was not an easy exercise by any means; building trust and extending the timeline were truly the key instruments of success in this evaluation process. The in-person interviews were also instrumental to understanding the collaboration between the West Coast Guardians from Pacific Rim to the West Coast Trail. However, approaching all communities with an open heart and mind enabled JRI to learn from the masters of their realms and bring that voice into the ensuing pages. The program is invaluable to the ecosystems that are protected and monitored, the communities who continue to learn from and practice traditional wisdom and ways of doing, and the individuals who gain valuable and necessary skills to support their growth and development. It is our hope that the work and legacy of the Indigenous Guardians and Land Stewards continues to preserve traditional ways of knowing and doing and environmental health for future generations.

Primary Research:

A learning and collaboration process that included virtual and in-person interviews with Indigenous Guardians and partners to understand the program impacts, in addition to participating in a collaborative process of validating the reporting and analysis phases.

The contact information for each Guardians Program was provided by Parks Canada containing the contact name, location, program and email/telephone number. Johnston Research Inc. managed a log-denoting the frequency of contacts (emails and phone calls sent) between JRI and each program contact, and the agreed upon interview date. On average, JRI contacted the Guardians about 5 times prior to booking; highest rate of contact attempts (email and phone) was 10 over the course of three months. Unfortunately, due to timing and seasonal availability, JRI was not able to secure interviews with Guardians programs in Northern and Atlantic Canada.

Introductory emails were sent to potential Guardians program contacts to share information about Johnston Research Inc. and the evaluation methodology, ensuring that all participants understood that the evaluation would be conducted in a culturally responsive manner, that respected each program/nation's ways of knowing and doing, including data sovereignty (i.e., the way data/reporting is handled, saved and shared).

Introductions were facilitated by Parks Canada's Indigenous Guardians Initiative team, made up of one national coordinator and six regional² coordinators, in collaboration with Parks Canada staff located at various national parks, national park reserves, and national historic sites who maintain relationships with local Indigenous communities and, in most cases, had helped support the development of new Indigenous Guardian programs.

Through these relationship holders, introductory letters were shared with new and long-standing Indigenous Guardians programs across all regions of Canada. In the end, eleven (11) partner Nations³ expressed interest and chose to contribute to the evaluation.

- a) Three (3) programs participated in virtual interviews between March and May 2025 using Zoom. Notice was provided by email invitation along with the interview questions so that respondents could prepare ahead of time.
- b) Three (3) programs sent their responses to the interview questions and supporting documents (i.e., photos, past reports) via email.
- c) Four (4) programs held in-person interviews in British Columbia between June 16-18th, 2025.

Development of the inclusive final report of all interviews organized by region, and final eight case studies.

Secondary Research

Secondary research activities included a review of any shared program documents and photos provided by the Guardians programs, and supplemental information on Parks Canada's website.

The following report outlines the findings from all sources of information.

² Parks Canada divides its operations into six regional groupings of national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation area. These six regions are: British Columbia and the Yukon; Alberta; the Prairies and Northwest Territories; Ontario; Quebec and Nunavut; and Atlantic Canada.

³ Two partners, the Huu-Ay-Aht First Nation and the Ditidaht First Nation, share responsibilities for one Guardian program called the West Coast Trail Guardians, which operates within Pacific Rim National Park Reserve.

2. GUARDIANS PROGRAMS AT A GLANCE

Indigenous Guardians programs are place-based expressions of First Nations, Inuit and Métis responsibilities to their traditional territories, treaty lands, and ancestral homelands, providing Indigenous communities across Canada with opportunities to exercise responsibility in stewardship of their traditional lands, waters, and ice. From its commencement in 2021, Parks Canada has funded over 40 Indigenous Guardians Programs across Canada.⁴

Ten Guardians programs participated in the research, six of which are located in British Columbia, one in Alberta and Quebec respectively, and two in Ontario. The map and table below illustrate the coordinates/location of each First Nation responsible for their program.



Figure 1: Map of the Guardians Programs Across Canada who participated in this research.

⁴ Government of Canada. (n.d.). *Indigenous Guardians Pilot map*. Environment and Climate Change Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/environmental-funding/indigenous-guardians/map.html>

Table 1: Participating Guardians Programs by Nation, Name and Location

Nation	Program	Location
Biigtigong First Nation	Biigtigong Guardian Program in Pukaskwa	Pukaskwa National Park, Ontario
Chippewas of Rama First Nation	Stewardship Guild	Orillia, Ontario
Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal Council	Blackfoot Guardianship of the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies	Calgary, Alberta`
Innu First Nation of Ekuanitshit	Nitassinan Guardians program	Ekuanitshit, Quebec
Huu-Ay-Aht First Nation	West Coast Trail Guardians	Vancouver Island, British Columbia
W̱sáneć	Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians Program	Brentwood Bay, British Columbia
Pauquachin First Nation	Pauquachin Marine Program	Vancouver Island, British Columbia
Tseshahat First Nation	Broken Group Islands Beachkeepers	Vancouver Island / Broken Group Islands
Ditidaht First Nation	West Coast Trail Guardians	Port Alberni, British Columbia
Gulf Islands National Park Reserve	Southern Resident Killer Whale Recovery program	Sidney, British Columbia
Cowichan Tribes	S-hwuhwa'us Thi'lut Kw'at'l'kwa (Thunderbird Protecting the Ocean) Program	Duncan, British Columbia

3. DETAILED FINDINGS

The Guardians Programs in British Columbia have been placed into three groupings for the purpose of this report; Pacific Rim which includes the Tseshaht Beach Keeper Program, the West Coast Trail which includes the Guardians programs of HUU-ay-aht and Ditidaht First Nations, and the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve which includes the Southern Resident Killer Whale Recovery program, Pauquachin First Nation in the North Straits and the Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians Program.

