

YINTAH

Directors : Jennifer Wickham, Brenda Michell, Michael Toledano

Producers: Jennifer Wickham, Brenda Michell, Michael Toledano, Bob Moore

Runtime: 125 min, 110 min, 88 min

Countries of Production: “Canada”

Language: English, Witsuwit'en

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Logline

YINTAH, meaning “land”, is a feature-length documentary on the Wet’suwet’en nation’s fight for sovereignty. Spanning more than a decade, the film follows Howilhat Freda Huson and Sleydo’ Molly Wickham as their nation reoccupies and protects their ancestral lands from several of the largest fossil fuel companies on earth.

Short Synopsis

YINTAH, meaning “land” in the Wet’suwet’en language, tells the story of an Indigenous nation asserting sovereignty. It is the story of the Wet’suwet’en people reoccupying their territory and resisting the construction of multiple pipelines.

The film follows Tsakë ze’ Howilhat Freda Huson and Tsakë ze’ Sleydo’ Molly Wickham, along with the Wet’suwet’en Hereditary Chiefs and fellow land defenders, as they reoccupy and protect their traditional land in a decade-long battle to keep out the companies that seek to exploit it.

Medium-length Synopsis

YINTAH, meaning “land” in the Wet’suwet’en language, tells the story of an Indigenous nation’s fight for sovereignty as they resist the construction of multiple oil and fracked-gas pipelines across their territory.

Over the period of a decade, the film follows Tsakë ze’ Howilhat Freda Huson, Tsakë ze’ Sleydo’ Molly Wickham, and their fellow land defenders as they reoccupy their traditional territory and galvanize their nation in a fight against several of the largest fossil fuel companies on earth.

YINTAH is about an anti-colonial resurgence—a fierce and ongoing fight for Indigenous and human rights. The film reveals the hypocrisy of the Canadian government’s espousal of reconciliation, as Indigenous land is still being seized at gunpoint for the purpose of resource extraction.

The Hereditary Chiefs’ claim to jurisdiction over the territory is supported by a 1997 Supreme Court of Canada decision. When a lower court effectively sidesteps this decision, granting pipeline companies access to Wet’suwet’en land, Wet’suwet’en leaders put their bodies on the line, building barricades to keep the companies out.

Ultimately, YINTAH is the story of the Indigenous right to stewardship and sovereignty over their territories. Freda, Molly, and the land defenders are part of a centuries-long fight to protect their children, culture, and land from colonial violence. For the Wet’suwet’en, their very future is at stake.

Character Bios

Howilhat Freda Huson

Tsakë ze' Howilhat Freda Huson is a wing chief of the Unist'ot'en people of the Wet'suwet'en C'ilhts'ëkhyu clan. In 2011, she reoccupied her family's ancestral territory in defiance of enormous fossil fuel development, and in doing so became a recognized leader in the international fight for Indigenous sovereignty. Leaving behind a comfortable life to live directly in the path of a proposed pipeline corridor through Wet'suwet'en yintah, Howilhat lead the way for other Wet'suwet'en families to reclaim their lands. With the help of many supporters she built a healing center for Wet'suwet'en people to heal from the violence of colonialism. She is internationally recognized for this work and has spoken as an advocate for her people at the United Nations.



Sleydo' Molly Wickham

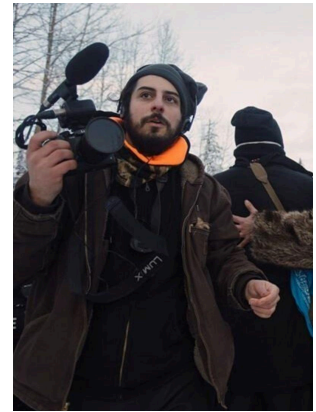
Tsakë ze' Sleydo' Molly Wickham is a wing chief of the Cas Yikh people of the Wet'suwet'en Gidimt'en clan. For many years, she has lived on unceded Cas Yikh territory with her family, in a cabin built strategically to protect an idyllic lake from mining. After supporting the Unist'ot'en behind the scenes for years, Molly was thrust into the national spotlight as the appointed spokesperson of the Gidimt'en Checkpoint. As her clan retook control of their traditional lands, she confronted the police on her doorstep, becoming a recognized icon of the Wet'suwet'en resistance. After leading a 55 day blockade of the Coastal GasLink pipeline, she has experienced targeted state harassment and ongoing criminalization as a result of her unwavering defense of the yintah.



About the Team

Michael Toledano, Co-Director & Producer & Director of Photography

Michael Toledano is an award winning filmmaker and photojournalist based in British Columbia Canada. Michael's work has been published by outlets including VICE, Al Jazeera America, and Democracy Now!, and has been shown across every major Canadian television news network. They are known for vibrant, ground-level documentation of social movements ranging from Black Lives Matter to the Wet'suwet'en resistance to pipelines.



