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The Impact of Cross-Border Environmental Media and Advocacy at the Skagit River Headwaters

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**BORDER
POLICY**RESEARCH INSTITUTE
WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**THE IMPACT OF CROSS-BORDER
ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA AND
ADVOCACY AT THE SKAGIT RIVER
HEADWATERS****BY DR. DEREK MOSCATO
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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY****SUMMARY**

The regional media of Cascadia has directed significant media attention toward the Skagit River watershed since 2018 as a result of a controversial mining proposal at the international border dividing British Columbia and Washington State. At the center of this controversy sits the so-called “Donut Hole” located at the headwaters of the Skagit watershed. As a result of concerns about impacts to wildlife and the surrounding North Cascades ecosystem, opposition to the project was substantial, led by environmental advocates and Indigenous community leaders. In turn, they harnessed extensive media coverage and advocacy to facilitate a larger regional dialogue about the importance of the cross-border Skagit watershed to larger parts of British Columbia and Washington State, as well as to Canada and the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly a half-century ago, a long-simmering controversy over the expansion of the Ross Dam on the upper Skagit River in order to boost hydroelectric power underscored the crucial role of media and public opinion in mitigating the growth of such infrastructure. The public debate gave way to the 1984 Canada–United States High Ross Treaty, which regulated activity at the Skagit River’s headwaters in British Columbia. Since 2018, media have returned their focus to the cross-border Skagit watershed because of a gold mining proposal by British Columbia-based Imperial Metals. It involved the so-called “donut hole”—an area of 5,800 unprotected hectares situated between two B.C. provincial parks—Skagit Valley and Manning—located at the headwaters of the Skagit watershed. As a result of concerns about impacts to wildlife and the broader North Cascades ecosystem, opposition to the project was substantial, led by environmental advocates and tribal leaders. These developments also facilitated a larger, regional dialogue about the importance of the cross-border Skagit watershed to larger parts of British Columbia and Washington State, as well as to Canada and the United States.

THE HEADWATERS OF A CROSS-BORDER WATERSHED

The Skagit River saga been an issue of great social and ecological importance across the last century within the Canada–U.S. cross-border region known as Cascadia, which includes British Columbia, Washington State, and Oregon. The Skagit River, along with the Fraser and Columbia Rivers, is a watershed of paramount importance in Cascadia. The river’s headwaters are located near Manning Provincial Park in British Columbia’s southerly reaches in the Canadian Cascade mountains. Crossing the border, the watershed snakes through North Cascades National Park in Washington State before flowing through the Skagit Valley and finally entering the Salish Sea (see Figure 1, next page).

In its entirety, the system is nearly 160 miles long and includes over 38,000 acres, making it the largest but also the most biologically diverse river draining into Washington State's Puget Sound.¹ It also includes three tributaries: the Sauk, Suiattle and Cascade Rivers. The river is a long-time favorite of flyfishing enthusiasts who seek out steelhead, coho, and Chinook salmon. Additionally, it is a popular site for winter eagle viewing. The watershed's diverse wildlife and natural resources have made it a regular point of contention for environmentalists, community advocates, and Indigenous nations historically. The public utility Seattle City Light operates three dams and powerhouses on the upper Skagit River: The Ross, Diablo, and Gorge dams. Collectively they are called the Skagit River Hydroelectric Project and they offer significant power to the City of Seattle. These dams have significant impacts on wildlife habitats throughout the watershed, particularly for endangered chinook and steelhead. The area is also known for both owl habitat and as part of the larger North Cascades designation for the reintroduction of grizzly bears.

Further transboundary implications of the watershed were highlighted in 1984, when a treaty intended to resolve disputes over the Ross Dam and to protect the Skagit watershed was signed by U.S. and Canadian federal governments, with the accompanying agreement signed between the Province of British Columbia and the City of Seattle. The agreement also

created the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission (SEEC), which has a mission of protecting wildlife habitat, developing recreational opportunities, and acquiring mineral or timber rights.²

THE DONUT HOLE FLASHPOINT

The Skagit Headwaters Donut Hole controversy has its roots in the creation of Manning and Skagit Provincial Parks in British Columbia. At the time of its creation, part of the Skagit River watershed was covered under a mineral claim and was therefore left out of the park. That situated the claim's 5,800 hectares and multiple valleys as a "hole" surrounded by protected nature. The unprotected area, which includes Silverdaisy Mountain, is sandwiched between Skagit Valley Provincial Park to the west and Manning Park in the east. In the wake of this strange juxtaposition of mining tenure surrounded by parkland, the nickname of Donut Hole stuck.³ In 2003, British Columbia's government allowed industrial logging to take place at the Donut Hole's forestland.