The interior Guardians comprise two programs in Ontario, Biigtigong's Guardian Program in Pukaskwa, the Rama Land Stewards Program in Chippewas of Rama First Nation. As well as the Blackfoot Guardianship of the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies Program in Alberta, and the Nitassinan Guardians of Innu First Nation of Ekuanitshit in Quebec.

Pacific Rim

Pacific Rim National Park Reserve spans approximately 105 kilometers along the West Coast of Vancouver Island, extending from Alberni Valley to Broken Group Islands. Pacific Rim National Park Reserve is divided into three parts, Long Beach, the Broken Group Islands, and the West Coast Trail. The park possesses beaches, rocky headlands and dense rainforest (Long Beach) and the rocky shorelines, hidden coves, and marine channels of over 100 islands and islets in Barkley Sound that are only accessible by boat or kayak (BGI).

This land is home to 14 Nations that speak several dialects of the Nuu-chah-nulth language, which include Tseshaht, as well as HUU-ay-aht and Ditidaht First Nations which will be described in the subsequent section. These Nations have lived along the west coast of Vancouver Island since time immemorial and maintain strong spiritual, economic, and natural ties to the land and sea.

What the Beach Keepers Do:

The Pacific Rim National Park Reserve was established in 1970 and was managed externally by Parks Canada ordinance. The Tseshaht community felt it was important that Tseshaht People have a chance to create employment opportunities for the community and support village heritage site. To do this, Tseshaht entered into a contract with Parks Canada in 2013 to deliver a Beach Keeper Program in their homelands, the Broken Group Islands (BGI). Since then, the Beach Keepers have diligently worked to improve connections between the community, the land and 2000+ annual visitors, sharing knowledge of the place names, history of village sites, archaeology and traditional stories about the islands.

"We want our people to experience the homeland. Some of the key homeland sites of their families, of their villages."

The Beach Keepers:

- Provide visitor orientation services including information on park rules, logistics and safety.
- Run educational programming on Tseshaht culture, history, archaeological information and the natural world with the park, sharing traditional knowledge and stories with park visitors
- Deliver guided kayak tours.
- Conduct park maintenance alongside Parks Canada (e.g., maintaining campsites, checking permits, etc.)
- Provide transportation services to the community via boat, allowing community members to go from the park and back to their territory.
- Monitor the whale populations.
- Support commercial fishing from Sunday to Wednesday and run a community fishery on the weekends that distributes thousands of fish in the community.
- Bring hundreds of visitors and community members to the BGI to celebrate events such as Indigenous Peoples Day, on an annual basis.



Photo: Staff running educational programming

Photo: Staff on monitoring/transportation boat



Impact of the Beach Keeper's Work:

The impact of the Beach Keepers is far reaching – from community benefits such as the ability to bring Tseshaht members down to the Broken Group Islands each summer for day trips to see firsthand what the Beach Keeper do day-to-day, and cultural events such as celebrating Indigenous Peoples Day; to supporting park maintenance and visitor information sharing.

The Tseshaht Beach Keeper program also provides valuable job and skill building opportunities to community members, who take great pride in staying current with their knowledge and educating themselves in both the on and off season to share that history with visitors, and with future generations of Beach Keepers.

Overall, Tseshaht leadership are pleased with what the Beach Keepers are able to accomplish within their mandate of the Broken Group Islands, and hope that one day their work can be expanded as Guardians inland along the harbour and to the Alberni Inlet.

“The guardians are the face of our nation, they represent us, they welcome people [and] they protect and monitor [our territory]. They also make sure we have a presence in the territory at all times during the summer.”

Parks Canada Involvement and Program Barriers:

The Pacific Rim and Broken Group Islands are rich in resources and in human, natural, and cultural history. Parks Canada works closely with Tseshaht First Nation and the other Nations in the territory to achieve long-term conservation, sustainable use of resources, and to care for the land and share its significance with visitors.⁵ However, there are concerns with communication between Parks Canada and the Beach Keepers during emergencies and with species monitoring; where Parks Canada has been monitoring species without communication with Beach Keeper staff. The Beach Keepers would like to see collaboration and increased communication between Beach Keeper staff and leadership, and Parks Canada moving forward.

“We could see improvement in communications when emergencies happen. When a boat has gone ashore they usually call / notify the nation right away. But there are some times when that communication isn't the best. Like when a bunch of shipping containers were cruising along here and we didn't know what was in them - it was kind of a scary time where communications could have been improved.”

