

## Creating Order in Ladysmith

Edward Hill

When Dana McFarland arrived at the offices of the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, she faced a librarian's nightmare. Hundreds of boxes of First Nations research papers, journal articles and legal opinions sat stacked, with no cataloguing and in no discernible order, in the Treaty Group's portable building on the outskirts of Ladysmith, B.C.

Amassing the documents was meant to give an information edge to negotiators seeking a self-governance treaty for the six First Nations represented within the Treaty Group. Instead, the papers became an incoherent burden eating into floor space and adding inertia to the notoriously slow pace of negotiations, now in year 14.

"Two years ago we realized we had a critical mass of data, more than we could efficiently find," says Brian Thom, a negotiator with the Treaty Group. "We needed a professional librarian to come in and help."

### A professional to the rescue

With small-town serendipity, a top-flight librarian just happened to be in the neighbourhood. McFarland, librarian for Royal Roads University in Victoria, lives only a few blocks from Thom in Ladysmith, a picturesque seaside community on Vancouver Island's east coast.

Royal Roads University agreed to a year-long secondment, and McFarland set to work building an

information management system from scratch. She mapped out a classification and key-word strategy as she and her assistant, Della Daniels, digitized documents into the Xerox Docushare database.

The main challenge was avoiding losses in translation. Many documents were written in Hul'qumi'num, an ancient Coast Salish language transcribed with the Roman alphabet for less than 100 years. Spellings could be inconsistent even between Aboriginal communities separated by less than 50 kilometres.

"It's a big issue to have systematization with a language that is primarily oral," McFarland says. Treaty Group First Nations members made executive decisions on Hul'qumi'num spellings, she says.

### Closing information gaps

Stacks of binders and documents remain, but by any reckoning, McFarland's library framework was a resounding success, and with deep ramifications.

"If we can find information quickly, it does create an advantage," says Robert Morales, chief negotiator with the Treaty Group. "At the negotiating table it is good to respond to issues quickly to maintain a level of interaction, rather than let things die or lose continuity."

The document library couldn't have come at a more critical time. First Nations leaders in British Columbia have called the entire



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treaty negotiation structure into question. Thom says the document library will allow the Treaty Group to take a lead in developing policy that will break stalemates frustrating treaty tables across the province.

"The library is now a key resource to draw on, after a decade of work under our belt," Thom says. "We don't have to reinvent the wheel. We can get to policy solutions, bridge the gaps and get to a final treaty." 🌿

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