Clear Seas Indigenous Internship

Marine Indigenous-Led Initiatives Database and Guardian Program Capacity Scan

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Purpose and scope

My work during this term supported the Indigenous Marine Career Advancement Program (IMCAP) by mapping Indigenous-led and community-based marine stewardship initiatives and exploring the operational conditions that help these initiatives sustain conservation work. My internship workplan positioned this scan as a way to connect community needs with marine-sector training and potential employment pathways.



My research combined a developing spreadsheet database, desk research, and exploratory conversations with initiative representatives. The database records organizations and initiatives, their Indigenous/community-led status, associated Nations or partners, geographic focus, contacts, and short descriptions of their work. It includes Indigenous-led examples such as the Central Coast Indigenous Resource Alliance (CCIRA), Coastal Stewardship Network/Coastal Guardian Watchmen, First Nations Fisheries Council of BC, Great Bear Initiative, Island Marine Working Aquatic Group (IMAWG), and Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council Fisheries/Uu-a-thluk, alongside community and NGO initiatives. The database is a working landscape scan, not a complete or independently verified census.

Research and database contributions

The scan identified a diverse marine stewardship landscape, from Nation-based Guardian and Watchmen programs to regional coordination bodies, fisheries organizations, conservation NGOs, and citizen-science groups. The working database distinguishes Indigenous-led initiatives from community-led and NGO entries so that potential partners can be understood without treating all organizations as equivalent in governance or mandate.



Examples in the research notes illustrate the range of activities. CCIRA is described as supporting marine planning, Indigenous resource management, technical capacity, and the integration of Indigenous knowledge and western science across Heiltsuk, Kitasoo Xai'xais, Nuxalk, and Wuikinuxv territories. IMAWG brings together 15 Nations from Coast Salish, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Kwakwaka'wakw language groups to strengthen Indigenous fisheries, policy engagement, stewardship, and knowledge transmission. The Marine Life Sanctuaries Society research profile documents citizen-science mapping, long-term monitoring, and contributions to marine refuge areas in Átl'ka7tsem/Howe Sound.

Interview themes: strengths, capacity and constraints

The exploratory interview notes point to three connected themes. First, successful initiatives depend on locally relevant work, trusted community relationships, and the ability to combine field knowledge with technical monitoring. This aligns with the broader literature describing Guardian programs as place-based expressions of Indigenous responsibilities and environmental governance (Reed et al., 2021; Parks Canada, 2026).

Second, capacity is not simply a question of individual skills. Notes from a conversation about marine-mammal stewardship described teams as heavily committed to existing projects, with limited time for additional workshops during the busy summer season. The same notes identified seasonal positions and a lack of year-round funding as constraints on expanding monitoring activities.

Third, training is most useful when it responds to an initiative's actual operating needs. The guiding questions explored project management, GIS, office/data skills, small-vessel operations (SVOP), and pathways from entry-level monitoring roles toward more advanced positions. Interview notes also raised access to training, funding, wage subsidies, childcare support, and hiring challenges as practical considerations. Published evaluations similarly identify sustainable funding, training, equipment, and program development as important to Guardian program continuity (ECCC, 2024; Parks Canada, 2026).

Implications for IMCAP and next steps

My findings suggest that IMCAP's training-to-employment approach will be strongest when it is co-designed around the needs and hiring realities of individual Nations and stewardship organizations. A useful next step is to validate database entries directly with Nations and initiative leads, record whether roles are seasonal or year-round, and distinguish required, preferred, and emerging competencies. Training referrals should be modular and linked to specific work (for example, vessel operation, GIS/data management, monitoring protocols, project coordination, and safety), rather than assuming that every program needs the same package (Reed et al., 2021).



My internship's contribution can be seen as a foundation for more targeted relationship-building and workforce planning: a structured starting-point database, a clearer picture of the variety of marine stewardship models, and early qualitative insight into the capacity barriers that can limit conservation work. Further interviews and validation are needed before drawing program-wide conclusions.

References

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