

Policy Brief



Ecological Security, Indigenous Marine Guardian Programs, and Expanding the Concept of 'Climate Security'

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This brief illustrates how an ecological security perspective can shed new light on the intersections between climate change, security, and the relationship between Indigenous Nations and Canadian governance structures. Climate change is threatening the security of individuals, communities, and industries across Canada and around the world. One perspective, the *ecological security* framework, suggests that to address threats posed by climate change, we must center and protect ecological processes themselves. Here, I examine the partnership between the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Marine Guardian Watchmen and the Government of British Columbia. This discussion demonstrates how IMGPs offer a practical and cooperative opportunity to work towards ecological security in Canada, and suggests federal and provincial governments invest in Guardian programs to support both climate security and Indigenous leadership.

Introduction

As the effects of a warming climate due to continued reliance on fossil fuels become more pressing, national and international institutions and organizations continue to propose high-level, top-down solutions aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change while maintaining domestic and international stability. During this time of rapid change, debates have arisen surrounding the concept of 'security' itself, with questions such as "security from whom?" or "security from what?" generating multiple perspectives towards an effective strategy to address climate and energy issues. One approach, the *ecological security* framework, suggests that security must be oriented around the biosphere itself, vulnerable communities, and future generations. An ecological security approach requires observers to reconsider our existing social, economic, and political systems in light of the existential threat of climate change and look outside narrowly institutional or top-down efforts to provide security.

In the Canadian context, an ecological security perspective can shed new light on the intersections between climate change, extractive industry, and the relationship between Indigenous and Canadian governance structures. As changes to temperatures, weather patterns, and natural disasters already disproportionately affect northern and Indigenous communities, meaningful discussions of climate security in Canada need to incorporate and take seriously the needs of Indigenous peoples. In many respects, the ecological security framework provides a more accommodating perspective within which to explore options for meeting the needs of both Indigenous peoples and local environments. In this brief, I provide an overview of the ecological security framework, and argue this approach can reveal practical and viable avenues for unconventional and intersectional security practices.

Specifically, the partnership between the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Marine Guardian Watchmen and BC Parks offers an example of an intersectional ecological security framework in practice. The overlapping and contested assertions of authority between federal, provincial, and Indigenous governments exemplified by this case suggests that the concept of security must be critically examined in an ecological context, and the possible range of actors understood as providing security widened.

Climate Change, Environmental Threats, and Ecological Security

To date, the primary venues for analysing and addressing challenges posed by climate change have been national and international-level institutions and organizations. National governments, including in Canada and the United States, have been incorporating climate change into national security strategies to differing degrees for several decades. Canada's most recent defence policy, [*Our North, Strong and Free*](#) integrates the implications of climate change into Canadian defence planning to a greater degree than ever before. Recent scholarship suggests that a significant majority of states in the world have similarly recognized the links between climate change and national security challenges, with many incorporating measures such as GHG emissions reductions, increases to disaster relief funding, and greater military-civilian cooperation on climate issues into their national security plans and documentation. In fact, [73% of all national security strategy documents](#) published between 2008 and 2020 referred to climate change and the effects of environmental change on national defence. At the international level, the [United Nations Security Council \(UNSC\)](#) has held debates around the theme of climate change and its impacts since 2007, with a 2021 resolution presented, though subsequently stalled, aimed at formalizing the [UN's role in addressing climate security](#). In 2024, Canada sponsored the opening of the NATO [Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence](#), which supports allies' ability to address, adapt to, and share knowledge regarding climate security challenges.

Despite this growing interest and recognition, the framing of the relationship between climate change and security, and which responses are deemed appropriate, are highly contested. National and international institutions tend to view climate security as posing dangers to domestic and global stability through increased [climate-induced migration](#), changing weather patterns, and [resource scarcity](#), among other factors. Some attention has also been directed toward the impacts of climate change on individuals and communities, particularly through discourses of [human security](#) which highlight structural inequalities and vulnerabilities, including gendered, racial, and North-South dynamics.

