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Appeals to Transboundary Ecology: Cross-Border Advocacy at the Skagit Headwaters Donut Hole

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APPEALS TO TRANSBOUNDARY ECOLOGY:

**Cross-Border Advocacy at the Skagit
Headwaters Donut Hole**

Derek Moscato

**BPRI Faculty Fellow & Associate Professor of
Journalism, WWU**

**Special Research Report
Spring 2023**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pacific Northwest's regional news media has directed significant attention toward the Skagit River watershed since 2019 because of a controversial, long-simmering mining proposal at the international border dividing British Columbia and Washington State. At the center of this controversy sits 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 surrounding North Cascades ecosystem, opposition to the project was substantial, led by environmental advocates representing a wide range of ecological, recreational, and community interests. In turn, they harnessed media coverage, digital communication, and live-time events to facilitate a larger, regional dialogue about the importance of the cross-border Skagit watershed for larger parts of British Columbia and Washington state, as well as for Canada and the U.S.

This study is therefore interested in not only the cross-border dimensions of such ecological engagement, but also the communication variables that helped to drive this larger, multi-stakeholder advocacy. It examines the strategic communication emanating from environmental advocates on both sides of the U.S./Canada border; and their public communication that toggled between the international and hyperlocal, as well informational and rhetorical.

AUTHOR

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I also wish to thank the environmental advocates and organizational leaders on both sides of the U.S./Canada border who participated in this project through their provision of time, expertise, and extensive feedback during their in-depth interviews. These environmental leaders, advocates, and communicators from Canada and the United States were: Tori Ball (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, B.C. Chapter), Leo Bodensteiner (Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission), Richard Brocksmith (Skagit Watershed Council), Joe Foy (Wilderness Committee), Andrea Wolf-Buck (Conservation Northwest), and Tom Uniack (Washington Wild). Finally, I wish to thank the WWU College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Department of Journalism for broad support of this project and opportunities to share this research with colleagues and students.

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	i
AUTHOR	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	3
2.1 MEDIATING A CROSS-BORDER MINERALScape.....	3
2.2 THE HEADWATERS OF A CROSS-BORDER WATERSHED.....	4
2.3 THE DONUT HOLE FLASHPOINT.....	6
3. RESEARCH METHOD.....	9
4. RESULTS.....	10
4.1 REDEFINING THE SCOPE OF PROFESSIONAL WORK IN CROSS-BORDER ADVOCACY.....	10
4.2 MANAGING A COMPLEX AND GROWING COALITION DYNAMIC.....	10
4.3 STRATEGIC MEDIA TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES.....	12
4.4 THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF CROSS-BORDER ADVOCACY.....	14
4.5 LESSONS LEARNED AND FACING THE FUTURE.....	15
5. CONCLUSION.....	17
REFERENCES	19

1. INTRODUCTION

Nearly a half-century ago, a long-simmering controversy over the expansion of the Ross Dam on the upper Skagit River to boost hydroelectric power underscored the crucial role of media and public opinion in cross-border environmental policy deliberations. The dispute over the dam ultimately gave way to the 1984 Canada-U.S. High Ross Treaty, which regulated activity at the Skagit headwaters, a site of ecological, cultural, and historic significance. In recent years, media have returned their focus to the Skagit because of a gold mining proposal by B.C.-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. The ensuing public dialogue surrounding the proposal, fostered by a coalition of hundreds of organizations, ushered in a more contemporary rendering of environmentalism in international contexts.

Resources extraction projects with cross-border implications continue to attract considerable media attention and the interest of issue advocates; and represent a matter of heightened concern not only in North America but also globally. The longstanding expansion of the global economy has resulted in greater demand for commodities such as precious metals, petroleum, and timber. This has put greater strain on the planet’s natural resources as industries seek out new sites for extraction, production, and distribution.

There are several reasons why resources industry projects attract an inordinate amount of attention from communities, regional jurisdictions, and other stakeholders. Oftentimes, they serve as both environmental threats and potential economic generators. At the international level, they also serve as a symbol for how nation-states interface with their own hinterlands and the hinterlands of their neighbors.

The gold mining proposal in B.C.’s Upper Skagit Valley provided one such example, and a timely reminder of the international significance of the Skagit River watershed to the cross-border Cascadia region, which includes Washington State and British Columbia. It also highlighted the outsized roles of media and advocacy in deliberating the benefits and drawbacks of such projects.

The Skagit River, its tributaries, and its larger watershed hold a prominent place in the cultural, economic, and ecological life of Cascadia. In addition to its prominence within Washington State and British Columbia, it has also served as the traditional fishing and trading grounds for the region’s First Nations and tribal communities. Thus, the gold mining proposal at the upper Skagit River provided an important entry point for deliberating larger concerns for the region’s ecological health.

These issues, in conjunction with immediate impacts to wildlife and the North Cascades ecosystem, cemented a binational opposition to the project. A coalition of environmental advocates utilized news media coverage, digital communication, and publicity events 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 U.S.

This report focuses on the cross-border dimensions of such ecological communication. It is interested in the contemporary public sphere that emerges from advocacy networks. By extension, it is interested in the crafting of communication appeals, the meaning-making in cross-border advocacy, and the connections between coalition environmentalism, media, publics, and government policymaking. By extension, it is interested in the crafting of communication appeals, the meaning-making in cross-border advocacy, and the connections between coalition environmentalism, media, publics, and government policymaking. This is relevant for the Cascadia border region, but also has key implications for scholarship about environmental media and policymaking. It imparts new knowledge about how environmental networks and stakeholders exchange information via traditional, digital, and interpersonal networks through a convergence of messengers, campaigns, and media. Planetary ecological concerns make this topic especially relevant for policymakers and scholars.