⁵ Parks Canada. “First Nations.” Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, Government of Canada, 5 Jan. 2024, <https://parks.canada.ca/pn-nc/bc/pacificrim/info/premieresnations-firstnations>.

The Future of the Guardians in Pacific Rim:

Looking towards the future of the Guardians programming in the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, Guardians and Beach Keepers indicate that more funding is required. The Tseshaht Beach Keepers would like to be able to build more infrastructure and expand their work to include more research and data collection on the park's natural resources such as rebuilding the kelp forest, clam harvesting and managing salmon populations. However, without additional funding, this is not possible.

“If we had it our way that. We probably quadruple our budget just to get to where we want to go and to have guardians in every aspect of our territory.”

West Coast Trail

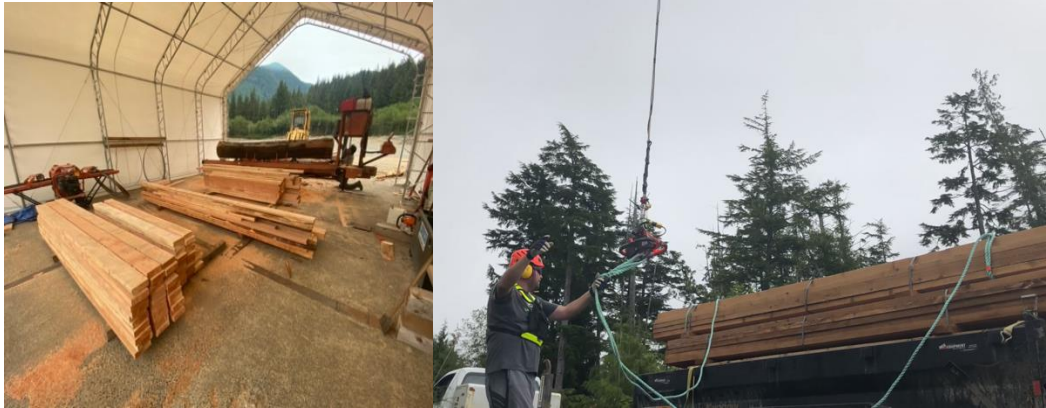
As previously mentioned, the West Coast Trail is one of three parts of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. The West Coast Trail terrain comprises rugged coastline and rainforests with a multi-day, 75km backcountry hiking trail alongside steep cliffs, creeks, waterfalls through complex ladder systems, boardwalks and suspension bridges. Both the Huu-ay-aht and Ditidaht First Nations care for the trails, protect the land and support visiting hikers in learning about the traditional language, food and cultural history.

What the Guardians Do:

The West Coast Trail Guardian program began as trail maintenance and brush work. Thirty years later it has evolved into a strong economic development program for the community. The Guardians of the West Coast Trail work in all weather conditions to ensure the trail is in good condition through clearing undergrowth and fallen trees and maintaining structures such as the boardwalk and cabins.

The programs are unique in that they bridge labour, culture, safety and community across their work. The Guardians:

- Protect and maintain the trails and boardwalks to support the ecological environment.
- Develop safe, culturally respectful and sustainable experiences for visitors, sharing information and stories.
- Focus on environmental and cultural preservation through operating the Marine Science Centre and fisheries.
- Support skills development and job opportunities for the community through the mill and developing and contributing to major trail infrastructure, such as the boardwalk.



Photos: West Coast Trail Guardians cutting and loading wood for the boardwalk

Impact of the Guardian's Work:

Through the Guardians programs, staff and visitors alike are able to connect and learn about the natural environment, Nuu-chah-nulth language and the Nations' unique cultures. Staff are also able to gain the skills necessary to be effective guardians and advance their careers. Many staff who have been through the Huu-ay-aht Guardians program have gone on to take more senior and executive roles, thanks to the skills they developed and the certifications they acquired (i.e., small vessel operator's proficiency certification) through their time in the program.

Like the Huu-ay-aht Guardians, the work of the Ditidaht First Nation Guardians provides great economic development opportunities for the community through gainful and rewarding employment. Over the years, the number of staff within the Ditidaht Guardians program has grown from two to four staff, including a supervisor position, providing vital jobs to community members.

Overall, the Guardian programs of the West Coast trail are reciprocal initiatives for the land, animals and people with a focus on building a sense of pride, uplifting future leaders and advancing knowledge transfer to future generations.

Parks Canada Involvement and Program Barriers:

Parks Canada has been very involved in the Huu-ay-aht Guardian program, offering a tremendous amount of support. Staff share that without the funding provided by Parks Canada, the Huu-ay-aht Guardian program would not exist, and they are very thankful for the support. However, while the Ditidaht Guardians also attribute the funding to the program's success, they have experienced delays in core funding and at times have received funding at the end of the season it was designated for. Staff indicate there is a need for core funding that allows for the First Nations, along with Pacific Rim National Park Reserve to do their work effectively and within the seasonal rhythms of the park, rather than by fiscal year.

The Ditidaht Guardians would also like to continue to see more open lines of communication with Parks Canada to ensure that the Guardians are able to maximize tourism in the area and flexibility on how to continue to deliver the program. They would like to co-develop a plan to bring more visitors into the park, including communications/messaging on memorable experiences and stories of the land. Ultimately, the Guardians would like to work more closely with Parks Canada to improve the program.

