

THE POWER OF DATA

SAIK'UZ FIRST NATION – Located deep in the heart of the British Columbia interior, about a 10-hour drive north of Vancouver, the small, secluded community of Saik'uz is proudly and unmistakably off-the-beaten path—but that doesn't mean it's a stranger to the power of data.

Just ask Stanley Thomas.

Having grown up in the tiny and tight-knit Carrier community of just over 1,000, Thomas (a former Saik'uz Chief) says that while the remote community of Saik'uz (pronounced Sai-cuz) might operate on a slower speed, data has always played a big role in its day-to-day routines.

“Data, to me, we've had it all our lives” he says “but it isn't always written down: it's in here” he adds, pointing to his temple.

As way of explanation, he describes how when he was a young man each day at his family home would involve the same post-dinner tradition.

“After we ate, my mom and dad would gather all of us kids, my brothers, my sisters and my cousins, together in the living room where our father would tell us stories that had been passed down to him.” he says “They called it the Giving of Time. One night he'd start a story—a legend, usually—and the next night he'd ask us where he'd left off. If no one could answer him, then he knew we hadn't been listening and he'd start all over again. ”

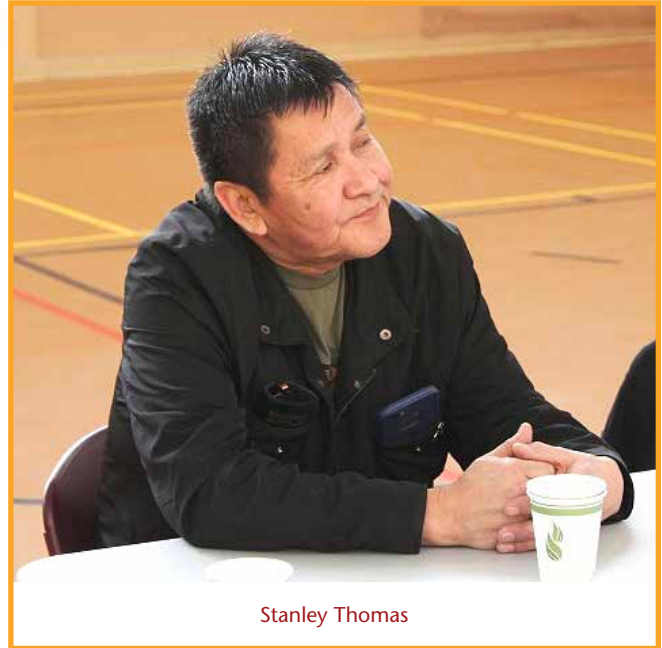
“That's a lesson you don't forget” he says with a laugh “but it shows you how smart they were.”

For many First Nations people, this is a funny (and likely familiar) story that speaks to the important role that oral storytelling plays in maintaining their culture and history. To Thomas, it's also an example of how indigenous data (or traditional knowledge, by another name) is being passed on, via oral history, from one generation to the next.

“Our data is here, in our own way, it's in our heads” he says sitting in Saik'uz's school gym hung high with

Saik'uz First Nation

Where data is a long-standing tradition



Stanley Thomas

banners for its championship fastball team. “It's about who we are, and where we came from.”

This echoes what many First Nations people—and increasingly more academics and scientists—have been saying for years: First Nations have been in the data gathering game for generations. The fact is that this can take many different shapes and sizes, whether it's the dissemination of knowledge through traditional storytelling, the collection of animal migration paths from the land, or community data collected by First Nations-led surveys.

That's exactly how the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) approaches its survey work, whether it's the upcoming First Nations Labour and Employment Survey (FNLEDS), the First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education and Employment Survey (FNREEES), or the recently completed First Nations Regional Health Survey (FNRHS, or RHS)—as part of an established tradition of First Nations data gathering used to inform the health and well-being of First Nations people.

Established in 1997, the RHS is the only national First Nations-governed health survey in Canada. Overseen by the FNIGC, a First Nations run non-profit, and its Regional Partners the RHS gathers vital information in more than 250 on-reserve and northern First Nations communities by utilizing Western and traditional understandings of health and well-being.

As a result, over the past 20 years the RHS has become a key source of data for First Nations communities and federal departments who want to inform their policy and planning with quality, relevant information. And that's the key reason that Saik'uz, a member of the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, decided to take part in the RHS this year for the first time.

Jasmine Thomas, the RHS Field Supervisor for Saik'uz and the surrounding region, oversees data collection for Phase 3 of the survey in about 20 percent of BC. Young and driven, she understands the role that RHS data can play in affecting positive change, which helped convince her to take the at-times demanding position.

"Data comes in many shapes and sizes including the stories we are told from our parents and grandparents" she says "But we also see the importance of planning and policy, and the role that good data can play in it."

Like many First Nations communities, Thomas says Saik'uz is in the midst of a population boom, which brings with it a host of policy, programming and infrastructure needs including housing, daycare, senior's care, and health care issues.

"I think we're in a new era of recognizing the power of data here" Cora Mcintosh, Saik'uz's Health Manager and past Council member, says.

"For many generations the information that was collected here was used against us, and used for other people's advantage; not ours. So I think now we're in an era of realizing the power of the data and how we can start integrating our traditional values and morals to what we want to see in our communities."



A mountainous view from the shore of Nulki Lake in Saik'uz First Nation

“As a community we’re really trying to start to take back the knowledge that we hold”

She's hoping that national- and regional-level data from the RHS Phase 3 (which will be available later in 2017) will help inform the kinds of decision-making that can contribute to positive change.

"As a community we're really trying to start to take back the knowledge that we hold. We're realising that the data was always intended for someone else, it was never really meant for us" she adds "And so we need to start collecting the right information, so that we can move forward."

Like the people of Saik'uz, FNIGC realises that the right information, whether its survey data or stories handed down from generation to generation, is critical to the health and well-being of First Nations communities.

"My father would always say Soo-naoodle" says Chief Thomas. "It means 'Do your best'. He never said much, but he said that a lot. And you have to understand, the things your parents tell you, that's data too."

"It's those simple little things: family, respect, love for each other—and the true stories of our people."

For more information about the RHS and FNIGC, please visit FNIGC.ca