

Our Lands (Tmicw)

Secwepemc laws and governance systems have long guided the management of lands and resources within Secwepemcúfecw through principles grounded in respect, responsibility, reciprocity and accountability. Rooted in Secwepemc values that recognizes the land (tmicw) as a living being with its own spirit and importance, Secwepemc law establishes a wholistic relationship of interconnectedness rather than ownership. These laws emphasize a duty to care for the lands and resources—ensuring that human use and care remained sustainable and balanced. Seasonal harvesting, guided by oral teachings and ceremonies, was regulated by strict protocols that required taking only what was needed, maintaining habitat health, and protecting key areas for regeneration and spiritual purposes. Governance and decision-making traditionally operated through family and community consensus, with Elders and knowledge keepers interpreting and applying laws to maintain ecological and social harmony. Enforcement of these laws relied on social accountability and spiritual sanction, reflecting a deeply moral relationship with the land. Despite the disruptions of colonization, Secwepemc communities continue to uphold and revitalize their traditional laws, integrating them into contemporary land use planning, environmental restoration, and resource management. Through this continuity, Secwepemc law remains a living system that sustains the health, identity, and sovereignty of the Secwepemc people and their territory. Following is a summary of how Secwepemc laws have historically informed and guided land and resource management within Secwepemcúfecw:

Secwepemc Worldview:

- Secwepemc law is rooted in a law of interconnectedness, where people, land, water, plants, and animals are all relatives. The land is not owned but cared for, and stewardship responsibilities are passed down through oral traditions, stories, and ceremonies.

Principles of Stewardship and Responsibility:

- **Yiri7 re tmicw** (the land is alive): The land itself holds spirit and knowledge, and humans have reciprocal duties to maintain its health.
- **Knucwést** (responsibility/obligation): Each family and community group holds specific responsibilities to particular parts of the territory. Management decisions were made based on respect, sustainability, and the long-term well-being of all beings.
- **Respect and restraint:** Harvesting was guided by protocols—taking only what was needed, leaving the first and last of a resource, and ensuring regeneration.

Governance and Decision-Making:

- Traditional Secwepemc governance involved collective decision-making through councils and family heads, ensuring that resource use reflected consensus, balance, and accountability. Elders and knowledge keepers were central in interpreting laws and applying them to current circumstances.

Seasonal and Place-Based Management

- Secwepemc law organized movement and harvesting around the seasonal round, ensuring that each ecosystem was used sustainably.
- Fishing, hunting, and plant gathering followed strict timing and ceremonial observances.
- Specific sites were protected for regeneration, spiritual significance, or cultural purposes.

Enforcement and Renewal of Law:

- Laws were enforced through social accountability and spiritual sanction—those who disrespected the land could bring harm to themselves and their communities. Ceremonies, stories (such as Coyote/Sk'elép stories), and teachings continually renewed these laws and passed them to future generations.

Continuity and Revitalization

- Despite colonial disruption, Secwepemc communities continue to apply traditional laws in modern resource management, including forestry, fisheries, and land restoration projects. Contemporary Secwepemc governance frameworks often blend customary law with modern environmental policy to reassert jurisdiction and restore balance within Secwepemcúfecw.
- Secwepemc laws guided land and resource management through reciprocal relationships, respect, responsibility, and collective governance. These laws ensured the sustainability and spiritual integrity of Secwepemcúfecw for future generations and continue to shape sustainable management today.

Secwepemc Range Interests in the Historical and Modern Eras

“Range resources” refer to the grasslands, forests, and open areas used for grazing animals, gathering plants, hunting, and other land-based activities. These resources have been—and continue to be—central to Secwepemc identity, economy, and governance. Historically, range resources sustained Secwepemc life through shelter, food, culture, and governance. Today, Range and rangelands remain essential to culture, economy, cultural practices and sustainability.

The protection, restoration, access, and stewardship to range lands is key to our identity, self-determination and reconciliation of land and resource interests.

Historical Importance of Range Resources

Subsistence and economy were critically important, historically, to Secwepemc, we relied on a wide range of ecosystems for seasonal rounds, moving through the territory to harvest fish, game, berries, and roots. The Secwepemc had already obtained horses through trade by the 1750's which made rangelands and resources even more important for the maintenance of livestock. The introduction of horses vastly increased the use of range lands for horse grazing and enhancing mobility and trade.

However, prior to and after the arrival of horses, range and grasslands supported elk, deer, and other ungulates, essential for shelter, food, clothing, and tools. Plant resources such as camas, balsamroot, wild onions, and berries were harvested from open range areas. We still rely on these resources today and will continue to rely on them into the future.

Cultural and Spiritual Connection

Range landscapes are tied to Secwepemc laws, oral histories, place names, and spiritual practices. Rangelands are important parts of our ecosystems and our laws guide our stewardship of the area through respect, reciprocity, and sustainable practices.

Land Use Governance

Range lands were managed collectively through family and/or community-based stewardship areas. Burning practices were used to maintain grasslands, promote new plant growth, and support game populations.

Impact of Colonization

The establishment of ranching industries and settler land tenure restricted Secwepemc access to key areas once used for cultural practices. Traditional land-use systems were undermined by Crown range leasing and resource extraction. We were Indian reserves were often placed on marginal lands, cutting communities off from traditional grazing and gathering sites.

3. Modern-Day Importance of Range Resources

a. Cultural Revitalization and Land Stewardship

Range resources remain vital for reconnecting youth to the land, traditional food gathering, and teaching Secwepemc land laws.

Cultural burning and ecological restoration projects aim to bring back traditional range management practices.

b. Economic and Political Dimensions

Secwepemc communities participate in range management agreements, co-management of Crown lands, and ranching enterprises.

Access to range lands supports livestock grazing and food security, linking economic sustainability to land rights.

Ongoing land claims and title assertions emphasize range lands as part of unceded Secwepemc territory.

c. Environmental Stewardship and Climate Resilience

Traditional knowledge contributes to sustainable range management, biodiversity conservation, and wildfire prevention.

Collaboration with government and universities incorporates Secwepemc ecological knowledge into modern range planning.

d. Social and Community Wellbeing

Range-based activities (hunting, gathering, horse culture) strengthen identity, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and healing.

4. Conclusion