The Future of the Guardians of the West Coast Trail:

When looking towards the future of the Guardians programs on the West Coast Trail, the programs stress the importance of securing funding beyond 2026. Particularly for the remote communities of the Trail, who rely heavily on tourism for income, without funding to maintain their programming and infrastructure their initiatives won't be able to continue as effectively, if at all.

"I think we're well funded currently, but there is a big shadow that's lurking for fiscal year 26-27. if we're not appropriately funded, we'll have to ask 'how do we proceed?'"

North Straits and Southern Gulf Islands

Gulf Islands National Park Reserve is located within the traditional, unceded territories of the W̱SÁNEĆ People and several Coast Salish First Nations including Pauquachin First Nation and Cowichan Tribes. The Guardians are dedicated to monitoring the Nation's traditional territories of land and sea along the Saanich Peninsula and Southern Gulf Islands. The programs combine western science and modern technology with traditional knowledge for marine research and conservation.

What the Guardians Do:

The Pauquachin Marine Guardians and the QENTOL, YEN / W̱SÁNEĆ Marine Guardians / stewardship programs share cultural roots, territorial overlaps, and similar goals. Both programs protect and observe the marine ecosystems of the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve and surrounding territory through the combining of traditional Indigenous knowledge and western scientific approaches and engagement with youth and community members.

The W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council (WLC) is a governing body that incorporates two W̱SÁNEĆ First Nations: Tsartlip and Tseycum. The WLC supports two initiatives in the Gulf Islands, the broader W̱sáneć Marine Guardians stewardship program and the Southern Resident Killer Whale (SRKW) Monitoring Program. Operating alongside the Guardians program, the SRKW program aims to

rebuild “the balance between the W̱SÁNEĆ and the keḻtolemećen (Killer Whales) / Orcas, get the W̱SÁNEĆ people out on the water, and make sure W̱SÁNEĆ sacred responsibilities are upheld.”⁶

The Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians and the SRKW:

- Combine traditional w̱sáneć knowledge of the keḻtolemećen (Killer Whales) with modern technology to observe and track whale movements throughout w̱sáneć territory.
- Aim to raise awareness of the relationship between w̱sáneć peoples and the keḻtolemećen (Killer Whale).
- Conduct habitat monitoring for salmon and water sampling
- Monitor the population counts of mammals within SRKW habitat and the relationships between species (i.e., killer whales and sea lions).
- Support compliance monitoring (on land and on water) including small vessel compliance to marine mammal distance regulation, cargo vessel speeds, etc.
- Share information with neighbouring Nations conducting similar work.

“Our Marine Guardian program has consistently exhibited substantial advancements in the collection and organization of a comprehensive dataset about Baseline, Habitat, and compliance monitoring across the Southern Gulf Islands, specifically concerning the Endangered Southern Resident Killer Whales within our traditional territory.”

⁶ WLC Launches Southern Resident Killer Whale Monitoring Program.” W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council, 2 Feb. 2022, <https://wsanec.com/wlc-launches-southern-resident-killer-whale-monitoring-program/>.

The Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians:

- Support w̱sáneć youth in revitalizing the traditional reef-net fishing practice, providing them with opportunity to connect with their community and culture.
- Conduct habitat monitoring and maintain a hatchery for salmon, as they are an important food source for the keḻtolemećen.



Photo: signage at that QENTOL, YEN W̱SÁNEĆ Marine Guardians office site.



Photo: keḻtolemećen courtesy of the QENTOL, YEN W̱SÁNEĆ Marine Guardians program

Cowichan Tribes are also part of the co-management framework for Gulf Islands National Park Reserve, as well as their own program, S-hwuhwa'us Thi'lut Kw'at'l'kwa (Thunderbird Protecting the Ocean) Program. The program aims to increase their presence in their territory and promote the wellbeing of the living beings and ecosystems, particularly in and around Sansum Narrows, which is a culturally important marine corridor near their traditional lands.

The program upholds Cowichan Tribes' responsibilities, rights, and title in their marine territory through on-water and shore-based monitoring, science, and stewardship.

Program activities include:

- Consultation and engagement on initiatives and activities affecting the marine territory
- Providing educational, cultural, and other forms of engagement within the community
- Monitoring the impacts of human behaviours and activities on the environment (such as marine pollution like debris, chemicals and illegal infrastructure) and other beings (such as vessel traffic around whales) and to respond accordingly.
- Acoustic monitoring of underwater noise in Sansum Narrows
- Monitoring Forage fish spawn, pinniped, European green crab, Eelgrass, herring and conducting research on coastal water birds.
- Maintaining critical habitat for juvenile salmon, shellfish, and their traditional food and medicinal plants.

“Our program is one way that Cowichan Tribes can ensure a regular presence on the beaches and waters and be a part of fulfilling the responsibility of Quw’utsun Mustimuhw for protecting our Tumuhw (land, air, water) and our other-than-human relatives.”

The Pauquachin First Nation Marine Guardians split their time into three components: supporting western science monitoring work, maintaining a community fishery, and general operations, such as bookkeeping and grant writing, and maintenance of the equipment (boats, plant removal, safety equipment, etc.).

