

# Catalyst in Action: Haíłzaqv Climate Action Team

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On October 13, 2016, an American fuel barge struck the shores of the island of Bella Bella on British Columbia's central coast. The barge spilled 110,000 litres of diesel and heavy oils and contaminated the marine territory of the Haíłzaqv Nation. On the night of the accident, Haíłzaqv Nation residents were the first ones on-site. Through stormy weather conditions, they risked their lives to contain the spread with oil pads and booms. However, the damage could not be mitigated.

Leona Humchitt is a proud member of Haíłzaqv Nation and serves her community through her roles as a councilor for the Heiltsuk Tribal Council, chairperson of the Economic Development Corporation, IODI Clean Energy Champion, 20/20 Catalyst, and Climate Action Coordinator. That night, Leona and her family were amongst the many Haíłzaqv residents providing urgent aid; she recounted the oil spill as a very traumatic event for her people that "sucked the life out of us." The Haíłzaqv Nation are among the many Indigenous communities in Canada that continue to experience the intergenerational trauma of the residential school system and the ongoing colonial processes; Leona asserted that the oil spill was another "form of genocide."

"Our Haíłzaqv homelands are vital to the survival of the Haíłzaqv people and our cultural ways. The water around us is a marine highway for anybody that's traversing our territories. So, we've been progressive and adamant in standing strong on the shoulders of our ancestors about protecting what's ours."

The marine territory was an ecologically diverse site where the people of Haíłzaqv Nation sustainably harvested over 25 food species, including cod, salmon, crab, and kelp; Leona affirmed that to this day, "the resources in that territory have still not come back." The accident also destroyed ancestral clam gardens that had been actively maintained by generations of Haíłzaqv people through community and commercial food harvesting. The clam gardens increased the species' productivity and contributed to the economic security of many members of the Haíłzaqv Nation.

Through open dialogues with community members, Leona said that the oil spill is a persistent source of "climate trauma and grief" for her people, but she also recognized the accident as a catalytic moment for change. Through the anger and hurt, the people of Haíłzaqv Nation collectively recognized the urgency to reduce their diesel reliance; the fossil

fuels that power their homes, cars, and boats are not only polluting their waters, but they are the largest contributors to climate change. The Haíłzaqv community is setting a standard for climate action they hope others will follow.

Through her community leadership with the Heiltsuk Tribal Council and Economic Development Corporation, Leona recognized that in order to guide her people to a place of resilience, she must be well-equipped with a higher level of education. In 2017, she commenced her Masters of Business Administration (MBA) in Indigenous Business and Leadership at Simon Fraser University. Through her focus on economic development and sustainability, Leona recognized that a critical element of community planning is ensuring that projects align with Indigenous worldviews, values, and principles.

When Leona was on the tail end of completing her MBA in 2019, a friend introduced her to the Indigenous Off-Diesel Initiative (IODI) and encouraged her to apply on behalf of her community. IODI is a \$20-million initiative from Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) with collaboration from Indigenous Clean Energy (ICE) and the Pembina Institute to support remote Indigenous communities in developing and implementing ambitious plans to reduce diesel dependencies.

In the first of the three phases of IODI, the Haíłzaqv Nation appointed Leona as the Clean Energy Champion and she completed the 20/20 Catalyst Program from Indigenous Clean Energy in 2019. Leona appreciated the capacity-building and clean energy learning from the program, but what she loved most was meeting other 20/20 Catalysts.

“It was an eye-opener to be able to meet Indigenous people from across Canada, to be able to have intimate conversations about what we can do to continue to be good stewards. Aside from growing my network, and meeting new friends and people that I truly care about, my key takeaway was that we all have that same value of we take care of the land and resources, and it takes care of us.”

In the second phase of IODI, the Clean Energy Champions were tasked with developing a Community Energy Plan (CEP). With full support from the Heiltsuk Tribal Council, Leona assembled the Haíłzaqv Climate Action Team (HCAT) with young leaders from the Nation; she believes that young Indigenous leaders are the driving force of climate action. The team includes **Qátuwás Brown** (Communications Manager), **Ayla Brown** (Climate Action Advisor), **Michael Vegh** (Energy Implementation Advisor), **Eryn Stewart** (Clean Energy Mentor), **Zuleika Bhamji** (Executive Assistant), and **Astrid Wilson** (Youth Ambassador).