The transboundary dimensions of ecological advocacy analyzed in this report foster new understandings of international environmental communication. Building upon the interplay of nature, advocacy, and media, this study draws from in-depth interviews to understand the tactics and strategies used by environmental strategists and communicators from multiple leading advocacy groups located on both sides of the border. It also draws from texts published by news outlets and advocacy groups in order to map out a network of cross-border ecological communicators in the North Cascades transboundary region.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 MEDIATING A CROSS-BORDER MINERALScape

The legacy of previous U.S.-Canada tensions at the Skagit Headwaters looms large over the contemporary Donut Hole saga. In his 1974 study devoted to the High Ross Dam controversy, which would have transformed the Skagit River's trajectory in B.C., Greenpeace co-founder Terry Simmons argued prophetically that public debate about dams was contingent upon the interest of journalists: "Media coverage generally has been carefully orchestrated in order to achieve maximum impact for the mutual advantage of the media and the conservationists.... A public controversy is in large part a media campaign" (Simmons, 1974).

This interplay of green advocacy and news media has long been a site of interest for environmental communication scholarship. The media-savvy campaigns of Greenpeace, for example, are seen as the logical outgrowth of the communication ideas put forth by Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan (Dale, 1996). The role of news media is influential in terms of shaping cognition about environmental issues and subsequent public opinion, but also for political mobilization. This playing out of environmental debates in the media leads to what Konkes (2016) refers to as a "mediatized visibility" for issue advocates that empowers environmental non-governmental organizations (p. 191). Yet such coverage is most effective in tandem with public participation opportunities. A greater degree of citizen engagement can mitigate litigation over divisive environmental projects and address key concerns for communities (Dilay, Diduck, & Patel, 2020).

Mining industry developments, including the extraction of precious metals such as gold and silver, 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 (Malik, Diduck, & Patel, 2015). The establishment of mines in proximity to protected, cross-border watersheds serves to raise the stakes for impacted countries and communities. Thus, the management of international watersheds remains a sustained, interdisciplinary focal point for scholars.

However, what is known about international watersheds is sometimes limited by state policy or decree. Here, media enterprises can disrupt government narratives or help to publicize closely guarded data or information that serves a public interest. An example comes from the domain of hydrologic data, and particularly the measurements of river flow rate. Satellite technology has helped to "challenge this data monopoly" and in turn has facilitated better management of international river basins (Gleason & Hamdan, 2017).

More salient yet to successful oversight of watersheds is citizen engagement. While the involvement of publics is recognized as a critical part of environmental stewardship, the larger question that emerges is how should the public be involved? Watershed management planners and activists have pointed to four goals for such engagement: Creating a process of legitimacy and popular acceptance; technical competence; fairness

of procedures; and the promotion of environmental education and discourse (Webler & Tuler, 2001). This view aligns with the call for formal transboundary processes to lessen the number of conflicts at international watersheds (Fernandez, 2015).

These environmental perspectives, which move between ideas, discourse, and local ecosystems, integrate the symbolic and material dimensions of media processes and production. This discursive-material knot offers a venue for understanding nature, industry, and society in the aggregate (Carpentier, 2017). The notion of a discursive and material knot...”structures large-scale assemblages, such as state apparatuses, armies, or markets, but it also enters into the micro-processes of the everyday without these different levels ever becoming disconnected (Carpentier, 2017, p. 4).” This perspective situates advocates as purveyors of scientific data and narrative appeals in the service of environmental action.

This interplay of communication and science aligns with the ‘mineralscape’ concept, which integrates the physical, chemical, and social dimensions of development minerals and their linkages to both local and national economies (Akong, 2020). Here, media and communication help to bridge natural resources to national policy debates but also the potential transformation of local economies. Furthermore, this integration of mining practices and social inputs provides new relationships between transnational and national actors and related policy implementation (Beland et al., 2021).

2.2 THE HEADWATERS OF A CROSS-BORDER WATERSHED

Previous examinations of Canada/U.S. transboundary ecological disputes have situated the Skagit River watershed in a larger grouping of Pacific Northwest environmental issues, including the conflict over logging on Clayoquot Sound during the 1990s, the Tasthenshini-Alsek mining controversy at the B.C./Alaska border, and issues of marine water quality, oil tanker traffic, and oil spills in the Salish Sea (Alper, 1997).

The Skagit and its tributaries represent critical habitat for wildlife and are a key facet of the North Cascades ecosystem on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border. The river is a long-time favorite of flyfishing enthusiasts who seek out steelhead, coho, and Chinook salmon. The upper reaches of the river are also known for both owl habitat and as being part of the larger North Cascades designation for the reintroduction of grizzly bears. Thus, along with the Fraser and Columbia rivers, the Skagit enjoys a prominent status in the Cascadia region, which comprises British Columbia, Washington state, and Oregon.

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 (National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, 2023). It also includes three tributaries: the Sauk, Suiattle and Cascade Rivers.

Indigenous and First Nations rights loom large throughout the watershed. Both the Upper and Lower Similkameen Indian Bands, along with the Sto:lo of Chilliwack, claim the area adjacent to Skagit Valley and Manning Park as their traditional territory (Dacre, 2019). Washington state tribes have significant connections to the area in addition to their own

territories along the Skagit River’s journey to the Salish Sea.

At the same time, the river is home to significant industrial interests. Hydroelectricity is produced by three dams on the river—making the Skagit a key focal point for Seattle’s metropolitan energy infrastructure. The public utility Seattle City Light operates the dams and powerhouses on the upper Skagit River: The Ross, Diablo, and Gorge dams. Collectively they are called the Skagit River Hydroelectric Project. These dams have significant impacts on wildlife habitats throughout the watershed, particularly for endangered chinook and steelhead.