“I think we're doing a lot of good work and we're making a difference in in the environment and for our community. People are proud of what we're doing, especially elders, we see them in up here and every Tuesday and they come and they tell us and they tell us they're proud. Even neighboring nations are taking notice and we get compliments.”

The Marine Guardians also:

- Conduct water quality monitoring.
- Lead on-the-ground restoration including beach tilling, building clam gardens (rock walls), and shoreline plantings

- Operate vessels and western scientific equipment to monitor marine health across the territory.
- Involve youth in planting native species such as salmon berry.
- Revitalize traditional knowledge, cultural ceremonies, and language (classes are held weekly), strengthening intergenerational knowledge translation.
- Strengthen food sovereignty for the community through harvesting crabs and prawns and delivering this vital food source to Elders and the broader community.
- Build and strengthen engagement/relationships with the community and Elders.



Photos from Pauquachin First Nation Marine Guardians.

Top left to right: – workers gear, camping gear, and community fish supply.

Bottom Left: “This is a work in progress – represents years of planning to rebuild fish supply and marine life.” Bottom Right: Wild plant life revival garden.

“We're going to be one of the First Nations on this coast, the first in the southern Gulf Island area, to build one of these [rock wall] from scratch down at the beach. We're building that all by hand with a 450-person gathering in August, the multi day intertribal gathering to build a new sea garden wall at our beach.”

“The beach [shellfish harvest in Coles Bay] was closed for 30 years and every generation since then has suffered from it, and we're bringing that back and bringing a different kind of traditional knowledge classroom. This is very important for us, very important for our Elders.”

Impact of the Marine Guardian's Work:

The impact of the Marine Guardians work, in and near the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve has made incredibly important ecological, economic and cultural strides since the programs began.

The Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians and the SRKW have significantly enhanced marine conservation efforts in monitoring and protecting the kelłolemećen (Killer Whales) and understanding salmon health through establishing their own vessel-based monitoring efforts to capture key visual and audio data for the SRKW project. The program has also revitalized traditional W̱SÁNEĆ stewardship practices and strengthening cultural connections with the broader community and youth, so that they may carry on the work with future generations. The Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians serves an influential model for Indigenous-led environmental leadership, and would love to share their learnings and impact more broadly across Canada.

The Pauquachin First Nation Marine Guardians also have a tremendous impact on the marine ecosystems of Saanich Inlet, Coles Bay and surrounding areas in restoring their Nation's presence on the water and strengthening intergenerational knowledge sharing, language revitalization and community resilience. The Pauquachin First Nation Marine Guardians program has also made an incredible impact on the food sovereignty of the nation, having returned community access to food systems that have been lost for a generation.

“I show up on this beach and this is a place of learning and cultural exchanges and it's a grocery store – it's a source of food. . . it especially important for this work is the prioritization of food sovereignty and having returned access to food systems that have been lost for a whole generation. I think it's really meaningful to have all of those components in this work, and I feel honored and inspired that I get to be part of it.”

The S-hwuhwa'us Thi'lut Kw'atl'kwa (Thunderbird Protecting the Ocean) Program also maintains a strong component of community food sovereignty through the restoration of the Cowichan River Estuary over the last 50 years. As well as providing youth in the community with the opportunity

to learn about, and to help protect the Cowichan Tribes marine territory through employment and summer internships.

“Our team is made up of folks who are passionate about protecting the marine environment and our other-than-human-relatives. All of us are committed to becoming knowledge keepers about our beaches and waters and to bringing that knowledge back to the community in whatever way is needed - be it reporting on changes that we see, responding to crises, or restoring habitat.”

Parks Canada Involvement and Program Barriers:

The SRKW staff are in particular are pleased with the support they receive on the ground-level in day-to-day operations and marine monitoring efforts, citing that Parks Canada staff are respectful of their ways, traditions and protocols, and are enjoyable to work with. However, they share that there is a disconnect with Parks Canada leadership at a national level, and other departments who are not involved in the day-to-day operations; citing that leadership is often too focused on the western science and data components of the program. Instead, the Guardians would like to see more understanding of their traditional ways of doing and openness to looking at the work from other perspectives from Parks Canada management and leadership, as this could improve communication and understanding between the day-to-day operations staff at Parks Canada administered sites and Guardians, from a top-down approach.

Furthermore, the Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians staff, specifically, note that since the program began in 2021, they have not received any communication from park staff to explore how both programs can effectively collaborate and work together. Overall, the Marine Guardians all highlight a need for more regular, consistent collaboration and knowledge sharing between Guardians and Parks Canada.

“I think we have a really good combination of Western science that we've been forced to collect and we've gotten good at it. But it's nothing without the traditional knowledge and I think that' is what we have focus on first.”

The Future of the Guardians Programming:

The marine guardians in and surrounding the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve would like to see more collaboration with Parks Canada staff to determine how they can better support Indigenous Guardians, specifically with traditional knowledge dissemination and capacity building, developing specific goals beyond ecological monitoring. Many of the Guardians programs in and around the Gulf Islands share similar aspirations for increasing youth, Elder, and community involvement, supporting ongoing program assessment and community feedback, and in supporting a deeper connection between their neighbouring First Nations regarding their work and shared objectives.

