

# First Nations deacon hopes B.C. law will give greater voice to Indigenous people

Deacon Rennie Nahanee remembers collecting seafood on the shores of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, near Vancouver, in the 1960s.

“We would go on the beach and could dig up clam, crab, and shrimp right off there. That’s when I was young,” he said. “You can’t do it now and I wouldn’t do it now, it’s too polluted.”



**Deacon Rennie Nahanee**

Seeing the environment change around him has Deacon Nahanee, a member of the Squamish First Nation, and many other Indigenous people concerned about having their voices heard more loudly and clearly in decision-making in their province.

Now that the B.C. Legislature voted unanimously Nov. 26 in favour of adopting the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Deacon Nahanee is cautiously optimistic.

“If it gives more power to Indigenous people, whatever those rights might be, the right to clean water, the right to fresh air, the right to have a government, the right to being a person,” then he supports the new legislation.

“I’m sure that the political situation for B.C.’s Indigenous people will

improve” with the acceptance of UNDRIP, said Deacon Nahanee, though how much remains to be seen.

A much-debated part of the bill called for “free, prior, and informed consent” from Indigenous peoples before development projects are started on their land.

The deacon supports that requirement but is unsure how much of a difference the new bill will have when it comes to real-time debate about environmental issues.

“Pipelines, for example; if they have the support of the government, they come in and put those pipelines through. They don’t really have to consult with the Indigenous population.”

With UNDRIP in practice in B.C., “maybe they will have to. Maybe we will have a say as Indigenous people of what’s going to happen, but I doubt it.”

He has other doubts, too. Why did Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States reject UNDRIP when 144 countries voted in favour in 2007?

Canada later changed its mind on UNDRIP, and in 2016, NDP MP Romeo Saganash tabled a bill to implement it in Canadian legislation. It failed in the Senate.

“There’s got to be a reason why Canada was rejecting it, and the United States,” said Deacon Nahanee.

He has heard that even if the legislation is adopted, “it would take 25 years for things to move into place. It’s a long time. It could be the same for British Columbia, too.”

B.C. is the first Canadian province or territory to accept UNDRIP. The government in the Northwest Territories announced Nov. 2 it would make implementing the declaration a priority as well. It’s unclear if other parts of the country will follow suit

The Alberta government says it’s committed to the principles of UNDRIP and that it’s an “early stage” of dialogue with Indigenous peoples and communities about implementing its principles. “It will take time as we take each step together.”

Deacon Nahanee is not eager to wait around to find out. “I’m happy they are doing it and I hope good things happen from it, but I’m not holding my breath about it.”

Deacon Nahanee has participated in several protests on environmental issues, and he said if he feels his voice isn’t heard, UNDRIP or no UNDRIP, he will continue to speak up for a way of life he wishes he had not lost.

"It's not about me. It's about the ones that are not born yet, the ones that are coming after us. I have to think about: what did I do, and what can I pass on to next generations? I enjoyed clean rivers and fresh air when I was young, but I don't see that in the future for our young people," he said.

"This is an awesome country. I've been to other countries in the world, but this is the best one. I want to protect that."

*-With files from Grandin Media*