

Workshop follow-up report from:

What's a 'Cumulative Impact', Anyway? Unpacking the environmental, community, and health impacts of resource development activities across northern BC

Smithers, BC, September 26, 2018

About the Cumulative Impacts Research Consortium

The Cumulative Impacts Research Consortium (CIRC) is a research and community outreach initiative at the University of Northern British Columbia. CIRC is dedicated to enhancing the understanding of the cumulative environmental, community, and health impacts of resource development. For more information, please visit www.unbc.ca/cumulative-impacts.

About the CIRC Smithers Workshop

CIRC staff facilitated a free public lecture and workshop on the traditional territory of the Wet'suwet'en people in Smithers on September 26, 2018 in conjunction with the Bulkley Valley Research Centre's Seminar Series. The workshop was part of an ongoing CIRC research project focused on developing new tools and processes to assess and monitor the positive and negative impacts of resource development across northern BC. This project aims to integrate community, environment, and health values and perspectives, and account for diverse forms of knowledge and information, to inform the development of cumulative impact assessment tools. These conversations are also an important avenue through which CIRC can better understand how our ongoing research can best enhance on the ground capacity to respond to issues related to cumulative impacts. For more information about the "New Tools" project, please visit the [project description](#) on the CIRC website.

The public lecture provided an overview of cumulative impacts science and research; presented some exciting new tools that integrate environmental, community, and health data to inform land-use decisions; and shared results from four years of research on the cumulative environmental, community, and health impacts of resource development across northern BC. A [video recording of the presentation](#) is available on the CIRC website.

The presentation was followed by a workshop, which was intended to create space for people living and working in Smithers and the surrounding area to share their perspectives and experiences related to past and ongoing resource development. To help inform this conversation, CIRC staff shared a suite of publicly available information around socioeconomic, health, and environmental indicators for the Bulkley-Nechako Regional District. This "regional profile" pamphlet and large-format "story map" integrated a variety of data sources to provide a snapshot of change in this area over time. While in no way a complete or comprehensive document, the regional profile and story map were shared with the intention of spurring conversation and reflection in response to the following broad question: *Resource development activities across northern BC have direct and indirect impacts on environment, community, and health values. Can you think of a time where those connections seemed most apparent to you?*

Key Messages

In describing their motivation to attend the CIRC workshop, numerous participants expressed that they came to the topic through their work on cumulative effects, environmental assessment, other natural resource issues, and environmental concerns. An area of specific interest was the policy implications of cumulative impacts assessment, and how cumulative impacts planning processes could be supported in municipalities and First Nations communities. Several participants expressed a strong interest in the connections between environmental and human health: For the sake of all peoples living in the region now and in the future, there is a need for holistic and shared intercultural understandings of how the health of people is inseparable from the health of the land. Industry activity such as forestry has historically polarized the community, with the prosperity of employment positioned in opposition to concern for the environment. It was noted that logging, mining, and energy projects in the region have been putting pressure on water quality and forest health. Other participants expressed concern that recent and historic wildfires, beehive burnings, broadcast burns, and slash burnings have had significant impacts on air quality in northern BC. Participants were interested in learning more about the individual and community impacts of resource development, and in hearing what others have to say, building understanding, and learning about social change in relation to cumulative impacts. Overall, it was felt that regulatory oversight by provincial and federal governments has been lacking and this has motivated community members to take action through grassroots organizing.

We asked workshop participants to describe a time in their lives when the connections between environment, community, health, and resource development were most evident. Various industrial projects were referred to as having adverse effects across all three values, including: the Buck Creek mine, Telkwa coal mining, the Northwest Transmission Line, fracking in northeastern BC, logging, and human exacerbated natural cycles such as wildfires and mountain pine beetle. The changes in railway use to prioritize non-passenger traffic have resulted in trains being a little-used form of public transportation. Participants recognized the cyclical nature of resource development as they have witnessed it in other surrounding communities from Prince Rupert, Kitimat, and Terrace, and the uncertainty and stress that can negatively impact community and family wellbeing.

