

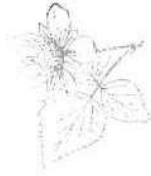
Davis & Wilson

1995

SALMONBERRY

Essence

IN THE NEW YEAR



Some Culturally Significant Plants of the
Haisla known to occur within the
Greater Kitlope Ecosystem

ALISON DAVIS &
BEATRICE WILSON
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Preface

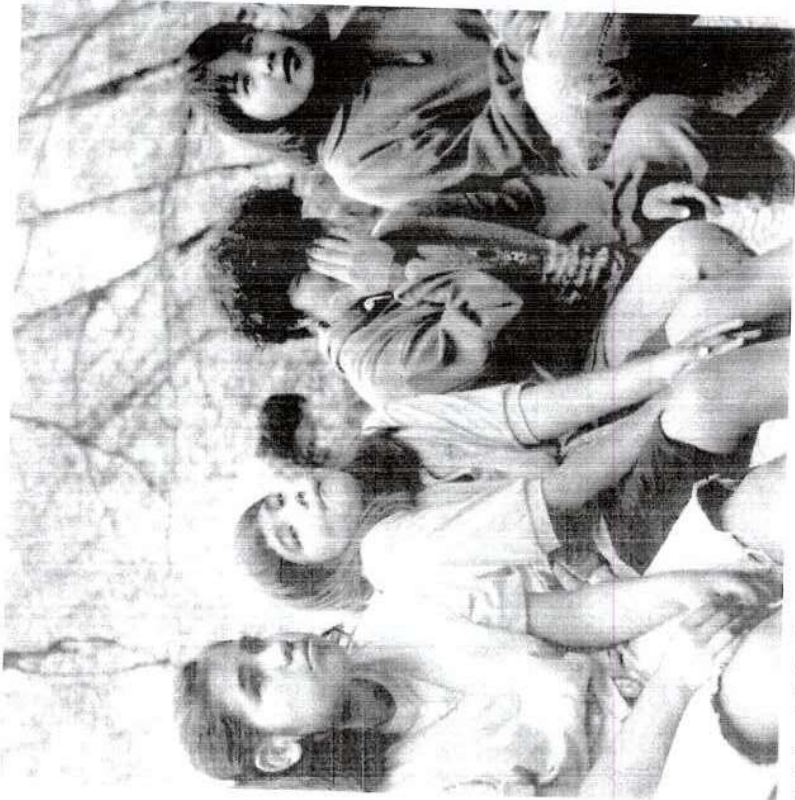
by Beatrice Wilson

Three years ago, Alison Davis came to my house to meet me, and I liked her immediately. Alison asked me if she could learn about my knowledge of plants in our territory, and how I use them. I have always taught my children about these things. They know all the plants and how to use them. But I always thought this information should stay within our people. I didn't want somebody else making a lot of money on it. I came to trust Alison and realized that this information is good not only for our people.

Two summers ago two German girls were camping up in the Killope. One of them got an arthritis attack that was so bad she couldn't get out of her tent. Her friend was nursing her. My husband, Johnny, told the friend how to prepare a medicine out of nettle root and alder bark. She did this and gave it to her friend every day for two weeks. At the end of that time, she was back out there climbing mountains!

There is a lot of knowledge in our people. Different people know different plants. Nobody knows all of it, you have to get to the right people.