The transboundary implications of the dams 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 High Ross Treaty created the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission (SEEC), which has a mission of protecting wildlife habitat, developing recreational opportunities, and acquiring mineral or timber rights (SEEC, 2022).

1909: The Canada-U.S. Boundary Waters Treaty created the International Joint Commission (IJC), giving broad powers related to Canada-US boundary issues, including the Upper Skagit Watershed
1942: The City of Seattle is granted permission to raise the height of the Ross Dam by the International Joint Commission. This would have flooded over 5,000 acres of wildlife habitat and recreational lands in B.C. The IJC order calls for compensating for Canadian interests as a result of the loss of land at the Upper Skagit
1947: B.C. passes the Skagit Valley Lands Act, setting up a B.C.-Seattle agreement to authorize flooding of Canadian land
1953: The Ross Dam is raised to its present level of 540 feet high
1967: Seattle and BC agree to raising the dam to its highest level, which would have flooded 1902 hectares of land in BC
1972: Facing public pressure, B.C. formally rejects the 1967 agreement
1974: Cross-border public interest in the health of the Skagit watershed is raised by the International Canoe-In on July 28, which sees 46 canoes and 20 kayaks negotiate the river
1982: The International Joint Commission, by order, urges British Columbia and Seattle to resolve differences over the authorized construction of the High Ross Dam
1984: The High Ross Treaty signed between British Columbia and Seattle ensures that Ross Dam will not be raised for 80 years in exchange for B.C. power purchased at equivalent rates. The treaty also establishes the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission (SEEC) to oversee an endowment fund devoted to preservation of the Upper Skagit Watershed area until 1965

Table 1: Historic Milestones in the Transboundary Upper Skagit

In addition to the 1984 agreement, the Skagit's Canada-U.S. history has been marked by a number of significant milestones over the past 125 years. These include the establishment of the Canada-U.S. Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, which created the International Joint Commission focused on boundary issues; the 1942 IJC authorization allowing the City of Seattle to raise the height of the Ross Dam; and the 1947 passing of the Skagit Valley Lands Act which led to an agreement between British Columbia and Seattle on the present height of the Ross Dam (Alper & Monahan, 1986).

The ongoing interplay of industrial project proposals and wilderness conservation at the cross-border upper Skagit River over the past century has created a unique dynamic in which the border has served to delay political decision-making, and in which government officials from both Canada and the U.S. have sought to balance the desire for reliable energy production with an untrammelled wilderness (Van Huizen, 2013).

2.3 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 the parks' establishment, part of the upper 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 of forested mountains, lush valleys, and rushing streams as a "hole" surrounded by protected nature.

In the wake of this strange juxtaposition of mining tenure surrounded by protected parkland, the nickname of Donut Hole stuck (Wilderness Committee, 2021). In 2003, British Columbia's government allowed industrial logging to take place in the Donut Hole's forests.

A key organizer in the drive to organize constituents against the gold mining development was Washington Wild. Founded in 1979, the organization is focused on wilderness protection throughout the state of Washington. Its name change from Washington Wilderness Coalition to Washington Wild in 2012 was motivated in part by an expansion of the organization's mission

Audubon Washington	North Central Washington Audubon Society
American Rivers	Northwest Environmental Advocates
BC Chapter of the Sierra Club	Northwest Watershed Institute
BC Nature (Federation of BC Naturalists)	Okanogan Highlands Alliance
Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society – BC Chapter	Okanogan Similkameen Parks Society
Center for Environmental Law & Policy	Olympic Forest Coalition Olympic Park Associates
Chilliwack Field Naturalists	Pacific Rivers
Chilliwack Park Society	Pilchuck Audubon Society
Clayoquot Action	RE Sources for Sustainable Communities
Conservation Northwest	Rivers Without Borders
Defenders of Wildlife	Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition
Dogwood	Snohomish Salmon Recovery Forum
Earth Guardians	Skagit Audubon Society
Earth Ministry	Skagit Land Trust
Evergreen Islands	Skagit Watershed Council
Fish Not Gold	Steelhead Society of British Columbia
Forterra	The Wilderness Society
Fraser Valley Salmon Society	Twin Harbor Waterkeepers
Friends of Cypress Provincial Park Society	Washington Chapter of the Sierra Club
Friends of Manning Park	Washington Conservation Voters
Great Old Broads for Wilderness	Washington Environmental Council
Kettle Range Conservation Group	Washington Wild
Methow Valley Citizens Council	Whatcom Land Trust
Mountains To Sound Greenway	Wild Fish Conservancy
National Parks Conservation Association	Wild Washington Rivers
Native Fish Society	WildEarth Guardians
North Cascades Audubon Society	Wilderness Committee
North Cascades Conservation Council	Women for Wild Lands
North Cascades Institute	

Table 2: Conservation organizations from across British Columbia and Washington State united as part of a coalition to stop mining at the Skagit Headwaters. (From SavetheSkagit.com/ Washington Wild.)

to protect wild and free-flowing rivers. Emphasizing its mission of environmentalism embedded in advocacy and civic engagement, the organization highlights a system of “education, empowering and mobilizing our communities” and building “grassroots networks that help protect wild lands and waters throughout the state” (Washington Wild, 2022, para. 1).

Washington Wild helped to catalyze a larger coalition of 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 (Haupt, 2022). These organizations included specific entities and constituents located downriver from the project but also in adjacent areas in the interior of British Columbia.

