

Nuu-chah-nulth Co-host International Conference

The 12th Annual International Congress for Ethnobiology wrapped up in Tofino on May 14, bringing to a close one of the largest conferences the town has ever seen. Attracting more than 350 people from over 50 countries, the congress was hosted by Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, the Tofino Botanical Gardens, and the International Society of Ethnobiology.

"The congress is about bringing people together who study the relationship between humans, ecosystems, and the environment," said Kelly Poirier, a member of the congress' organizing committee and Tseshaht First Nation. "We want to ensure the relationship between culture and biodiversity remains invigorated for future generations."

Held bi-annually in different locations around the world, the congress plays host to scientists, academics, journalists, indigenous scholars, and community activists who tackle difficult and challenging issues. This year's themes included food security and sovereignty, language, and the preservation of sacred places. The Nuu-chah-nulth principle of Hishuk-ish Tsawalk (everything is one) was the overarching focus.

"As Nuu-chah-nulth, we understand the relationship between language and our governance to the places where we live and the health of the ecosystem. Hishuk-ish Tsawalk gives everyone a word to define that relationship," Poirier said.

Nuu-chah-nulth people and Nations participated in every level of the congress. Umeek (Dr. Richard Atleo) was the session's keynote speaker. Poirier and sister Dawn Foxcroft sat on the organizing committee,

along with Levi Martin of Tla-o-qui-aht. Another sisterly duo, Gisele and Tsimka Martin of Tla-o-qui-aht, delivered field trip sessions, while others took part as panellists and presenters (including Eli Enns, John Rampanen, Levi Martin, and Umeek.)

Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation also performed a memorable opening ceremony featuring traditional songs and dances. "Those were picked by the Ha'wiih," said Levi Martin. "They're usually a show of what they have in their territory."

The Congress included a wide range of formats for people to share their knowledge, ideas and experiences, ranging from talking circles, to film viewings and discussions, cultural performances, field trips, oral presentations and poster sessions.

Uu-a-thluk staff and contractors hosted a session featuring Central Region Biologist Katie Beach as moderator. Participants included Dawn Foxcroft talking about Uu-a-thluk's unique approach, Don Hall talking about Nuu-chah-nulth fishing rights, and Beach talking about sea otters in Nuu-chah-nulth Ha-ha-houlthee.

Later in the congress, the Nashuk Youth Council talked about their journeys to reconnect with traditional foods through Uu-a-thluk-sponsored activities. Their session featured a screening of seven digital stories. "In 1778, Nuu-chah-nulth people discovered Captain James Cook," said Damon Rampanen to many chuckles. He later added, "To this day, youth are colonizing ourselves by buying things because other kids have it. You don't want to be known as the kid who doesn't have the iPod."

The youth received a standing ovation for their efforts, drawing comments from participants from around the world. "We salute you," said Finnish audience member. "All the stories you have told—you have done a great thing."

Poirier later reflected on the congress' success. "We wanted to give people a taste of what it's like to live in this coastal community and I think we've achieved that. That's probably the most exciting part."



12TH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ethnobiology

Did you know?

Twenty years ago, at the inaugural ICE held in Brazil, more than 600 people adopted the Declaration of Belém, which outlines ways to recognize Indigenous experts as authorities and meaningfully and equitably engage Indigenous people in all projects that affect them, their resources, and their environments.



Members of the Nashuk Youth Council address delegates during the International Congress of Ethnobiology. From left to right: Damon Rampanen, Nikkie Watts, Tony (Herbert) Mountain, and Keenan Jules.

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