There was a sense that the democratic process does not seem to be addressing the needs of the people of northern BC. The cumulative costs of development projects fall to the local area, but much of the benefit is felt in southern BC or elsewhere. The decisions on major projects are driven by international capital and market demands, putting communities in a position where it is difficult to balance the trade-offs and ensure long term community health. In the absence of better decision-making frameworks, First Nations and other communities may try to capitalize on these large capital projects to get things done. However, the final decisions by companies and governments are not made with cultural and ecological decisions at the forefront, and a failure to follow through with promises leaves First Nations with the impacts on the land and their leverage gone. Larger conversations around capitalism and materialism were discussed with examples of how the community has come together to speak out against capitalism and at the same time, how the promise of pay-offs in the form of money or employment can act as a wedge in social solidarity.

Participants expressed pride in the strong sense of community in Smithers, for example with community-based organizations such as the Bulkley Valley Community Resources Board, the Voices for Good Air public group, and the Bulkley Valley Research Centre. Participants spoke to these 'ground-up'

initiatives as a way forward to ensure their voices can be heard in decision-making processes. There seems to be more division and intensity on the topic of resource extraction occurring in the area recently, but the conflicts over resources have also created opportunities for uncommon allies. Reconciliation and resolving land disputes is seen by some as an opportunity for more collaborative land-use management and planning. But prejudice and racism still exist, and a more transient population linked to resource development means a shift in relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous community members.

The need for more holistic strategic planning in regards to project approvals to avoid compartmentalization of work (as happens now) was discussed. It was stated that there needs to be strategic regional assessment, not just on a project-by-project basis. The Bulkley Valley Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) was mentioned favourably as a mechanism which took notice of changes in the community in the past. It was referenced as a tool which brought ‘peace in the valley’ and differing opinions together in response to complaints regarding clear-cut logging in the region. While the LRMP process is remembered in a generally positive light, there was also criticism regarding the lack of Indigenous representation within the conversations that constructed these plans. It was expressed that there is an opportunity for nation-to-nation land-use planning with First Nations communities, which would result in improved land management for the benefit of all. Such a process must be grounded in a joint understanding of Indigenous and non-Indigenous values, and incorporate Indigenous rights and title.

Participants identified a need to have better data to use for indicators, particularly around health values, as well as to include First Nations values and indicators to measure impacts, since all of the impacts have happened on traditional land. There was some discussion that the use of the word ‘values’ to communicate ‘needs’ is flawed, as inevitably the value with the strongest voice is the most heard, which is perceived to lie largely with private interests. Participants expressed concern that the democratic structure in Canada is not serving the people of this community well. There was a perception that elected governments serve the needs of corporations and industry more than its citizens. There was a strong sense that people need more power in decision-making and this can be achieved self-determinedly through grassroots organizing.

Generating Next Steps for Positive Action

In the coming weeks, CIRC staff will continue to process, reflect on, and build this information into our ongoing research directed towards better understanding the cumulative impacts of resource development. Workshop participants can expect a more comprehensive project report in the coming year. As well, these insights will feed into longer term research projects, including the development of publicly available tools and resources. Importantly, both the research process and outcomes are intended to build capacity amongst local communities to respond to cumulative impacts issues, and inform ongoing planning processes around land and resource management. Based on information, ideas, and relationships generated through these workshops, we will work to develop new research projects to respond to issues raised. Throughout this process, we commit to continuing to solicit and respond to feedback through a variety of methods (phone, email, face to face conversations), distribute information widely, act as a hub to enable various individuals and groups to connect with one another, and continue to travel to communities to convene open public conversations about these complex

issues in place. CIRC staff present at this workshop were humbled and grateful for the willingness of people in the room to share these stories with us, and commit to returning to continue these dialogues.

Acknowledgements

This event would not have been possible without the generous support of our funders, as well as the invitation from the Bulkley Valley Research Centre to speak in their Seminar Series CIRC would like to recognize and thank the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions and the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia for contributing funds to support this event.



For more information about this event and the CIRC, please contact:

The Cumulative Impacts Research Consortium
circ@unbc.ca

www.unbc.ca/cumulative-impacts
<http://cumulativeimpactslivinglibrary.ca/>