Key also to the larger coalition were the inclusion of Native American and First Nations voices. Several tribes located in the Skagit basin — including the Swinomish, Upper Skagit and Sauk-Suiattle — voiced formal opposition to the mining project due to worries for established treaty rights for fishing and hunting in the larger watershed. The Samish Tribe also highlighted the toxic threat to the large number of bald eagles that converge on the river during the winter months to feed on salmon.

In a joint press release issued by Washington Wild, The Wilderness Committee, the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, and the City of Anacortes, Tribal Chairman Steve Edwards noted the larger implications for Native American communities in the Pacific Northwest: “Swinomish believe it is prudent and wise to... actively oppose Imperial Metals’ gold exploration permit in the Skagit Headwaters, based on the direct ecological link between these headwaters and our homeland on the Skagit River and Salish Sea...” Furthermore, Edwards pointed to “significant risks the gold mining proposal creates to salmon recovery efforts in the Skagit River Basin, which directly affect the exercise of our Treaty Rights and the ability of every citizen of Washington State to enjoy this priceless natural treasure” (Foy, 2021, para. 6).

Leo Bodensteiner, U.S. Co-Chair of the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission, provided additional insight about the potential of the mineral acquisitions. “For three decades SEEC has been looking for opportunities to retire the outstanding mineral rights in the Skagit Headwaters to ensure the long-term protection of this important watershed. We have a real opportunity to resolve the potential threat this presents to the Skagit and create a win-win-win for British Columbia, Washington State and Imperial Metals” (Washington Wild, 2021, para. 11).

An earlier win for conservationists had come in 2019, when British Columbia’s provincial government announced the protection of forests in the Silverdaisy management area that overlaps the Donut Hole area. 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,” he said.

His comments were echoed by George Heyman, B.C. Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, who invoked the relationship between British Columbia and Washington State in protecting shared environmental regions. “We are conserving the forest environment and connecting wildlife corridors by protecting this intact old-growth valley,” he said. “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 second phase phase of advocacy, focused on the gold mining permit, derived from the work of the cross-border SavetheSkagit coalition. The British Columbia government again addressed the future of the Donut Hole area in January of 2022 when it announced the long-term preservation of the Skagit River Headwaters. Citing its value as a natural, cultural, and recreational resource, B.C. Premier John Horgan pointed again to the province’s relationship with Washington state, and also to the importance of working jointly on other shared watersheds, including the Nooksack River.

