



Indigenous Marine Stewardship

Great Bear Sea PFP, Canada

Following its launch in 2024, partners of the Great Bear Sea PFP have accelerated action towards long-term conservation commitments. Across the region, partners such as Gitga'a't First Nation, Gitxaala Nation, and the Haida Nation advanced the designation of new protected areas in their traditional territories, laying the groundwork for on-the-water management and stewardship. These early designations reflect how implementation is unfolding through First Nation's leadership, place-based action, combined with collaborative governance and planning with Federal and Provincial government partners.

Humpback whale in Knight Inlet, Vancouver Island, BC, Canada © Gunter

Following its launch in 2024, partners of the Great Bear Sea PFP have accelerated action towards long-term conservation commitments.

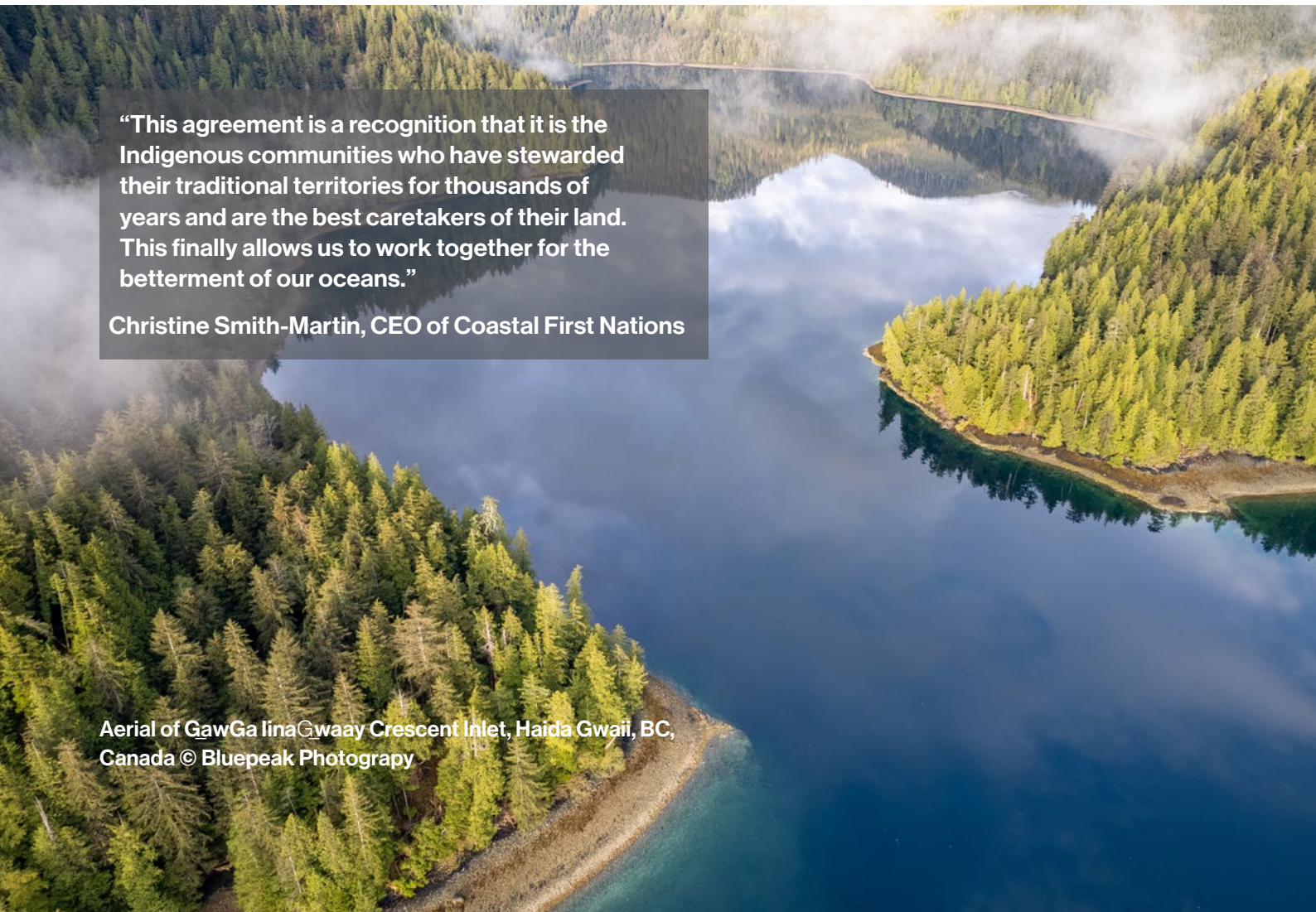
Across the region, partners such as Gitga'at First Nation, Gitxaala Nation, and the Haida Nation advanced the designation of new protected areas in their traditional territories, laying the groundwork for on-the-water management and stewardship. These early designations reflect how implementation is unfolding through First Nation's leadership, place-based action, combined with collaborative governance and planning with Federal and Provincial government partners.

The Great Bear Sea PFP formalized a long-standing vision shared by 17 First Nations, the Government of Canada, and the Province of British Columbia, with support from nonprofit partners including Nature United, the Canadian affiliate of The Nature Conservancy. The agreement applies to a marine region spanning two-thirds of British Columbia's coastline, from northern Vancouver Island to the Alaska border, and established a co-governed model for long-term conservation and financing.