Jennifer Wickham, Co-Director & Producer

Jen is Cas Yikh (Grizzly House) from the Gidimt'en (bear/wolf) clan of the Wet'suwet'en people. Jennifer grew up in and around Wet'suwet'en territory, and has actively participated in her nation's governance system since 2008. Jen's background is in writing and Indigenous resurgence, with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Victoria and an Education degree from the University of Northern British Columbia. She has worked as an educator, a mental health advocate, and community support worker. She is a founding member of the Indigenous Life School on Wet'suwet'en territory. From 2018 to 2020, Jen worked as the Executive Director of the Witsuwit'en Language and Culture Society. Since 2018, and currently, Jen has been the Media Coordinator for the Gidimt'en Checkpoint.



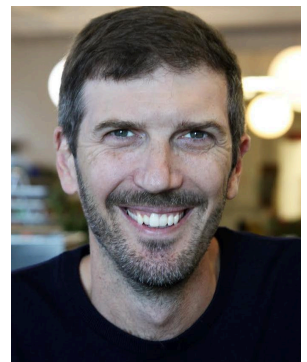
Brenda Michell, Co-Director & Producer

Brenda Mitchell is Tsakë ze' K-eltiy of the Unist'ot'en people of the Wet'suwet'en Nation. She has lived in the Wet'suwet'en communities of Witset and Burns Lake all her life, and was groomed to participate in Wet'suwet'en governance from a young age. Brenda is trained as a Wet'suwet'en language instructor and has worked as a post-secondary education coordinator for the Lake Babine Nation Band for decades, and is currently the resident Elder, language teacher, and addictions counselor at the Unist'ot'en Healing Centre. Brenda is a grandmother of ten and this fight is about protecting the Yintah for her grandchildren. She believes that this film is an important way to tell her people's story and listen to the words of her Grandmother Knedebeas who always told her children, "Don't let no white man take my yintah."



Bob Moore, Producer

Bob Moore is Co-President and Creative Producer at EyeSteelFilm in Montreal where he has produced over 40 feature documentaries since 2008. Together with his talented partners and collaborators, he has been the recipient of over 100 international awards, including Emmys, Cinema Eyes, Golden Horses, Owls, Phoenixes, and a variety of other celebratory animal-themed prizes. He's been the subject of a Producer's Spotlight at the Cannes Marché du Film, is currently an advisor and mentor working with the Sundance Film Festival, IDFA, DMZ Docs South Korea, QUMRA, Tokyo Docs, Dhaka DocLab Bangladesh, Hot Docs, and RIDM.



Director's Statement

Mirroring the scope and ambition of the Wet'suwet'en fight to protect unsundered lands from theft, YINTAH offers the definitive account of a historic wave of Indigenous resistance to Canadian colonialism. Drawing from more than a decade of vérité footage, the film shadows two Wet'suwet'en leaders (Freda Huson and Molly Wickham) as they reoccupy and protect their homelands in the face of state violence.

As filmmakers, we found that Canada protects its image through force. Throughout the years our camera operators were held at gunpoint, repeatedly arrested and detained, subject to illegal police exclusion zones, surveillance, harassment, and even incarceration. Despite this repression, YINTAH is a film where every consequential moment was captured, providing a remarkably cohesive account of a story that police worked hard to suppress.

As colonial forces conspired to criminalize Wet'suwet'en jurisdiction, we as filmmakers worked to uphold it. The result is a film which was compiled under the traditional laws and collective authority of the Wet'suwet'en house groups at the center of this story – developed with intensive participation from Wet'suwet'en leaders and co-directed by the immediate family members of the film's protagonists. Adopting a decision-making structure which mirrors the practices of Wet'suwet'en self-governance, the film relied on collaboration and consensus-building to share this vital history from an authentically Wet'suwet'en perspective.

As a result, YINTAH is itself both an expression of Indigenous sovereignty and an attempt to decolonize history. With direction from Wet'suwet'en elders and dozens of community members, and aided by narration from the film's protagonists, YINTAH offers an honest, uncommon, and unapologetic perspective of Canada's brief time on Wet'suwet'en lands. In the words of Violet Gellenbeck, an elder and chief who participated in the filmmaking process: "For the first time it is our own people telling our history."

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This approach to de-colonial filmmaking was informed by: [**On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories.**](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

What does unceded territory mean?

The Wet'suwet'en nation have lived on and governed their territories for thousands of years. They have never signed treaties or sold their land to Canada.

How was the film made under 'anuc niwh'it'ën (Wet'suwet'en law)?

YINTAH has been designed to empower Wet'suwet'en community members to take control of their own history, and has essentially been governed by Wet'suwet'en traditional leadership. The filmmaking process has been designed to uphold the principles of 'anuc niwh'it'ën (Wet'suwet'en law), which means that each Wet'suwet'en family depicted in the film has held decision making power over their own representation. In Wet'suwet'en law, each house group (or family group) is the sole decision making authority on their house territories, and so in YINTAH, each house group has been given creative authority over the representation of events on their house territories.

In practice, this means that both the Unist'ot'en and Cas Yikh houses, which the film primarily revolves around, have had their interests protected on the film team by a co-director and producer (Brenda Michell and Jen Wickham, respectively). Repeated meetings were held throughout the filmmaking process with the Unist'ot'en and Cas Yikh people, as well with other depicted Wet'suwet'en clans and leaders as needed, resulting in a process where the Dinī ze' and Tsakë ze' (male and female chiefs) and Skiy ze' (children of chiefs) of the Wet'suwet'en effectively guided and authorized the depiction of this vital chapter of Wet'suwet'en history.