While the growing awareness and general movement towards addressing the implications of climate change on security are notable, some scholars suggest existing accounts overlook important aspects of security. In this respect, the concept of [ecological security](#) reframes the relationship between climate change and security by critically reflecting on this intersection from a perspective informed by the fields of political ecology, international political economy and environment, and ethics. Ecological security foregrounds the complex and interdependent relationship between communities and ecological processes themselves as the primary referent of security. Unlike conventional framings of climate security, ecological security primarily focuses on the stability and longevity of ecological systems, rather than on referent objects such as national borders or international systems. [Conventional approaches to climate security](#) generally locate national governments or international institutions as the 'acting subjects' responsible for providing security, but the expanded scope of the ecological security approach recognizes local communities as playing a role in creating conditions of increased security.

This shift in focus necessitates a different range of responses and approaches, with scholars suggesting a simultaneous broadening of what constitutes 'security' with renewed interest in rethinking existing

socioeconomic systems including fossil fuel reliance, agricultural systems, and global capitalism. Unsurprisingly, this position has attracted [sharp critique](#) with policymakers, scholars, and observers arguing that ‘security’ in this sense is utopian, unrealistic, and has few actionable prescriptions. Despite this, [recent work by Matt McDonald](#) suggests that ecological security is gaining institutional purchase, though the going remains slow. Here, I suggest that an ecological security approach already exists in practice and is not out of reach as some critics suggest. Specifically, we see a case of ecological security being enacted by Indigenous Marine Guardian Programs (IMGPs) in British Columbia (BC), which offers a glimpse into what an ecological security framework may look like in action.

Indigenous Marine Guardian Programs: The Kitasoo/Xai'xais IMGP & Pilot Project

[Indigenous Marine Guardianship Programs \(IMGPs\)](#) are professional programs established by a First Nation or coalition of Nations to conduct a variety of broadly defined environmental, educational, cultural, and enforcement activities. IMGPs are created with the goal of mobilizing Indigenous Knowledge and developing a meaningful pathway for Indigenous peoples to achieve greater autonomy over the management of their traditional territories. [Guardians conduct](#) monitoring, observation, and enforcement activities; research-related activities such as data collection, analysis, and reporting; and outreach activities including education, cultural activities, and collaboration with other Nations, or local and regional authorities. These [programs are often involved in](#) protecting local animal populations from illegal hunting or fishing, gathering data on proposed industrial projects, and providing input to various levels of government on land use planning. IMGPs are recognized as active assertions of Indigenous rights, as they provide avenues for Nations to exercise authority and self-determination within their territories.

IMGPs are commonly incorporated into academic literature and policy spaces through the lens of [conservation](#), as guardians are seen as environmental stewards, knowledge-holders, and community members invested in the preservation of their environment. However, relegating such programs to the technical sphere of land management or environmental studies can overlook the social, political, and even *security*-oriented dimensions of IMGPs. For many Indigenous peoples, the health and survival of their traditional territories including the land, air, water, and non-human animals is [deeply connected to the security](#) of the Nation and its people. As IMGPs are actively engaged in the protection of traditional territories, they can be understood as putting ecological security principles into action. Put simply, Indigenous guardians act to secure their local ecosystem against external threats, ensure the long-term survival of the environment and people who depend on it, and embody a politics of resistance and resurgence through the adoption of regulative, enforcement, and governance responsibilities.

The [Kitasoo/Xai'xais Coastal Guardian Watchmen](#) are one such IMGP, located on the central coast of British Columbia. In June 2022, the Kitasoo/Xai'xais and Nuxalk Nations signed a Memorandum of Understanding with BC Parks to launch the Guardian [Shared Compliance and Enforcement Pilot Project](#). This project created a [partnership](#) between the Nations and BC Parks through which 11 individual guardians from the two Nations undertook training and were assigned the same legal authorities as BC Park rangers. Interestingly, though the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation partnered with BC provincial authorities for the pilot program, at the same time the Nation has publicly opposed the federal government's plans to establish an LNG facility and export route in Kitasoo/Xai'xais waters, with the Nation [unilaterally declaring](#) Kitasoo Bay a Marine Protected Area in 2023 under Indigenous law. Therefore, while it may be tempting to simply view the Watchmen-BC Parks partnership as a step towards closer relationships between federal, provincial, and Indigenous authorities, the

Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation has not adopted a policy of uncritical cooperation. Rather, this case highlights the complex and contested relationships between Indigenous, provincial, and federal authorities.