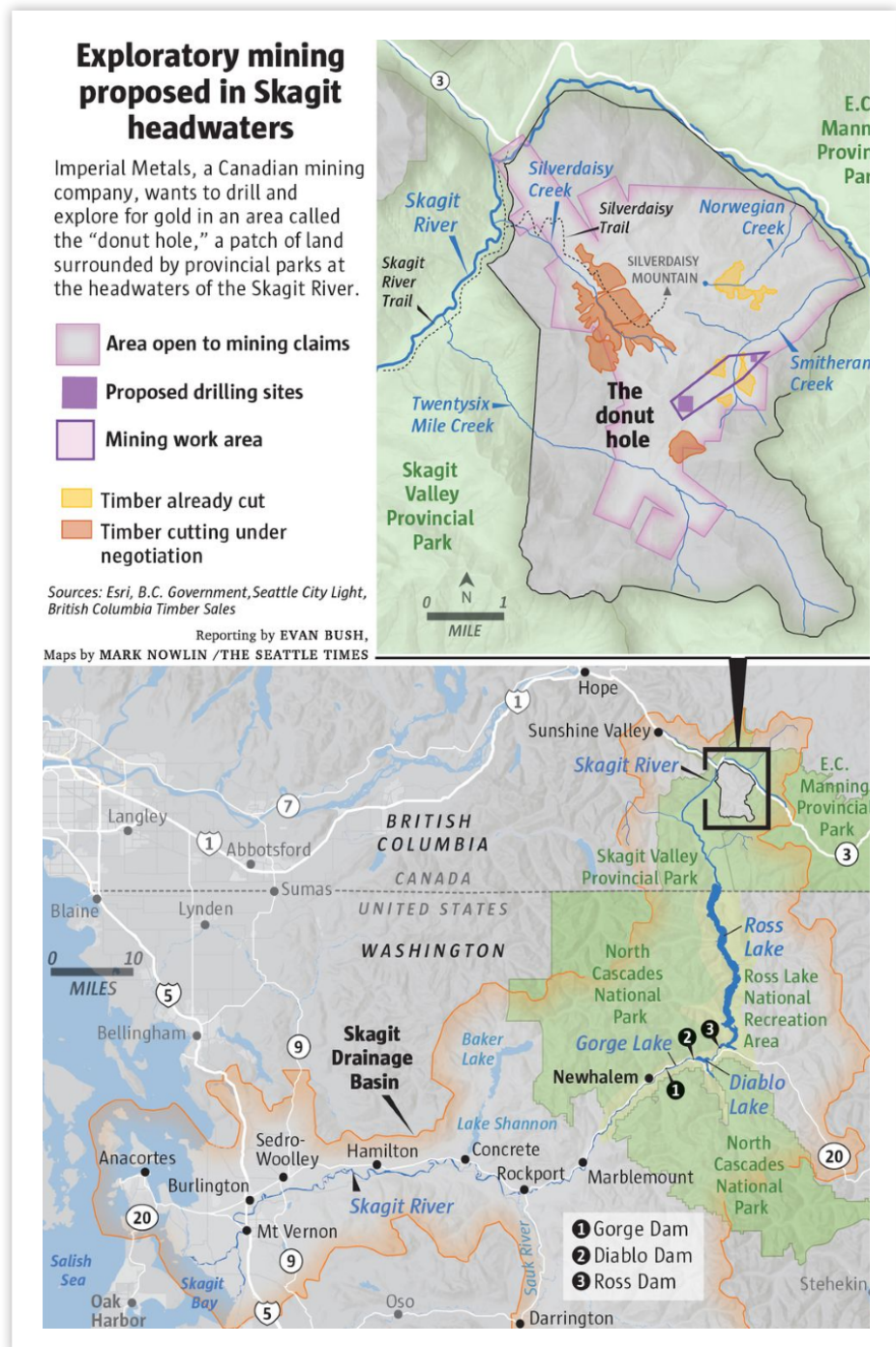


Figure 1: Map of Skagit River and headwaters by Mark Nowlin/The Seattle Times.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In order to gain a deeper understanding of strategic objectives and communication tactics at the organizational level, this study carried out in-depth interviews with communication leaders from some of the most prominent organizations involved in the Skagit Headwaters advocacy. In-depth interviews were used to understand the tactics and strategies used by environmental advocates. This interplay of interview data collection in or adjacent to impacted cross-border jurisdictions, alongside press releases and other public communication, allows the researcher to delve with specificity into emergent themes and topics such as conservation, sustainability, or economy, and to map out the most prominent themes of cross-border ecological communicators. These environmental communication professionals included senior directors and media practitioners associated with the following organizations from both sides of the U.S./Canada border: The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Conservation Northwest, Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission, Skagit Watershed Council, Washington Wild, and the Wilderness Committee.

The interviews were carried out in the qualitative tradition to gain unique organizational insights, but also to fulfill what McCracken (1988) described as the interview's potential for understanding the individual's internal logic and motivations through deliberation and dialogue. Individuals from the above organizations were invited to participate in long-form semi-structured interviews conducted via a video conferencing platform. While the coalition to stop the mining project at the Skagit Headwaters eventually included over 350 organizations or political representatives, these environmental advocacy groups were selected because they were among the most prominent in leading the outreach effort through their presence in media articles and public communication materials, and because they tended to represent stakeholders from the larger coalition. Prior to commencement of the interviews, the research protocol received approval from Western Washington University's Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number: 5007EX22).

4. RESULTS

4.1 REDEFINING THE SCOPE OF PROFESSIONAL WORK IN CROSS-BORDER ADVOCACY

The nature of the cross-border advocacy in two countries and multiple jurisdictions stretched environmental and communication practitioners in terms of the scale and scope of their operations and outreach. Though most of the U.S. organizations were located in Washington state, which is adjacent to the Canadian border, some cited less familiarity with Canadian environmental policy issues, but also with forms of government and policymaking. One U.S. organization admitted that “we didn’t do much or think much of cross-border stuff. Most of the maps (the organization worked with) stop at the border... I was mostly blind to it.” Another noted that it was difficult to break through to key decision-makers in Victoria, the B.C. provincial capital, as well as Ottawa. “We’re not even constituents of theirs.”

Other coalition members drew from historical experiences and understandings of the cross-border and Cascadia regions. Joe Foy, the Protected Areas Manager for the Vancouver, B.C.-based Wilderness Committee recalled his work with other environmental groups on both sides of the border during the early 1990s to establish a Cascades International Park. The proposal intended to more effectively manage the landscapes and ecosystems of the Cascades mountain range bioregion on both sides of the border, as well as to integrate management of different parks. However, the idea faced intense scrutiny as a result of concerns over private property, jurisdictional governance, and even national sovereignty (Miles, 2003). As Foy explained, “We failed on that, but we learned some valuable lessons.” Foy had also studied the cross-border coordination to stop the High Ross Dam from flooding the Upper Skagit.

4.2 MANAGING A COMPLEX AND GROWING COALITION DYNAMIC

Coalition advocacy can be challenging for organizers in various endeavors, including environmental protection. Organizers must confront a range of policy imperatives, stakeholder priorities, communication strategy approaches, and even firmly held ideological positions. Because coalition members in the Skagit headwaters saga were uniformly opposed to the permitting of the Imperial Metals goldmine, organizations within the movement were provided with breathing room to tailor their message and approach for their respective constituencies. Thus, partners can fulfill their own mission without being pigeon-holed into a stifling or inauthentic position. “Make sure you are structured so that everyone can be themselves,” said Foy. “That’s when we do the best. And be aware of what can hurt your partners inadvertently.”

Yet even with optimal operating conditions, the size of the coalition invariably created challenges. Richard Brocksmith of the Skagit Watershed Council admitted to the occasional misalignment within the larger communication messaging coming from the Donut Hole coalition. “I think you definitely lose some control on messaging and you don’t get to hear all the conversations and nuances that are happening outside of your own small circle,” he said. In addition to this concern, another challenge raised was the reality of conflicting organizational visions within the coalition. Because the Save the

Skagit enterprise included conservation groups, public utilities, and even small businesses, there was always the possibility for conflict between the organizations challenging the mining permit.

Yet the coalition was able to forge ahead by slotting different organizations into specialized roles. For example, some organizations provided greater expertise in navigating media in Washington state or British Columbia, while others provided on-the-ground monitoring. Others were well positioned to lobby governments in Olympia and Victoria. There was, according to Tori Ball of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), an “interplay between groups; we don’t all act in the same role. Some have an approach to government relations, other people or groups might focus on the public engagement and mobilizing people to speak up about an issue. It’s important to have both of those sides and also people in the middle.”

For many of the involved organizations, a strategic priority was to align the work of the Save the Skagit coalition with their own organizational mission and the aspirations of their respective memberships. One organization explained that the Donut Hole campaign provided an important opportunity for soliciting donations: “We are supporter driven; we always ask ourselves if this is something our supporters want us to do. So for us as an organization in terms of funding, growth, it ticked all the boxes.”