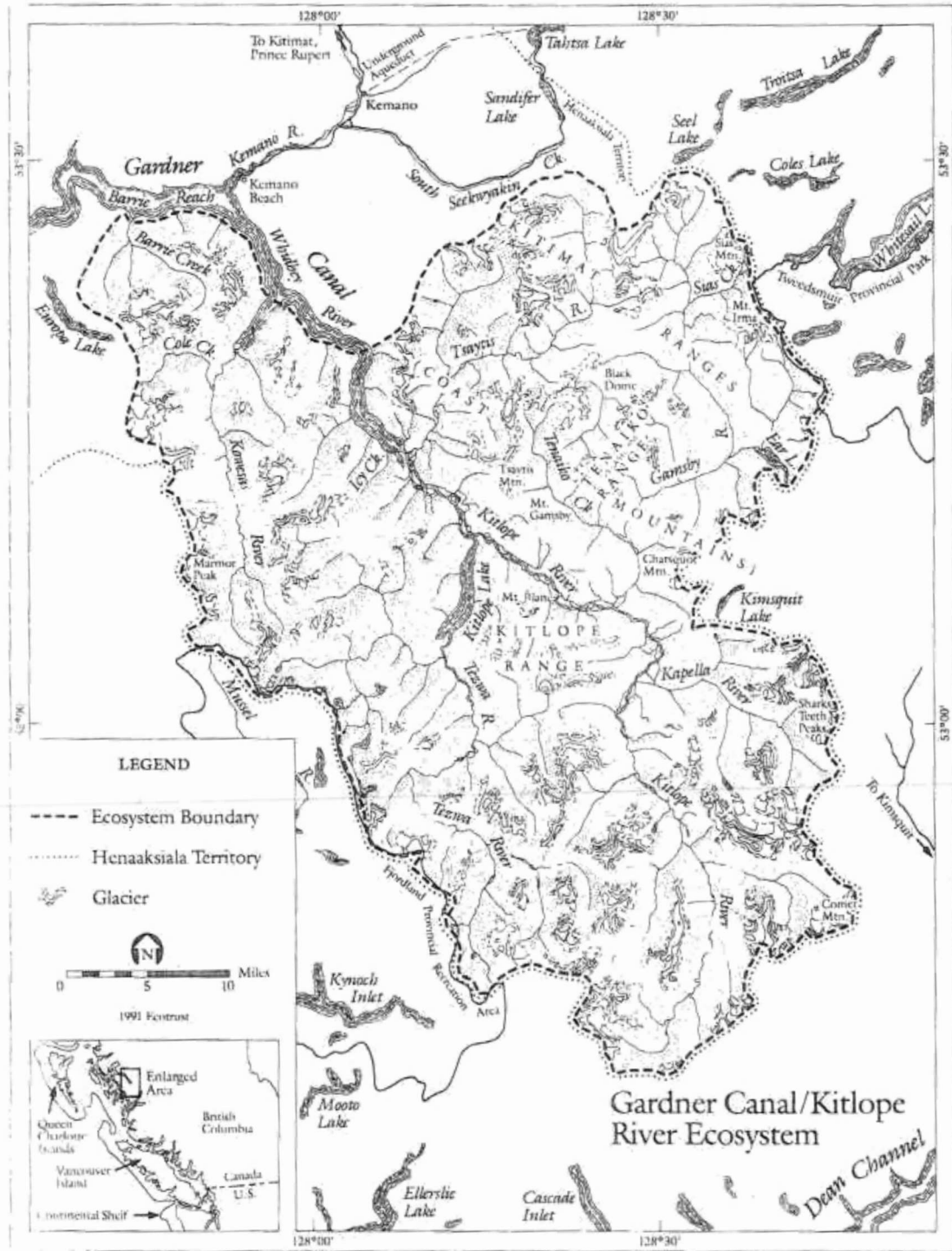
Today, Rediscovery, a cultural awareness and outdoor leadership camp, is bringing our children back to the land. When they are in the Killope they get interested in the plants and other cultural knowledge, but sometimes when they get back to the village, they forget. I hope this book will help the younger people get more interested, and that they will use these special plants. It is an important book because when we are gone, the book will still be here.



Haisla girls in the Killope.



The Greater Kitlope Ecosystem



Subsistence Regimes

Since the traditional territory of the Haisla is so extensive, covering many ecological zones and sub-zones, subsistence foods and natural resource materials vary greatly. Eulachon, a small anadromous fish, was and remains a very important staple food. Its oil, or "grease", is rich in vitamins and once served as an important trade item between the coast and the interior. Other bounty of the sea includes salmon, as well as crabs, clams and other shellfish, while game animals such as bear, mountain goat, beaver and deer are hunted in the forests and on the mountains. Rounding out the Haisla's traditional diet is a periodic harvest of tasty and nutritious plant foods.

In the old days, before electric refrigerators and canning, the Haisla had to rely mainly upon dried fish and game meat as well as eulachon oil to tide them through the cold season. By the time spring's warmth arrived, fresh new vegetable shoots were thus a welcome dietary addition. These green vegetables, such as the young pliable inner shoots of the salmonberry, thimbleberry, fireweed and cow parsnip, have a high moisture content in addition to being rich in vitamins such as carotene, vitamin C, and folic acid and the minerals iron, calcium and magnesium.

