

Fireweed as a Gitxsan Clan!?

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Instructor Robert Bandringa's Indigenous Studies 332 course *Indigenous Ethnobotany*. The assignment asked students to investigate how First Peoples live in respectful relationship with plants and place. The paper uses MLA citation style.

Exploring the culture and protocols of the Gitxsan Nation in regard to its Clan system leads to a discussion about the unique decision to include Fireweed—a plant—as one of its four Clan crests. This analysis delves into the ethnobiological relationship between the Gitxsan Nation and Fireweed, investigating the biology, ecology, and cultural uses of this plant.

The Gitxsan Nation is made up of four Clans, including the *Lax See'1* (Frog), *Lax Skiik* (Eagle), *Lax Gibuu* (Wolf) and *Gisk'aast* (Fireweed). You may notice that one of these is not like the rest, which makes me wonder, why was Fireweed chosen to be a Clan name amongst these animals? This analysis of the ethnobiological relationship between the Gitxsan Nation and Fireweed will investigate who the Gitxsan People are, where they come from, as well as the biology, ecology and cultural uses of Fireweed. Clan crests are chosen based on the strong cultural ties to the community, and this paper will identify the cultural significance of Fireweed to the Gitxsan Peoples.

Positionality Statement

I would like to begin by positioning myself as a researcher, acknowledging my privileges and lived experiences, and how that provides personal insight into my work. My name is Audrey Heath and my family comes from the Gitxsan Nation, as well as having various European roots. I recognize that growing up in Canada—an inherently colonial society—has had a large influence on my life and views. I have been fortunate to live as an uninvited guest on the unceded and traditional territories of the *k'ik'əłəm*, *səlilwətaʔl təməxw*, *S'ólh Téméxw*, *Qayqayt*, and *Stz'uminus* Peoples. Currently, I am a student in the Simon Fraser University (SFU) School of Communication and Indigenous Studies Department, and a staff member at the SFU Indigenous Student Centre.

Indigenous Studies is more than just learning about the First Peoples on this land, it is about everything that makes up Turtle Island—a term for North America which comes from Anishinaabe creation story—in which we call home. As someone who grew up removed from my culture, it is fascinating to be able to read these narratives and learn about my community and where I come from in order to support me in reconnecting with my culture. My family is a part of the **Lax Gibuu**, but I was always curious about how amongst all these animals, Fireweed was one of our community's Clans. Therefore, I chose to research Fireweed, in order to get a better understanding of the cultural significance this plant holds within the community. I look forward to learning more and understand that as a researcher it is important to recognize my own influences, as well as show respect for the knowledge and culture being shared. All these aspects contribute to the person I am today and influences my personal views and values on the topic.

The Gitxsan Nation

The Gitxsan Nation is located in the Northwest Interior of British Columbia, spanning 35,000 km². The name “Gitxsan” comes from our land, which the Skeena River—the largest river within the Northwest Coast—runs through (Ksan Association 10). “Git” means “people of” and “xsan” means “the River of Mist,” which references the Skeena River. Altogether, Gitxsan means “People of the River of Mist.” The Gitxsan Peoples follow a matrilineal lineage, in which all “rights, privileges, names and stories are passed down through the mothers” (Hetxw'ms Gyetxw “The Gitxsan Nation”). As mentioned, there are four Clans that one must be born into, as these follow kinship lineage. The **Lax See'1**, **Lax Skiik**, **Lax Gibuu** and **Gisk'aast** all follow a Wilp—also known as house—system. The Wilp system means that with the guidance of Elders and members, each Wilp is led by a head chief and wing chiefs—there is no one chief for the entirety of the Gitxsan Nation (Hetxw'ms Gyetxw “The Gitxsan Nation”).