The flexibility within the Save the Skagit coalition allowed for organizations to tailor their communication and outreach in alignment with their missions and their constituencies; but it also allowed for the customizing of messaging in the respective national contexts. Foy, of the Wilderness Committee, referred to a “B.C.-centric” way of engaging with Washington state media.

This flourishing of advocacy groups as autonomous entities contributing to a cross-border ecosystem of environmental organizing was articulated by CPAWS’ Tori Ball, who compared the nature of the coalition to the interconnectedness of the Skagit watershed itself, with headwaters on the Canada side eventually turning into a vital watershed for Washington state communities and eventually an important food source for the region’s orca population when the river meets the Salish Sea. “It was helpful to emulate that approach in mobilization and communication,” said Ball. “The communication emulated the notion of a connected, cross-border watershed.”

The work of the larger Save the Skagit coalition also provided benefit to the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission (SEEC), which was established between British Columbia and the City of Seattle as part of the Ross Lake/Seven Mile Reservoir Treaty agreement signed between the U.S. and Canada in 1984. The agreement, which is in effect until 2064, leaves SEEC as a critical connection point between advocacy groups and government stakeholders. The sixteen-member commission, with a delegation of members from both sides of the border, oversees the Endowment Fund devoted to the Upper Skagit.

According to USA Co-Chair Leo Bodensteiner, SEEC didn’t work within the coalition, but rather worked alongside the effort to bring resolution to the mining permitting controversy, which included the retirement of mining tenures at the site. “We appreciated

every bit of their effort, and it didn't muddy the waters at all," said Bodensteiner. "Any pressure we could exert to get Imperial Metals to the table and settle on a number and complete the deal, that was in our best interest."

4.3 STRATEGIC MEDIA TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES

Assembling a large coalition to agree on an environmental position was the first important step in tackling the mining proposal at the Skagit headwaters. However, the coalition would not be able to advance its position, and sway publics and politicians, without successful public communication and engagement. The problem to solve, as one advocate noted, was how to get people to know about the issue in the first place. The less partisan nature of the Skagit Headwaters issue allowed the coalition to move quickly and take a strong, uniform position against the mining permit without alienating segments of the public. This contrasts with other environmental issues that can play out along political or ideological lines. As one coalition member noted, "with highly controversial projects like wolf management, or grizzly bears... our controversial carnivore friends... we take a lighter touch. For Donut Hole, it was banging pots and pans."

Interview participants noted that in the early phase of the Donut Hole advocacy, media outlets in Washington state were more receptive to the message and to the larger story, although media from both countries provided extensive reporting (see Table 3). For example, during the spring of 2019, the Seattle Times published 6 articles or op-eds devoted to the issue. However, with the exception of The Narwhal, a Canadian online publication focused on environmental reporting, and Castanet, a B.C. news website serving the province's Okanagan region, few of the early stories about the topic were featured in Canadian media. According to Washington Wild's Uniack, however, that changed with the implementation of a paid advertising strategy. The coalition bought full-page advertisements in the Vancouver Sun, the province's newspaper of record, and The Province, a popular tabloid daily published by the same company as the Vancouver Sun. According to Uniack, the paid strategy captured broad public interest in B.C. and helped generate roughly 600 emails to the province's premier, John Horgan. It also caught the attention of local and national media. After the ads run, the Donut Hole story received earned (unpaid, editorial) coverage in the Sun and Province, but also the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the Globe and Mail.

The surge of Canadian media coverage was also the result of one other key variable, according to the Wilderness Committee's Foy: the involvement of the United States in the story. "With the mainstream media like the Vancouver Sun, it was hard to get their interest until Washington state was involved," he said. "Suddenly it became a trade issue."

In conjunction with the cross-border media coverage, Washington Wild helped organize a letter-writing campaign. Furthermore, the SavetheSkagit coalition engaged tribal stakeholders in both countries during this process. One important result was the publication of an op-ed co-signed with the president of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs (UBCIC). As Uniack explained, "the First Nations are an extremely important voice for the (B.C. former premier) Horgan government. Having them weigh in on this issue

was important.” This proliferation of media dialogue was also complemented by a more grounded advocacy.

This approach, which featured visual depictions of the river and surrounding ecosystem in the Donut Hole area, was central to the Wilderness Committee’s contribution. “One of the things we do is ‘on the ground’,” said Foy. “I went up there multiple times in all of the seasons; we took multiple videos, including drone videos, made available to all of our allies including our Washington state allies and also the media.” In addition to this shared multimedia, Foy also took journalists to the Donut Hole area for a first-hand look at the impacted headwaters. These guided trips for reporters also paid further dividends in subsequent media coverage.