“Parks Canada have a mandate that's a lot of data for ecological monitoring purposes; and a lot of the time I don't know if there are specific goals highlighted for why they're collecting certain data. But I think it would be really awesome if things like food and medicine were some of the motivating impact factors.”

“Nowadays everything has a border, just like everything has a price tag. We got put on reserves and I call that a border – it keeps from us going out to the rest of the world, and there's so much more [out there]. That that's one thing that is holding us back is. We're fighting against each other and not with each other. You gotta break those boundaries and break those borders. We'll come together, work with each other.”

The Marine programs of the North Straits and Gulf Islands advocate and express a critical need for more funding, with some sharing they have to seek out additional funding partnerships to fill the significant funding gaps in order support their goals in gathering reliable resources and tools necessary to carry out their work. The programs would like to hire Marine Educators, which would provide economic development opportunities to the community, and educational opportunities in engaging with local schools and disseminating the work undertaken by the Marine Guardians. They would also like to see more sharing of information across reserves and nations to learn from each other. However, without additional funding this is not possible. As the marine programs continue to evolve over time, additional funding will be critical to supporting the program's efforts.

“In addition to paying for wages and benefits for our six staff members, we need additional funding to support our program activities. These costs include: staff training; travel; office space; data management and analysis; operation and management of three vessels, support vehicles, equipment, and software; communication and meeting expenses; and administrative support.”

“We would be interested in participating in future training opportunities and local or regional gatherings of First Nations marine programs in order to connect, collaborate, and learn from our colleagues. . . We also seek enhanced collaboration and communication between Cowichan Tribes and Parks Canada, including deeper collaboration on the management of GINPR and developing co-governance and long-term funding arrangements.”

Recently Implemented Programs

The recently implemented Guardians programs from the Rockies to the St. Lawrence River are diverse and unique. The programs integrate their traditional knowledge with western science to address pressing environmental challenges, such as biodiversity loss and climate change, monitoring ecological systems, and share traditional knowledge and stories with visitors.

"By funding First Nations, these programs contribute to development and the maintenance of socio-economic health by creating accessible and rewarding jobs for community members."

What the Guardians Do:

The Biigtigong Guardian Program in Pukaskwa National Park maintains a strong focus on fostering and maintaining connection to the land and the community through a number of cultural programming activities including camps throughout the year for harvesting, tanning and feasting, hiking day trips and weekly Elder gatherings.

The Stewardship Guild of Rama First Nation also focuses on connection to the land. The program offers Anishinaabe teachings and bush skills through land-based education in the territory, including harvesting, gathering and processing food, learning about the natural ecosystems and native species.

The Blackfoot Guardianship of the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies is the first program of its kind in Alberta. It is based out of Calgary, however the program places Blackfoot Guardians in the field 270+ kilometers away from Calgary, in Waterton and the Southern reaches of the East Slopes to monitor, protect, and preserve the sacred lands and waters of the Eastern Slopes alongside Parks Canada. The Guardians patrol the watersheds, trails, and roadsides to collect data on the land's environmental health, as well as sharing stories and cultural knowledge with park visitors. The Blackfoot Guardianship program has also created the Blackfoot Guardianship Environmental Network to enhance the coordination, communication and integration of land and natural resource management issues amongst Blackfoot communities through the organization of community meetings and conferences.

"Our project is unique because we will be operating off-reserve, and it provides a way for us to truly be back on the land that we've been removed from for the past 150 years or so. It also creates much needed jobs for our community members."

The Nitassinan Guardians of Innu First Nation of Ekuanitshit in Quebec protect and monitor the ecological systems within the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park through the development of monitoring efforts and activities including:

- Monitoring the lobster population, eelgrass, and coastal seabirds.
- Monitoring cruise ship passengers and boaters in Baie Ste-Marguerite to protect the beluga whales.
- Preparing and leading school workshops to promote responsible harvesting among youth.

Impact of the Guardian’s Work:

Recently Guardians programs have made great impacts in their respective communities, supporting youth and community engagement, restoring their Nation’s presence on the land, revitalizing language and cultural events/camps, providing opportunities for skill building and career growth; as well as sharing traditional knowledge and stories with park visitors.

The programs are incredibly meaningful to the Guardians, partners and community members. The programs provide them with the opportunity to be on the land, and manage the land in a reciprocal way that benefits all – First Nations communities, Non-Indigenous community members, the wildlife and natural resources.



Photo: gear maintained by The Stewardship Guild of Rama First Nation

Parks Canada Involvement and Program Barriers:

Generally, the Guardians of the recently implemented interior programs maintain that Parks Canada has been a supportive partner in their programming, specifically mentioning that Parks Canada is accommodating, flexible and easy to work with.

However, Pukaskwa Guardians expressed concerns over miscommunication regarding what community members are and aren't allowed to do on their traditional territory within the park. This points to a need for clearer policy and community education to mitigate the current fears of using the park. However, to improve community education efforts, more Guardian staff or direct support from the Band Council would be required as the program currently has only one Guardian with no extra budget for hiring additional staff without impacting programming. Similarly, the Nitassinan Guardians shared concerns about funding, and the longevity of the program without on-going funding from Parks Canada.

