



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 30, 2020

FIRST NATIONS AND MUNICIPAL LEADERS FROM THE NORTH AND CENTRAL COASTS CONTINUE TO ENACT TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS; BC AND CANADA FAIL TO SUPPORT LIFE-SAVING WORK

Background

Haida Gwaii, along with North and Central coast communities, are working together to protect residents and the region. In unity, First Nations and municipal governments have developed community-based strategies to prevent non-essential travel into remote communities.

On April 6, North and Central Coast communities issued a joint letter calling on provincial and federal authorities to support travel restrictions (the joint letter can be viewed [here](#)). In more than three weeks, signatories have not received support from BC or Canada, and the danger to remote communities was compounded by BC's recent declaration that fishing and hunting are essential services, which permits non-residents to fish and hunt in First Nations' territories. The pressure is increasing with more confirmed cases in the region and COVID-19 impacts in the small Island community of Alert Bay.

With a lack of action, First Nations are forced on to the frontlines and bear a tremendous amount of risk to protect communities. Following a checkpoint preventing non-residents from visiting Haida Gwaii on April 27, Dr. Bonnie Henry was asked if communities can tell visitors they are not welcome. Dr. Henry responded, "This is part, of course, of our relationship with First Nations communities and their self-government and self-determination and they do have the ability and authorities to make those decisions for their communities."

Quotes

"The Tsimshian Nation is preparing our own actions to protect our members and the people living in our territories. Lax Kw'alaams has reserve lands that cross Highway 16 between Terrace and Prince Rupert and we are preparing to create a checkpoint to monitor and enact travel restrictions. We cannot let this virus come into our community, there is just too much at risk for our people."

– Lax Kw'alaams Mayor, Garry Reece

"The federal and provincial governments have a moral obligation to be on the right side of history this time. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the extraordinary threats it poses to knowledge, languages, cultures and people is an opportunity towards real reconciliation. So far, the province is failing in that responsibility. The Haida Nation will continue to take the actions necessary to protect our Elders, fluent Haida speakers, and communities. We will take every measure to prohibit non-essential travel to Haida Gwaii."

– Haida Nation President, Gaagwiis *Jason Alsop*

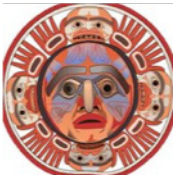
"We cannot forget the ravages of past pandemics and will do everything we can to prevent a repeat of the past. Canada and BC should do the same. They can start by respecting our laws, coordinating with our government action, and sharing resources that are commensurate with the unique needs of our communities."

– Heiltsuk Nation Chief Councillor, Marilyn Slett

"Boating on our waterways is another way people from outside can access our communities and put our people at risk. Especially since our communities have the only resources and emergency response staff to deal with medical emergencies or broken-down boaters. Gitga'at will continue to enforce the closure of our marina in Hartley Bay to outside vessels and we support all other coastal communities doing the same. The frightening situation in Alert Bay makes it clear that small remote communities are at great risk."

– Gitga'at First Nation Chief Councillor, Arnold Clifton





"The inclusion of hunting and fishing as essential services by the BC government does not mean that travelling to remote areas of the province is acceptable during this pandemic. This is not the time to leave your home communities. The District of Port Edward is equally concerned about the travellers who do not seem to be getting the message and we will continue to collaborate with our neighbors, other government agencies and health providers to protect our most vulnerable."

– District of Port Edward Mayor, Knut Bjorndal



"Our unity is our strength in any emergency, unity of purpose and willingness to work together in kindness for the wellbeing of all. When public safety is at risk, our resilient communities have an admirable history of putting differences aside and getting the job done. While there are different governments with different mandates at play, in the end, we all want to protect our Elders, our babies, our vulnerable community members and protect our health care resources. When we work together, anything is possible. We will continue to call on the province and the federal governments to support our local needs and priorities while we all work through this pandemic."

– Central Coast Regional District Chair, Samuel Schooner



"Local governments are really disappointed with the province's lack of action during this pandemic. We need local responses that work for our communities and BC has not provided the backing needed. Our thoughts are with the community of Alert Bay. It took a tragedy for the province to permit the state of local emergency, and communities are taking a proactive approach to protect our residents here on the North Coast."

– North Coast Regional District Chair, Barry Pages



Quick facts

- After the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, First Nations and municipalities declared states of local emergency within their jurisdictions.
- On March 26, BC suspended municipal local states of emergency.
- First Nations states of emergency are still in place under federal jurisdiction. The Haida Nation state of emergency remains in place under the Constitution of the Haida Nation.
- On April 23, the province declared hunting and fishing as essential services.
- On April 23, the Canadian Coast Guard's assistant commissioner for the western region, Roger Girouard, issued a letter cautioning "fellow mariners" not to travel to small coastal communities during this pandemic.
- Prime Minister Trudeau has acknowledged that Indigenous communities face greater health vulnerabilities at the best of times. This is exacerbated during the Coronavirus pandemic.
- Canada's Chief Public Health Officer has recognized Indigenous communities are at a higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19.
- The federal government has a duty to consult with First Nations communities regarding food harvesting and rights.
- With the legacy of colonization, First Nations must take extreme measures to protect Elders and others who hold traditional and cultural knowledge and land-based languages.
- First Nations' oral narratives are passed from one generation to the next and have a cultural responsibility to ensure intergenerational knowledge transmission.
- Northern communities have strained health care resources – local hospitals are not equipped to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.



Media inquiries

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