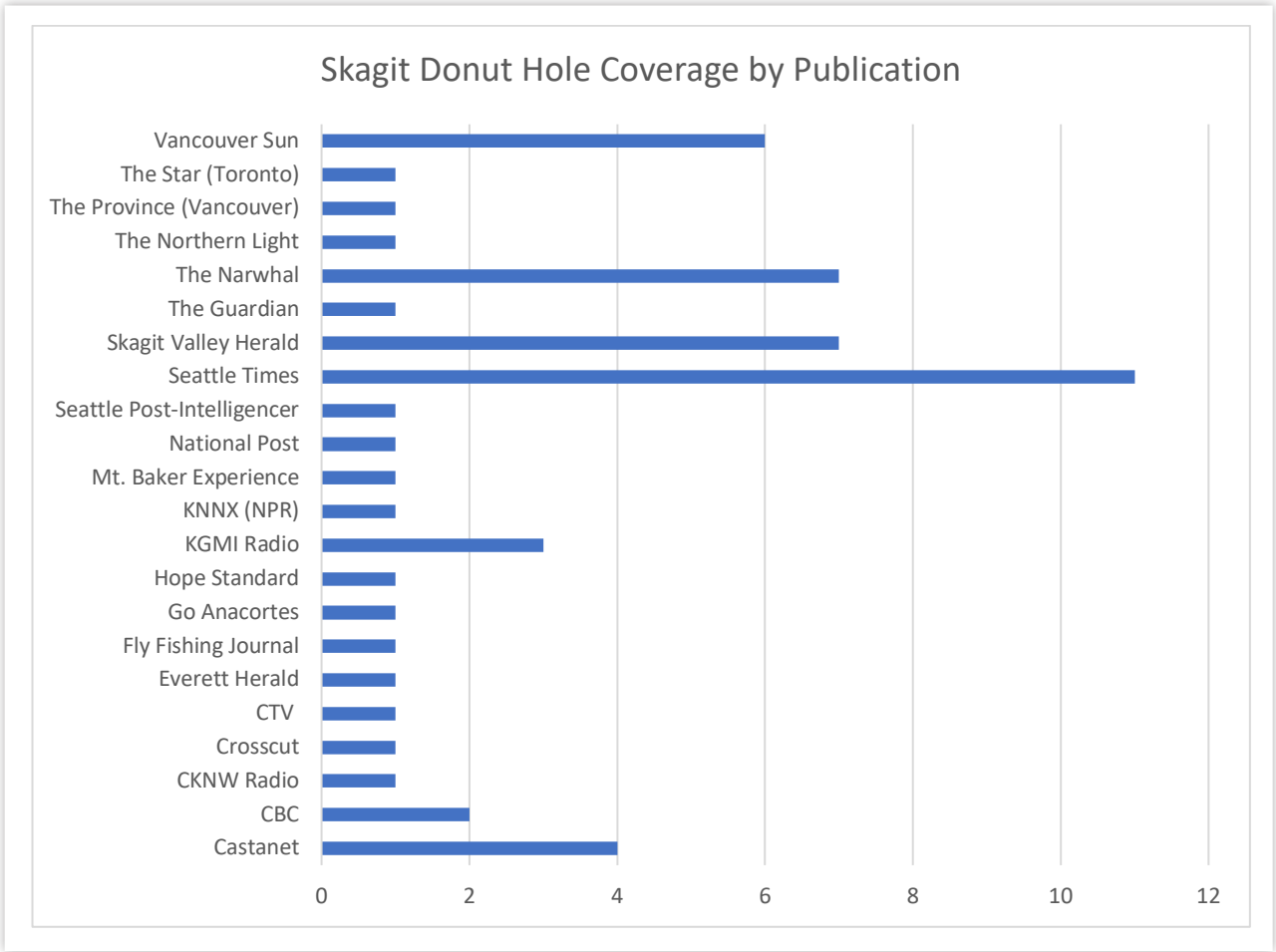


Table 3: Media coverage of Skagit Headwaters Donut Hole in B.C. and Washington State

Organizations from the coalition developed an extensive summary report to provide background information and context to media, policymakers, and the public. Additionally, organizations like the Skagit Watershed Council used the broader media program as an opportunity to do direct member outreach to keep them abreast of larger developments at the border. The Council reached out to the 13 local governments on the watershed (including cities, towns, counties, public utility districts, and tribes) to share with their respective constituencies or to develop a local resolution.

That meant constructing and contextualizing through two distinct national experiences. The partnership between environmental advocates on both sides of the U.S./Canada border allowed for a more holistic addressing of planning and tactics. As one advocate noted, “I think there were existing barriers – political, historical, lack of knowledge – that the coalition allowed us to address, by having those connections.” At the same time, however, the mining permit was positioned differently to media and public audiences in the U.S. and Canada because of their different interests. As one leading advocate noted, “You have to play to both sides of the border.... Understanding how a B.C. media outlet will frame this, and the language. On the U.S. side, it comes across different.”

While the tone of some of the media coverage felt oppositional in terms of the relationship between the coalition and governments, the Save the Skagit program was careful to include the governments in its successes. As CPAWS’ Tori Ball noted, the organization issued media releases during moments for organizing, but also moments for celebration, and this outreach included government officials. “We wanted the government to know when they’ve done good work, to celebrate... to encourage government to make good choices; and to bring in the wider community to include them in the celebration.” Notes of thanks also went out to officials for their support of key milestones to conserve the environmental sanctity of the Skagit Headwaters.

4.4 THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF CROSS-BORDER ADVOCACY

The crafting of messages that took on distinct meanings on the U.S. and Canadian sides of the border underpins the role of strategic narrative in transboundary environmentalism. “Let folks on each side of the border tell the story the way they want to tell it,” said Joe Foy, of the Wilderness Committee in B.C. In addition to the need for autonomous messaging on the part of individual organizations, he expressed the need for crafting of messages tailored for the respective citizenries of Canada and the U.S. The Donut Hole saga took on different meanings depending on one’s location and national identity. While the Skagit River is known as one of the iconic watersheds in Washington state, owing to its ecological value, economic impact, and downriver population centers, the Skagit headwaters was also framed in Canada as a prominent recreation destination. “We cranked up the idea that this was a threat to Manning and Skagit Provincial Parks,” said Foy. “Many families over many generations have good memories of these parks. This was very different than the Washington state message.”