The Blackfoot Guardians also experienced unique barriers in getting their programming off the ground from such a great distance away. Namely that the spaces in which the Guardians are working from in Waterton Park lacked housing and storage space. They stress that if future Guardians projects are going to be operating off-reserve or in Parks Canada areas as they are, that Parks Canada have adequate space set aside for the programming to avoid complications when trying to get the project off the ground.

The Future of the Guardians Programming:

When looking towards the future of the Guardians programs recently implemented in interior Canada, the programs look forward to improving community engagement, participating in sharing cultural knowledge with visitors and community members, supporting community events and improving communication with Parks Canada. They are hopeful about securing long-term funding beyond 2026 to continue their stewardship efforts, building relationship with other federal programs, community members and tribal entities and supporting the dissemination of traditional teachings, language and knowledge.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Across Canada the diverse Guardians programs share a common set of goals: to braid western and Indigenous approaches in supporting and building land management that operates for the benefit of improving community well-being. The programs provide:

- economic development, training and careers advancement opportunities for community members and program staff.
 - Some programs provide much needed transportation services to the community via boat, allowing community members to go from the park and back to their territory, supporting jobs and revenue for community members.
 - Many of the programs support skills development and job opportunities for the community, such as the learning how to build major trail infrastructure and obtain boating licensing.
 - Several programs run fisheries that support economic development through commercial fishing.
- meaningful engagement and connection to the land and sea through cultural programming, language revitalization and food sovereignty.
 - Several programs support food sovereignty efforts through running community fishery on distribute thousands of fish in the community.
 - Guardians support the transportation of hundreds of visitors and community members to celebrate events such as Indigenous Peoples Day.
 - Many programs seek to raise awareness about marine life and the park ecosystems to ensure they are cared for generations to come.
 - The Guardians that share territory and interests share information with neighbouring Nations conducting similar work.
- the ability to share their traditional teachings, celebrations and stories with park visitors, Elders and youth; and preserve traditional ways of knowing and doing for future generations.
 - The Guardians share archaeological information and information on the natural world with the park, providing valuable visitor orientation services including sharing information on park rules, logistics and safety. As well as sharing traditional knowledge, stories and guided tours.

- Many programs seek to raise awareness about marine life and the park ecosystems to ensure they are cared for generations to come.

Guardians program barriers are also relatively consistent across Canada, with two main concerns, communication and funding. Guardians program staff shared challenges in communication with Parks Canada both on-the-ground staff at each of the sites, and with national leadership. They share concerns that Parks staff are not regularly sharing information on their monitoring efforts with Guardians staff, causing duplicative effort and inefficiencies. This disjointed and siloed approach to monitoring the ecosystems also does a disservice to Parks staff, who could learn from the Guardians as well, particularly in understanding Indigenous traditional approaches and other perspectives on protecting the land, waters and non-human inhabitants. Overall, the guardians highlight a need to strengthen the ties between staff involved in the day-to-day operations from Parks Canada and Guardians and foster more regular, consistent collaboration and knowledge sharing between both parties.

However, the biggest challenge to the success of the Guardians programming is a lack of long-term, sustainable funding. All programs expressed various limitations and concerns regarding the funding arrangements. Many shared that they would like to expand their work to extend further in their respective territories, but are not able to do so with the capital they have available as inflation continues to rise, and the cost of fuel, building infrastructure and the cost-of-living go up. For some, the short-term agreements and dispersing of core funds has also proven to be a barrier, particularly when funds are delayed or received after the season has ended.

The Guardians strongly advocate for more consistent, long-term funding in order to improve the program, hire more staff and build the infrastructure required to support their programming both now and in the future.

Overall, the guardians from coast to coast believe strongly in the program and its profound positive effects. They hope that the programs can continue to create collective impact, share knowledge and protect the lands for future generations.

“This is the cool part with the Guardian program and the Indigenous stewardship policy is there's influence from First Nations, and how it's going to be built out.”

“I think the importance with the guardians is the hybridization of the knowledge shared. You have indigenous knowledge that's offered up that created abundance in the past and that could potentially create abundance in the future. And then the [western] science. If we can get marry those two together, then that's going to be beneficial to the world overall. That's what I think is important about the Guardians.”

Considerations for the Future of the Guardians Programming

Looking towards the future of the Indigenous Guardians Program it is recommended to focus on . . .

Providing long-term funding to support program expansion and program sustainability. While greatly appreciated, the current funding provided to the Guardians programs is not sufficient to meet community needs. The limited funding available from Parks Canada often forces Guardians to seek out additional funding partnerships to fill the significant gaps, taking resources away from the program operations. For others, the limited funding means that the program is run by a one or two Guardians who have no additional capacity hire additional staff required to expand operations or mitigate potential burnout. Long-term, consistent funding would allow the Guardians across Canada to build additional infrastructure, purchase equipment and hire more staff to support the important stewardship initiatives, improve cultural programming, provide more employment and internship opportunities, increase research, data collection and monitoring efforts, and share knowledge with future generations.