Through the PFP, CAD \$335 million is being mobilized to support stewardship, management, and Marine Protected Area implementation. This financing is expected to leverage approximately CAD \$750 million over 20 years to conserve and improve ocean management across 25 million acres of ocean, or 30 percent of the Great Bear Sea.

In parallel with site designations, partners focused in 2025 on building the systems needed to support durable implementation of the larger Great Bear Sea Network of Marine Protected Areas. This included activating collaborative governance bodies established through the PFP and related agreements, advancing monitoring frameworks that integrate ecological, cultural, social, and governance indicators, and embedding Guardian and stewardship programs into monitoring and management processes.

Together, these efforts represent foundational work. They ensure that as protections expand, they are backed by the effective governance, stewardship capacity, and information systems needed to support adaptive management and long-term conservation outcomes at scale.

An aerial photograph of a lush, green forested coastline. A large bay or inlet is visible, with mist or low clouds hanging over the water and the forest. The water is a deep blue, and the forest is a vibrant green. The scene is peaceful and scenic.

“This agreement is a recognition that it is the Indigenous communities who have stewarded their traditional territories for thousands of years and are the best caretakers of their land. This finally allows us to work together for the betterment of our oceans.”

Christine Smith-Martin, CEO of Coastal First Nations

Aerial of GawGa lina Gwaay Crescent Inlet, Haida Gwaii, BC, Canada © Bluepeak Photography

In July 2025, Gitga'at First Nation and Gitxaala Nation, in partnership with the Province of British Columbia, established a new 3500 acre Wildlife Management Area covering critical ecosystems in the Kishkosh and Kitkiata inlets on the north coast of the Great Bear Sea. The waterways shelter pristine river systems, extensive estuaries, tidal flats and shorelines, as well as the at-risk seabirds and salmon that rely on them. The area also includes sites of ecological and cultural importance and supports food security for coastal communities. The area includes key food harvesting locations and sacred cultural sites that sustain the Gitga'at Nation. It will be stewarded by Gitga'at Guardian Watchmen, who already maintain a presence in the inlets and conduct patrols, monitoring, and safeguarding activities. The protected area will be co-developed and co-managed by the Nations and the Province of B.C., and a management plan is being developed to balance conservation objectives with appropriate use.

In October 2025, the Haida Nation formally announced the establishment of two marine refuges on Haida Gwaii — G aw áahlii (Masset Inlet) and X aana K aahlii (Skidegate Inlet). Together, these refuges cover approximately 29.6 square kilometres of ocean and will be co-managed by the Council of the Haida Nation and Fisheries and Oceans Canada. The refuges protect key habitat for salmon, herring, seabirds, harbor seals, and other species, while contributing to local food security and cultural continuity. These designations build on nearly two decades of Haida-led marine planning and form part of the broader Great Bear Sea Marine Protected Area Network.

Also in October 2025, the Gitxaala Nation and the Government of Canada announced the establishment of the Banks Marine Refuge west of Lax k'naga Sts'ool (Banks Island) within Nluut'iksgm Laxyuubm Gitxaala, Gitxaala territory on British Columbia's north coast. The refuge protects ecologically rich waters that include coral and sponge communities, kelp forests, and eelgrass beds that support marine species such as ts'mhoon (rockfish). It was co-developed under the Gitxaala Nation Marine Protected Area Agreement, a governance agreement between Gitxaala Nation, Canada, and British Columbia that guides the collaborative establishment and management of marine protected areas. It is co-governed by Gitxaala Nation and Fisheries and Oceans Canada and adds 435.83 square kilometres of protected ocean area toward the regional Network of Marine Protected Areas.

To safeguard these culturally important and sensitive ecosystems, the Banks Marine Refuge prohibits all commercial and recreational prawn and crab trap fisheries, in addition to existing fishing closures for rockfish conservation. The designation reflects Gitxaala Adaawx, Ayaawx, and Gugwilx'ya'ansk (laws and practices), alongside Canada's legal framework for marine ecosystem protection. The Banks Marine Refuge demonstrates how collaboration between First Nations and Canada can translate Indigenous stewardship priorities into durable, place-based marine protection.

“Indigenous Nations are holistic people. Going forward, the relevant Nations will negotiate the status of individual Marine Protected Areas along the coast. The Nations will have a say on what goes and what doesn't go on in these areas.”

Merv Child, executive director of N_anwak_olas Council

The first phase of PFP implementation across the Great Bear Sea offers several early lessons for large-scale, Indigenous-led marine conservation efforts.

- Coordination across multiple initiatives and agreements is necessary to move from commitment to implementation. Progress depended on alignment across the PFP, the MPA Network Agreement, and the Nation-to-Nation governance agreements, with no single instrument or initiative operating independently.
- Stewardship capacity is essential to translating governance decisions into on-the-water action. First Nations' stewardship and Guardian programs function as a practical link between governance, monitoring, and implementation by integrating local knowledge and on-the-water presence into management processes.
- Implementation progresses most effectively when governance, monitoring, stewardship, and financing advance together. Moving these systems forward in parallel supports readiness for adaptive management, rather than sequencing them in isolation.
- A staged implementation pathway enables progress without requiring uniform timelines or outcomes. Marine Protected Area sites are advancing at different paces based on governance and planning readiness, allowing progress to be tracked while accounting for site-specific context.