Thus, member organizations of Save the Skagit were immersed not only in coalition building, stakeholder engagement, and the deployment of strategic communication tactics for journalists and the public. They were also mindful of how the story was being constructed in order to capture broad public interest and policymakers in both countries. Washington Wild’s Tom Uniack pointed out that the elements of a compelling narrative came ready-made in the Skagit headwaters saga. The company behind the mining proposal, Imperial Metals Corporation, shared a name with the antagonistic Imperial Army in the Star Wars film franchise. “There is no doubt that Imperial Metals is aptly named,” said Uniack, referring to the company’s scope of operations across British Columbia. “We felt like Rebel Fighters on the hot planet,” he said, referring to a popular scene from the movie Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back.

A major rhetorical driver of the larger advocacy was the naming of the Donut Hole itself. “Donut hole? I think it is fantastic marketing,” quipped Brocksmitth. “It is unique, and it really describes it. Anytime you can get something that is unique and not branded to something else, it is an effective tool.” Foy of the Wilderness Committee noted that even the moniker was immersed in transboundary dynamics. When his organization spoke with British Columbia audiences at the beginning of the campaign, it was known as the “Manning Park Donut Hole,” even as his counterparts south of the border affixed Skagit to the donut hole name.

As the media became increasingly interested in the dialogue between Washington’s governor, Seattle’s mayor, and the premier of British Columbia, the “Skagit Headwaters Donut Hole” name eventually stuck in both countries. According to Foy, the moniker had its origins with bureaucratic discussions decades ago when the British Columbia government established Skagit Valley Provincial Park. The name was catchy for media headlines, but it also mitigated confusion over the area’s identity, with references to other names such as Silver Daisy eventually giving way to the Donut Hole moniker.

4.5 LESSONS LEARNED AND FACING THE FUTURE

The Skagit headwaters donut hole advocacy was seen as an important milestone not only in regional conservation and protection, but also for matters of transboundary governance. One organization noted that previous to the events at the Upper Skagit, the watershed was well behind other bioregions, such as the Salish Sea, in terms of cross-border dialogue, communication, and planning: “This highlighted that the watershed doesn’t stop at the boundary.”

Thus, the Skagit headwaters controversy has been a catalyst for organizations in both Washington state and British Columbia to further explore and engage with bioregions issues where industrial activity or resources extraction might conflict with the health of ecosystems or communities. “There’s more work to be done,” said Brocksmitth of the Skagit Watershed Council, who noted that there are other cross-border watersheds with adjacent mineral resources where similar environmental challenges might arise. “That’s one of the things that I’m excited about... Let’s use this coalition for the next challenge.” That sentiment was echoed by the Wilderness Committee’s Joe Foy. “The Donut Hole has been very helpful. Every time we work together we learn some things.” But, he said, there is more work to be done along the border at a multitude of locations. “There is a broader movement that revolves around Canadian mines and mine proposals flowing into the U.S. – into the 49th parallel and into Alaska” he noted.

Conservation Northwest’s Andrea Wolf-Buck noted that some of the partners from the Skagit headwaters episode have continued to partner with the organization in opposing copper mining activity at Copper Mountain, located a short drive east of the donut hole, with watershed ramifications similar to the gold mining proposal. The Copper Mountain project, which is already active, is located in a valley between Wolf Creek and the Similkameen River. The regional watershed flows into Washington to meet the Okanagan River and eventually the Columbia River.

In addition to working with national and regional governments from Canada and the U.S., the advocates underscored the importance of working with Washington state tribes and B.C.'s First Nations throughout the process, and how their involvement will be central to the future of the Skagit Headwaters but also other impacted areas in the borderlands separating B.C. from Washington state. That involvement includes joint conservation and advocacy efforts, but also the integration of Indigenous communities in issues of governance, land usage, and culture. While the Skagit Headwaters Donut Hole campaign has provided important lessons for environmentalists navigating new and ongoing mining ventures in the Cascade range borderlands region, it also offers a template for similar issues occurring in the Okanagan, Boundary, and Kootenay transboundary regions, and the borderlands where Alaska, B.C., and the Yukon meet.

Skirmishes between environmentalists and interests from industry and government are bound to drive public dialogue and debate in the cross-border Cascadia corridor and other ecological zones in the U.S./Canada borderlands. Yet the longer-term vision articulated by Foy harkened back to the ethos and spirit of the binational Cascades International Park. "The idea of collaboration, expanding protections, for the recognized benefit on both sides of the border, that's an idea that carries on into the centuries ahead of us."

CONCLUSION

Deliberations over the Skagit River watershed have played out in the westerly reaches of the U.S.-Canada borderlands for over a century. These debates have been an issue of particular social and ecological importance within the U.S./Canada Cascadia region. This in great part because of the Skagit's myriad connections to regional and tribal culture, its recreational opportunities, its relationship to two major metropolitan regions in Seattle and Vancouver, and its rich ecology and wildlife.

Analyzing the cross-border networks and local interests involved in the Skagit Watershed Donut Hole controversy, this study identifies three distinct takeaways for cross-border environmental communication. Firstly, in the case of international watersheds, cross-border advocacy 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 and 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 in addition to established media enterprises such as newspapers. 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. This rhetorical construction of an environmental issue by a coalition of organizations emulates the call by Frome (1998) for environmental communicators to infuse these debates with the power of emotion and imagery that transcends scientific and technical data by itself: “Transformation, whether of an individual or an entire society, depends upon intangible values of human heart and spirit.”

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 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. Furthermore, these same proposals and projects are deliberated by non-profit, non-governmental (NGO), and advocacy organizations that are best positioned to shape the narrative for the larger public but also policymakers on both sides of the border.

Thus, infrastructure and resources extraction projects in the Cascadia region such as the Trans Mountain Pipeline, the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 proposal, and the Copper Mountain mine are bound to be deliberated within an internationalized and integrated public sphere that represents a multiplicity of stakeholders. For policymakers, the Skagit Watershed 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.

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