Support Knowledge sharing amongst Guardians programs through hosting an annual event that brings together all Guardians programs across the country. An event similar to the National Guardians Gathering hosted by the Indigenous Leadership Initiative and National Guardians Network, would provide additional opportunity to support connections between the Guardians program, inspiring staff to learn and discover more about the various Parks Canada sites and work of the other programs. We hope the regional perspective provided in this report can better support such planning for national gatherings, including panels, presentations, and networking.

Improve collaboration between Guardians and Parks Canada, ensuring that communication between Parks staff and leadership, and the Guardians is clear and consistent. Many of the Guardians would like to co-develop plans with Parks Canada to ensure that the Guardians are able to maximize tourism in their respective territory to increase community revenue, share stories, protect the lands, water and its inhabitants. They suggest that Parks Canada implement improved

structural support for land co-management policy development and shared decision making through a living document that is regularly updated. Further, the Guardians would like to see improved collaboration and communication on the day-to-day monitoring efforts of Parks Canada Wardens and staff and the Guardians to ensure that monitoring efforts are effective and efficient.

5. Appendix A: Partner Participants

Nation	Guardian Program	Location	Website / Social Media Page
Biigtigong First Nation	Biigtigong Guardian Program in Pukaskwa	Pukaskwa National Park, Ontario	Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/bnguardian/
Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal Council	Blackfoot Guardianship of the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies	Calgary, Alberta	Website: https://blackfootconfederacy.ca/blackfoot-guardianship-of-the-eastern-slopes-of-the-rockies-partnership-project/
Chippewas of Rama First Nation	Stewardship Guild	Orillia, Ontario	Website: https://www.ramafirstnation.ca/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/people/Rama-Land-Stewardship-Guild/61572002555664/#
Huu-Ay-Aht First Nation	West Coast Trail Guardians	Vancouver Island, British Columbia	Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/HuuayahtFN
W̱sáneć	Qentol, Yen / W̱sáneć Marine Guardians Program	Brentwood Bay, British Columbia	Website: www.qentolyen.com Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/qentolyen/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100095075200698
Innu First Nation of Ekuanitshit	Nitassinan Guardians Program	Ekuanitshit, Quebec	n/a
Pauquachin First Nation	Pauquachin Marine Program	Vancouver Island, British Columbia	Website: https://www.pauquachinmarine.com/
Tseshaht First Nation	Broken Group Islands Beachkeepers	Vancouver Island / Broken Group Islands	Website: https://tseshaht.com/beach-keepers/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/717901234937185/
Ditidaht First Nation	West Coast Trail Guardians	Port Alberni, British Columbia	Website: https://visitnitinaht.com Ditidaht First Nation: https://www.indigenouscoastbc.com/destinations/nation/ditidaht-nation
Gulf Islands National Park Reserve	Southern resident Killer Whale Recovery program	Sidney, British Columbia	Website: https://parks.canada.ca/pn-nc/bc/gulf/nature/ocean/erds-srkw

			https://wsanec.com/wlc-launches-southern-resident-killer-whale-monitoring-program/
Cowichan Tribes	S-hwuhwa'us Thi'lut Kw'at'l'kwa (Thunderbird Protecting the Ocean) Program	Duncan, British Columbia	Website: https://cowichantribes.com/

6. Appendix B: Interview Guides

Interview Questions for Guardians

1. What is important about your Indigenous Guardian (or Earthkeeper, etc.) program?
2. What made you want to work with the Indigenous Guardian (or Earthkeeper, etc.) program?
3. How do you know the Indigenous Guardian (or Earthkeeper, etc.) program is working to meet the needs of community members? If so, why do you feel this way? If not, what are your concerns?
4. Does the program have access to the resources and tools needed to be successful? What does or would that look like?
5. Do Parks Canada staff provide support and/or resources that are useful to the Guardian programs? How? Or what could that look like?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share to support the evaluation? Your insights are valuable.

7. Appendix C: Introductory Letter

Letter of Introduction: Evaluation of Indigenous Guardian Programs

2025 Indigenous Guardians Evaluation

Request: Request for Guardians/Watchmen/Beachkeepers etc. to respond to questions provided and to provide feedback on how they think the Guardians program went, suggestions or comments that they would like to share.

Confidentiality: Unless participants request that their contributions are attributed to them in the report, everything shared with Johnston Research is confidential. This means Parks Canada will not receive copies of interview notes or any other materials shared with the consultant. Information that is shared directly with Parks Canada, such as feedback sent directly to a coordinator by email, will also be treated as confidential in the report.

Timelines: The contract with Johnston Research is being extended into June, with data collection aiming to be completed by the end of June.

Questions and Formats: The evaluation is being led by our Indigenous evaluation consultant, Andrea Johnston, who will be producing a report based on all the information that is shared. The questions below were developed with Andrea with input from IGI staff, and are meant as starting points. Partners can choose to answer some, all, or none. We will be grateful to receive any feedback they wish to share, in the format they are most comfortable with. This includes written responses or an interview, but other options could include a story, photos, or a song. If interviews are preferable, we will share contact info with Andrea, and she will get in touch with participants.