Discussion: Contestation, Cooperation, and Security

Considering the Kitasoo/Xai'xias Coastal Guardian Watchmen program in conjunction with other Indigenous-led environmental efforts raises interesting questions about ecological security in action, and how the delegation of authority between settler-colonial governments and First Nations governance impacts these efforts.

I have argued [elsewhere](#) that direct action and civil disobedience efforts, such as Wet'suwet'en and other First Nations' resistance to the construction of new oil and gas pipelines in BC, constitute examples of ecological security in action. Since such movements are led by local communities with a focus on directly preventing extractive projects from continuing, they embody the ecological security framework in that they consider the environment itself the subject of security, and they include a serious questioning of current socio-economic systems. As with other [Indigenous-led movements](#) against extractive projects, such as those against the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines in the United States, First Nations are practicing a "[generative refusal](#)" by enacting a different way of relating to the environment, while simultaneously asserting the authority and legitimacy of Indigenous forms of governance through protest.

Such examples of civil disobedience often throw into sharp relief the interconnections between First Nations struggles against federal or provincial authority, resistance to environmental degradation and extractive industry, and enactment of ecological security through direct action. 'Security' means something different to communities facing structural oppression at the hand of state authorities *and* who are experiencing real-time threats to their lands, waters, and ecosystems. [Will Greaves has argued](#) that the security claims of Indigenous peoples in Canada often go unheard by federal and provincial authorities because of the challenge to settler societies themselves posed by Indigenous claims to self-determination. Since Indigenous Nations' claims to legitimacy and authority threaten the underlying sovereignty of Canadian governance, the security of Indigenous peoples cannot be taken seriously by the state. Just as the security of the environment itself cannot be adequately considered without questioning the dominance of capitalist socio-economic relations, the security of Indigenous peoples requires grappling with historically entrenched ideas about the legitimacy and authority of federal governance. Though this may appear to be an intractable problem, I propose the Kitasoo/Xai'xias partnership with BC Parks represents a possible way forward to consider how an intersectional ecological security can be enacted.

As discussed above, the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Watchmen are providing security in practice to their local ecosystem and community through their actions as Guardians, prior to their involvement with the provincial government. The Watchmen themselves describe their conservation and monitoring activities as an embodiment of their worldview, and deeply [intertwined with their identity as a Nation](#). However, since partnering with BC Parks, the actual and perceived authority of the Watchmen has been increased as they are now able to ticket, fine, and enforce the Parks Act independently. This is both an increase in the practical ability of the Watchmen to provide security for their territory and community, and an important shift in the Canadian government's ability to support the security of Indigenous peoples themselves. By delegating this authority to the IMGP, the province of BC is helping to increase the security of the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Nation both by supporting the self-determination and

autonomy of the Nation, and by increasing the capacity of the Watchmen to provide ecological security within their territories.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This brief discussion seeks to provoke a critical reflection on the notion of *security* within the contexts of climate change and the relationship between the Canadian state and Indigenous Nations. The case of IMGPs and the Kitasoo/Xai'xais Marine Guardians prompts us to consider how security in the face of climate change may require a multifaceted and intersectional approach, such as those which support local and Indigenous communities to provide security in small-scale yet meaningful ways. Ecological security reminds us that all systems are connected, and therefore solutions must similarly span different social locations and levels of governance.

I suggest that both federal and provincial governments in Canada seriously consider the opportunities for meaningful collaboration provided by IMGPs and programs such as the Shared Compliance and Enforcement Pilot in British Columbia, and investigate potential collaborations with Nations and IMGPs across the country. This collaboration could take the form of a [national network of Guardian programs](#), supporting and expanding the 30 existing Guardian programs across the country. [Australia's Indigenous Rangers Program](#) may offer an example to Canada's federal government in this regard. From a traditional defence perspective, the federal government may consider expanding the role of [Indigenous people within the Canadian Rangers](#) and incorporating elements of IMGPs and Indigenous governance within the Rangers. Ultimately, both the federal and provincial governments should endeavour to take up an ecological security perspective as Canada wades deeper into the climate crisis. This does not have to mean immediate, radical shifts to our political and economic landscape, but can be taken as an invitation to bring more stakeholders into the conversation around climate security and recognize the potential of Indigenous leadership across the country.

About the Author

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