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Article in *Marine Policy* · September 2017

DOI: 10.1016/j.marpol.2017.06.005

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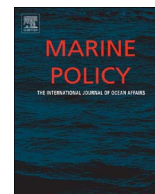
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## Erosion of trust in government consultation will impede the creation of environmental policy



Travis G. Gerwing<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Kieran Cox<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Ecosystem Science and Management Program, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Biology, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada*

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

British Columbia  
Conflict resolution  
Consultation  
Environmental policy  
First nations  
Resource management  
Traditional knowledge

### ABSTRACT

Conflicts over resource are becoming increasingly frequent as human development accelerates and resource limitations become evident. The impact of these conflicts is felt disproportionately by Indigenous Peoples, who despite international recognition that they must be consulted over resource extraction, have not been adequately included in policy development. As creation of effective environmental policy relies on meaningful consultation of all stakeholders, there is now a global outcry surrounding this eroded process. In British Columbia, Canada, a lack of meaningful government consultation has resulted in the approval of large-scale developments (the Site C Hydroelectric Dam and the Pacific Northwest Liquefied Natural Gas terminal) that are directly opposed by multiple stakeholders (First Nations, the academic community, conservation organizations, and other concerned citizens). A key component of the consultation process, trust, is explored here. Specifically, how poor government consultation erodes stakeholder trust in the consultation process. This trust is essential if holistic environmental policy, policy that protects both the environment and the economy, is to be created.

Conflict between natural resource users is becoming more frequent as human development accelerates, and resource limitations become increasingly evident [1]. Traditionally, Indigenous communities managed resources through the consultation of community members and councils [2]. Unfortunately, rapid global resource depletion has resulted in the degradation of natural resources [2]. Despite the growing international recognition that Indigenous Peoples must be consulted regarding resource extraction from their traditional lands [3], government policies have often avoided such consultation [4–6], leading to a global outcry [4,5,7]. Failure of the consultation process hinders the creation of environmental policy, as the development of environmental policy that promotes sustainable development while minimizing environmental impacts relies on engagement of all stakeholders [1].

In British Columbia (BC), Canada, consulting all stakeholders includes integrating the views of various levels of industry, First Nations, government, academics, environmentalists, and local community members. Although, the provincial government currently mandates consultation with First Nations [8], policy development has often failed to incorporate Aboriginal input [6]. Not including this input is unfortunate, as a wealth of empirical evidence (Reviewed in Reed [1]) suggests that if consultation with stakeholders occurs at all levels of policy development and implementation, not only is compromise possible, but effective environmental policy that meets the needs of all

involved can be created [1]. The key, however, is that consultation must be meaningful; those consulted must be able to inform and help guide the development and implementation of policy [1].

To create such policy, however, trust in the process of consultation, and in the government itself, is essential [1]. Without trust that their concerns will be incorporated into policy decisions, there is no reason for local community members, industry, First Nations, or academics to engage in the process. This disengagement will not only result in sub-optimal or damaging policies, but also guarantees that opposed projects will be delayed by litigation [1]. As such, recent decisions by the Canadian federal government, regarding large development projects such as the Site C Hydroelectric Dam and the Pacific Northwest Liquefied Natural Gas (PNW LNG) terminal are deeply troubling. Troubling as these decisions have catastrophically eroded trust in the process of consultation. Such development decisions within Canada, however, are representative of a larger trend occurring globally, as stakeholders clash over the allocation of limited natural resources.

Given the nature of some large-scale developments, such as major hydroelectric projects including the Site C Dam, and the entrenched opinions of all sides, it is difficult to see where compromise via consultation was possible. While many may not agree with the decision to proceed with the Site C Dam, finding a suitable compromise in this situation would be challenging, if not impossible. This is not the case,

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Biology, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.  
E-mail address: [t.g.gerwing@gmail.com](mailto:t.g.gerwing@gmail.com) (T.G. Gerwing).

however, with the location of the PNW LNG terminal to be built on Lelu Island along the north coast of BC. There is no denying that considerable concern was raised regarding the LNG pipeline path, as well as the carbon emissions associated with this project [9]. However, most stakeholders involved in this project acknowledged the need for the revenue this project would create. There was an atmosphere of potential cooperation surrounding this project, with the exception of the location of the terminal on Lelu Island.

Opposition to the PNW LNG terminal solidified around the impact this project would have upon the Flora Banks, an Eelgrass bed located off the coast of Lelu Island. The Flora Banks are essential nursery habitat for the entire Skeena Salmon run [10,11], and peer-reviewed studies elucidated that construction of a suspension bridge over the Flora Banks as part of PNW LNG, would likely cause catastrophic erosion [12]. Loss of the Flora Banks would have disastrous impacts upon the Skeena Salmon run [10–12], a salmon run that annually contributes \$110 million to the BC economy [13]. Over 130 scientists wrote an open letter to the Federal government, not in opposition to PNW LNG, but pointing out the risks of development, given the importance of the Flora Banks to the Skeena Salmon run [14]. Concerns that mirror those of a federal government report from the 1970s [15]. As pointed out by Nathan Cullen, the New Democrat Party (NDP) Member of Parliament for the Skeena-Bulkley Valley riding, the risk of development, coupled with the availability of other potential terminal locations in the area, makes moving the terminal seem obvious [16].

When the PNW LNG terminal received final approval to be built on Lelu Island, the Canadian federal government ignored the concerns of academics, conservation groups, local community members, and First Nations. In his announcement, Prime Minister Trudeau claimed that this decision was based upon the best available scientific data, and after meaningful collaborations with First Nations [17]. An obviously false statement given the peer-reviewed studies warning against development on the Flora Banks [10–12], and the overwhelming desire to protect this critical salmon nursery habitat [18]. This decision, and these statements, resulted in disillusionment of local community members, conservation groups, First Nations, and academics. In the immediate aftermath of this decision, multiple lawsuits opposed to the PNW LNG project were filed by First Nations and conservation organizations [19].

By ignoring the views collected during consultation, the federal government has catastrophically eroded trust, trust that is required to craft holistic environmental policy. Even with regards to the PNW LNG terminal location, where a clear compromise existed, the government ignored input from concerned First Nations and local community members, and made a decision that contradicted the best available scientific data. Consultation, in this case, was meaningless, as those consulted had no influence upon policy decisions. If local community members, First Nations, and scientific input cannot influence policy development [1], there is little incentive to engage with government to develop future environmental policy.

Bluntly, this erosion of trust is deeply concerning, and the current state of affairs in BC is not unique; it is representative of current global deficiencies in the consultation process [1,6]. Even though many challenges face global sustainability [20], increasing equality of resource availability will benefit all stakeholders [21]. However, it is only through meaningful consultation that sustainable land use policies can be developed [1]. As climate change and human development continue to impact ecosystems, the need for holistic environmental policy that engages all stakeholders will only increase [1]. However, the failure of

governments around the world to engage in meaningful collaboration has eroded the trust needed to craft this policy. Given the immediate need to address climate change and development issues, if trust is not restored, barriers to crafting environmental policy may become insurmountable. However, if governments can be seen to engage in meaningful consultation, there is no reason why inclusive, evidence-based environmental policies that allow humanity to succeed in a changing world, cannot be implemented.

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