This research set out to analyze a network of stakeholders and advocates in the wake of the Skagit River Donut Hole development. It located a cross-border network of environmentalists, conservations, tribal members, and community activists who situated the watershed as an entity serving local or hyperlocal interests as opposed to its state-wide public utility dimensions. Consequently, the communication and media emanating from this network took on local/

hyperlocal dimensions even as it took on transborder qualities. The role of news media is influential in terms of setting public opinion and also for political mobilization. Public interest litigation in environmental matters is also tied to public participation opportunities. A greater degree of citizen engagement during environmental impact assessments can mitigate litigation and can address key concerns for communities.⁴ Mining industry developments provide a unique set of concerns for citizens in the context of not only environmental conditions but also community well-being and local employment. A deterioration of these variables, in conjunction with indecisive or inconsistent action by government institutions, can negatively impact the public's trust in government and legal institutions.⁵ Critical to successful civic oversight of watersheds is the involvement of publics. Previous research has pointed to four possibilities for public involvement: Creating a process of legitimacy and popular acceptance; technical competence; fairness of procedures; and the promotion of environmental education and discourse.⁶

SKAGIT SAGA

In response to the emerging Donut Hole controversy, the wilderness protection organization Washington Wild helped to catalyze a larger coalition of 280 organizations, including regional and state governments, communities, businesses, and not-for-profits. Among the signatories were representatives from the City of Seattle (Mayor Jenny Durkan), the State of Washington (Governor Jay Inslee), Lummi Nation, Patagonia, and U.S. Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell.⁷ These organizations and individuals represented specific entities and constituents located downriver from the project and also in adjacent areas in the interior of British Columbia. Key to the coalition were the inclusion of Native American and First Nations voices. Several tribes—including the Swinomish, Skagit, Sauk Suiattle, and Samish tribes—located in proximity to the Skagit basin voiced formal opposition primarily on the grounds that the mining development would undermine previously established treaty rights for fishing and hunting in the watershed.

In late 2019, the Province of British Columbia announced the protection of forests in the Donut Hole, also known as the Silverdaisy management area.⁸ Doug Donaldson, Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development, spoke directly to the impact of community organizations and environmental groups: "We've heard loud and clear from individuals and groups on both sides of the border that logging should stop in

the Silverdaisy, and we're making sure that commercial timber harvesting in that area does not continue." George Heyman, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, echoed his comments, invoking the relationship between B.C. and Washington in protecting shared environmental regions: "We are conserving the forest environment and connecting wildlife corridors by protecting this intact old-growth valley. Along with our neighbors in Washington, we share the commitment to protect the Skagit River Valley as an important step taken on behalf of our children and grandchildren."

The Province of B.C. again addressed the future of the Donut Hole area in January 2022 when it announced the long-term preservation of the Skagit River headwaters.⁹ Citing its value as a natural, cultural, and recreational resource, B.C. Premier John Horgan pointed again to the province's relationship with Washington, and also to the importance of working jointly on other shared watersheds, including the Nooksack River.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the cross-border networks and local interests involved in the Skagit River Donut Hole controversy, this study identifies three distinct takeaways for cross-border environmental communication. Firstly, in the case of international watersheds, cross-border media flows provide a critical role in serving the public interest, especially if they challenge unilateral state interests or disrupt a veil of environmental secrecy. Secondly, a growing network of media technologies, including digital networks, are fostering a wider-range debate about ecological topics, especially with a growing chorus of NGOs and other voices finding their platforms on Internet blogs and social media. Finally, the infusion of rhetoric in environmental debates—particularly the kind of discourse that lends itself to media headlines and cinematic storytelling—drives a persuasive form of narrative that can influence public opinion and ultimately policy action.

One of the key challenges for environmental activists in the realm of cross-border persuasion is confronting national appeals. It is not uncommon for governments or companies challenged by publics to point to foreign adversaries working against a country's assumed interests. In the case of the Skagit River watershed, however, a cross-border coalition was able to overcome a stand-off between two nations and their respective citizenries. This speaks to some key macro-trends that



Figure 1: Map of the transboundary Skagit Watershed. Source: Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission.

will continue to shape the policy trajectories of international and cross-border watersheds in North America. Firstly, there has been a sustained growth of environmental NGOs and non-profits on both sides of the U.S./Canada border, and these organizations represent an increasingly influential force in shaping public opinion. Secondly, and aligned with this growth, these entities have forged critical alliances with like-minded organizations across their respective borders. In some cases, they have even expanded their own footprint. Finally, resource extraction proposals and projects are subject to consideration by publics and governments within a broader policy arena that weighs the pros and cons of macro-environmental and economic impacts. This includes localized issues such as wildlife conservation, impacts to land and water, tribal

rights to fishing and hunting, and concerns for agriculture and local industries. But it also includes global concerns such as climate change and international watersheds. Thus, infrastructure and resources extraction projects in the Cascadia region such as the Trans Mountain Pipeline and the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 proposal are bound to be deliberated within an internationalized and integrated public sphere that represents a multiplicity of stakeholders. For policymakers, the Skagit River donut hole saga suggests that such environmental media is increasingly strategic, fluid, and aligned with broader global discourses. At the same time, for all involved parties it suggests the value of early and sustained public engagement, media outreach, and cross-border dialogue.

ENDNOTES

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