HCAT worked towards creating a community-led resiliency plan – known as Híikila qñts nála'áxv (Protecting our World)—to reduce diesel reliance, foster cultural revitalization, increase economic opportunities, and promote energy sovereignty. The team's strategic

orientation is centered around stewarding the land and resources for future generations; Leona expressed that the CEP will create a “better future for our children, our children's children, and the seventh generation.” The CEP lays a pathway for the next ten years and aims to eliminate 24,000 tonnes of greenhouse gases (GHGs) for a cost of over \$19 million.

“Clean energy planning is moving us back into alignment with our Haítzaqv values, worldviews, and our ǵviłás, which are our traditional laws and overarching principles that determine everything about who we are as Haítzaqv people. Clean energy and net-zero action are using the gifts of the Creator—the sun, wind, water, and earth—to generate energy that is from our homelands. It’s about reclaiming who we are and our relationship to our place. This plan was created for us and by us. It is a plan rooted in the empowerment of the Haítzaqv people and in a way, it’s really about decolonization.”

A key component of clean energy planning is community engagement. Due to public health restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the HCAT was unable to host in-person gatherings and feasts. Instead, they conducted virtual sessions to engage the nínúhaqla (elders), yíimás (chiefs), wíum’aq (women of high rank), elected leaders, and community members. Since more than half of Haítzaqv Nation members live off-reserve, the team was driven to develop engagement strategies that would include descendants outside of the community. The HCAT believes that **“you’re Haítzaqv, no matter where you are.”**

The HCAT partnered with Ethelo to develop an online community engagement platform, which enabled them to achieve a high level of community buy-in from on and off-reserve members of Haítzaqv Nation. The platform surveyed participants on the different climate action solutions that should be implemented in Bella Bella. Based on the results, the team identified the following ten climate action solutions: efficient home heating systems; renewable diesel; solar project; retrofitting community homes; food sovereignty; passive house kit; capacity development strategy; electrification of marine vehicles; retrofitting community buildings; and community transport.

In the engagement surveys, most of the clean energy solutions received over 90% support amongst respondents, which are some of the highest percentages that Ethelo has ever witnessed. The surveys have garnered over 700 respondents and through HCAT’s entire community engagement process, they have engaged with over 1,000 members of Haítzaqv Nation.

The HCAT is currently in the third phase of IODI, which ends in February 2023 and involves the project design and implementation of a portion of the CEP. In partnership with Ecotrust Canada, the HCAT has made major strides for the heat pump project, which is one of the ten climate action solutions identified in the CEP. Thus far, HCAT has retrofitted 154 community

homes by removing diesel-fuel heat furnaces and installing electric heat pumps for a total cost of \$2 million. In 2022, they raised \$5 million to retrofit another 250 community homes.

Many First Nations on-reserve homes and community buildings were built with energy inefficient and substandard materials that have resulted in unsafe housing conditions, health issues, and excessive energy bills. Improving home energy efficiency is a priority for the HCAT, especially since a standing home in Bella Bella often uses twice the amount of energy as an average home in B.C. The heat pump project improves air quality, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and decreases annual household energy spending from \$3,600 to \$1,500.

The HCAT has made enormous achievements in the planning and implementation of their climate action solutions. On March 12, 2022, the Haítzaqv Nation hosted a community feast at the Gvúkva'áus Haítzaqv (home of the Heiltsuk) in Bella Bella to present the completed CEP to the hereditary chiefs, community members, and guests invited from governments, NGOs, corporate partnerships, and the media. Since the CEP was centered around providing a better future for the younger generations, the celebration was dedicated to the children and youth of the Haítzaqv Nation. The Gvúkva'áus Haítzaqv, a monumental local cedar house was filled with joy as the guests talked, danced, sang, and feasted on the traditional foods of the Haítzaqv people.

The HCAT also facilitated a networking session for experts to contribute to the implementation plans of the ten climate action solutions identified in the CEP. The HCAT is currently in the process of actualizing their ten-year CEP by implementing their climate action solutions.

When reckoning with the culturally and environmentally devastating effects of colonialism, the oil spill, and climate change, the resilience of the Haítzaqv Nation stems from the reconnection to their ancestral worldviews. When it comes to climate action, Leona encourages Indigenous communities to link arms and do the heavy lifting, ensuring that it **“aligns with our worldviews as Indigenous people to create a sustainable future for our children yet to come.”**

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