Biology of Fireweed

What we commonly know as Fireweed, may also be referred to as Rosebay Willowherb, Narrow-leaved Fireweed, Great Willowherb or Flowering Willow. Other names include, its scientific names of: *Epilobium angustifolium* or *Chamerion angustifolium*, or in the Gitxsan language as **Haas**. This perennial plant typically grows 0.8 to 3 meters tall. It is adorned with alternating, lance-shaped leaves which are stalkless and range from 5 to 20 centimeters long. These green leaves can be covered in short hair on the topside, and are paler and distinctly veined on the underside. Starting in June, pink to purple flowers will grow about 2 to 4 centimeters in width, along with four sepals, four petals and four stigma lobes. All together, these flowers will blossom in clusters of more than 15 atop the stem. Finally, the fruit of the Fireweed. It grows in pod-like capsules which are narrow

and 4 to 9 centimeters long. They range in colour from green to red and contain four chambers. Once split open, it reveals hundreds of fluffy, white seeds, in order to disperse its seeds for the next season (Pojar and MacKinnon 2006).

Ecology of Fireweed

Fireweed is a very resilient plant that grows in moist and dry areas which have been disturbed, such as clearings, roadsides, meadows, avalanche tracks, river bars and especially recently burned lands—hence its name. This makes them an integral pioneer species, revitalizing the land for new growth to start. With these descriptions in mind, they are common throughout the Pacific West Coast, and even more abundant on the outer coast (Pojar and MacKinnon 2006). Today, the BC Ministry of Environment lists this species' conservation status as “demonstrably widespread, abundant, and secure” (Klinkenberg). Specific to the Gitksan territory, as of 16 September 1925, Fireweed can be found near what is known as Kitwanga, British Columbia, along the sides of the valley (Smith, et al. 106).

Cultural Uses of Fireweed

Many Indigenous Nations throughout the coast of British Columbia use Fireweed in different ways, inclusive of the stem, seeds and pith. The following are just some of the cultural practices the Gitksan Nation uses in regard to Fireweed. In the early spring, the inside of the young shoots, also known as the central pith are eaten raw, by taking the shell of a muscle to scrape out the insides (Smith, et al. 106 & 150; Pojar and MacKinnon 2006). The leaves of this plant are also high in Vitamin C, which is great for making tea (Pojar and MacKinnon 2006). In addition, the flowers produce nectar, which is exceptional for making honey, as well as syrup, which is known to be used as a type of edible glue for making berry rolls (Pojar and MacKinnon 2006; Roger 11).

Aside from the nutritional factors, Fireweed is also used for its natural fibres. It can be used to make cord or thread with many applicable uses. To make these, Fireweed is gathered from June to July and before it flowers, as it would then become too difficult to use. As per the cord, six or more strands of the plant are braided together to create the final product, and used to tie together items such as blankets, boxes or make fishing nets. Although the cord is made for fishing nets, it unfortunately is not the best material to do so. When it comes to making thread out of Fireweed, it is used in combination with goat or sheep wool. This thread is then used to make items such as fishing nets and pack straps for long journeys (Smith, et al. 106 & 153).

Smith recognizes Fireweed as one of only a few plants that hold immense cultural relevance by the Gitksan Peoples. However, it is also stated that this may be due to lack of documentation on the subject. Fireweed is held in high regard as a Clan name, whereas Bastard-Toad Flax (*Geocaulon lividum*) and Queen's Cup

(*Clintonia uniflora*) are recognized in Trickster stories about **‘Wii Get**—a mythical raven (Smith, et al. 162). Although no mythologies could be found about Fireweed for the Gitksan Nation, does not mean that there are not any.

Nevertheless, its significance can be recognized in a few scenarios. Roger states that a “single fireweed was the first totem pole” (11). As well, there is a totem pole in Kitsequicia, adorned with a Fireweed flower crest. Surrounded by all these animal totems and crests, there is still space found for a flower. Additionally, MacDonald recognizes that the Thunderbird can often be used as a crest to represent the Fireweed Clan (105). The Thunderbird is a powerful, supernatural being, and therefore by association, recognizes the equal value and importance of Fireweed. Finally, most importantly, the Fireweed represents one of the four Gitksan Clans, known as the ***Gisk’aast***.

Conclusion

Fireweed has a wide range of uses, as a food source, medicine, fibre material, pioneer species and cultural signifier. Although there is no one clear reason for the Gitksan Nation to make Fireweed one of their Clan crests, all of these uses recognize the significance of the plant and suggest why they may have chosen to do so. It is most common for Indigenous Nations to use animals to represent their Clans, so using Fireweed is unique and representative of its immense significance.

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