Spring time also introduces a sweet, juicy, noodle-like food called cambium. Cambium is actually the tree's growing tissues between its wood and bark layers, and can be retrieved by carefully peeling away the tree's outer bark; however, care must be taken not to girdle the tree's bark, since this will kill it. Such trees as the amabilis fir (known as balsam in Kitamaat), the coastal western hemlock and the black cottonwood bear this tasty food, which appears to contain high carbohydrate/sugar energy values. Johnny Wilson remembers eating cambium with his grandparents when he was a young boy. This food can be harvested from mid-May up until mid-August. It is traditionally processed by pit-cooking, after which it is smoke-dried and then pounded before being stored away, often times combined with dried blueberries and/or crabapples.

As the warm season progresses, various other plant foods can be harvested. Cecil Paul tells: "When the flowers of the salmonberry and indian rice bloom, this is considered to be an indicator of the new year because this is the first berry and also the first food from under ground that are ready in the season." Louise Barbetti and Bea Wilson add that the pink blossoms were picked and placed about Peoples' houses in celebration of the arrival of summer.

Berries and fleshy fruits, such as crabapples and rosehips, are good sources of vitamins A, B, and C, as well as calcium. In the past, berries were picked en masse and consumed raw or with "grease", or else pulverized and poured into whipped "grease" that was set in skunk cabbage or thimbleberry leaf-lined wooden containers. This would be stored for the winter's rations. Cecil Paul

Subsistence Regimes

remembers the fun he had picking berries as a child: when a ripe berry was spotted, the spotter would yell *gáulh gáulh* (look what I have found) in order to point out and lay claim on his or her little treasure. Speaking from personal experience, I can say that even today, berry harvesting is no small endeavour among the Haisla; however, berries, crabapples, and rosehips are now most often stored as sweet jams and fruit preserves.

Later on in the summer season, root vegetables (i.e. tubers, corms, hulleh, rhizomes and true roots) are consumed such as Indian rice corms, silverweed tubers, fern rhizomes, and lupine tubers. Many root vegetables contain valuable stored carbohydrates which are usually most concentrated at the end of the leaf-growing season, before new shoots appear. However, many of these plants also contain secondary compounds — anti-nutrients and toxins — that are used as defense systems against predators. Through a long, slow process involving lessons from trial and error, information from other groups, and observations of wild animals, the Haisla have learned how to process plants in order to take advantage of their stored nutrients.



Plant technology

Living in our Supermarket culture, it is easy to forget the immense creativity it took for human beings to not only make a living, but to live and create a culture out of a sometimes harsh wilderness. Imagine yourself and a group of friends dropped into the wilds of northern coastal BC. What would you clothe yourself with? How would you travel? What would you live in? What would you eat?

Prior to modernization, the Haisla incorporated many plant materials into their lifestyle. The western red cedar was used to construct houses and their furnishings, canoes, hunting and fishing gear, clothing and other materials. Fibres and fibrous materials, such as leaves (ie. skunk cabbage), stems (ie. stinging nettle), bark (ie. red cedar) and roots (ie. spruce, red cedar) were also used for diverse purposes such as making baskets, fishing nets, cordage, and diapers. Louise Barbetti states that native people were actually the first ones to invent disposable diapers, by using the pulverized, softened bark of the cedar. Other plant products include tree pitch, used as a sealer and waterproofer for boats, and old horsetail plants, which were fashioned into musical rattles for children. Skunk cabbage leaves have a multitude of uses: folded one way they become a drinking cup; folded another way, a sun visor. The leaves were also used as liners in wooden boxes, much as wax paper is used today, and as already mentioned in cooking pits.

These days, canoes, cooking-pits and moccasins have been replaced by power boats, microwaves and Nike runners; nevertheless, many Haisla members retain the knowledge and skills to be self-sufficient in a wilderness setting. However, most of this knowledge rests with the older residents of Kitamaat village, and since young people are now taught in a classroom setting as opposed to the outdoors, a concern exists that this vital information may not be passed on. In an age when the only people equipped to handle modern technology are highly trained specialists, it becomes ever more important that we not forget how to use our own eyes and hands. Progress cannot always be measured by how many television channels a satellite can beam down on us. The ability to construct something with one's own hands out of nature's simple materials is a great achievement, and perhaps a truer measure of success.