What is the correct spelling - Wet'suwet'en or Witsuwit'en?

Both Wet'suwet'en or Witsuwit'en are correct. The spelling "Wet'suwet'en" is most commonly used in the media because it matches the spelling used by various Wet'suwet'en organizations, such as the Office of the Wet'suwet'en, and is consistent with the spelling used throughout the landmark Delgamuukw-Gisday'wa Supreme Court of Canada.

The film uses the spelling "Witsuwit'en" as this is the preferred spelling of Witsuwit'en. A distinct Witsuwit'en orthography was developed by a linguist working with the language speakers for decades.

What is the difference between the hereditary chiefs and the elected band council?

The Dinī ze' and Tsakē ze' (Hereditary Chiefs) are the leaders of the Wet'suwet'en community. They govern the 22,000km² of traditional territories of the Wet'suwet'en people, speaking on behalf of their house and clan members (family groups) in the balhats (feast hall). The hereditary chiefs are not elected - rather, they are chosen by elders and other members of their clan or house after years of training and observation. The hereditary chief does not act alone, but consults matriarchs and other members of their family group and clan in order to make decisions by consensus. If a chief has not upheld their responsibilities, it is possible for their community members to strip them of their name and authority.

The elected chiefs are a creation of the Indian Act system imposed on the Wet'suwet'en community by the Government of Canada. They are elected every two years as representatives of the individual reservation communities and are responsible for looking after those municipalities.

There is often overlap between these two systems, but the roles are distinct: The Hereditary Chiefs represent the territories as a whole, while the elected chiefs represent the reservations.

What was the Delgamuukw decision?

In 1997, Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs joined with Gitksan Hereditary Chiefs and won the landmark *Delgamuukw-Gidsaywa* Supreme Court of Canada case. The court recognized that the Wet'suwet'en people have never given up title to 22,000 km² (8500mi²) of land in northern British Columbia - an area the size of New Jersey. The court decision also recognized Wet'suwet'en Hereditary chiefs as the rightful representatives of the Wet'suwet'en title holding collective.

Does Canada recognize the Wet'suwet'en title to their land/yintah?

Wet'suwet'en hereditary decision making processes were recognized and described in the 2011 *Canfor v. Sam* ruling of BC's Supreme Court, which stated:

"Each Wet'suwet'en chief has rights and responsibilities specific to the particular territory over which that chief is given a duty to protect. The rights and responsibilities are confirmed, coordinated, and directed to the common good, in other words, governed, through the feast."

Despite these rulings, the governments of Canada and British Columbia continue to assert jurisdiction over this territory and have issued permits for resource projects without the consent of the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs. Wet'suwet'en people upholding decisions made in accordance with Wet'suwet'en law have been criminalized by the Canadian state, and have repeatedly been arrested for occupying and controlling access to their house territories.

What is the Wet'suwet'en governance structure?

The Wet'suwet'en nation comprises five clans (Gilseyhu, Likhts'amisyu, Laksilyu, Tsayu, Gidimt'en), which are further divided into thirteen house groups. Each house group has [distinct house territories](#) that have been governed, taken care of and utilized by house members since time immemorial for food harvest and seasonal occupation to meet the needs of its members. [Hereditary chiefs](#) whose titles are linked to each house are responsible for the health and sustainability of their house group territories. Wet'suwet'en law protects each house territory against trespass or harvest by outsiders, with hereditary chiefs controlling access and use even among their own nation.

What is the significance of the Balhats / Feast hall?

Wet'suwet'en law is enacted through the balhats (feast hall), where decisions are ratified and clan business is conducted. The Wet'suwet'en feast was made illegal for 100 years through the Canadian potlatch ban, effectively criminalizing Wet'suwet'en governance and political systems and replacing their system that pre-dates colonization with the Indian Act. Despite this, Wet'suwet'en people have retained their legal traditions and continue to govern themselves in the feast hall in accordance with Wet'suwet'en law to this day.

What is the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) ?

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) aligns with Wet'suwet'en law by describing the right of Indigenous peoples to require [Free, Prior, and Informed Consent](#) (FPIC) before any development occurs on their traditional territories. Despite BC's intent to implement UNDRIP, the Province has continued to deny the self-determination of the Wet'suwet'en and our internationally protected right to FPIC. The most troubling aspect of this has been the right to participate in decisions that impact our rights without "coercion, bias, conditions, bribery, or rewards" which has resulted in the issues we are faced with today.

The United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UN CERD) has repeatedly condemned the Coastal Gaslink project, urging the Canadian state to halt the project, seek Free, Prior, and Informed Consent from the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs, and urging police to stand down on Wet'suwet'en lands and to "immediately cease the forced eviction" of Wet'suwet'en people.

What is Coastal Gaslink and who is TC Energy?

The Coastal Gas Link pipeline (CGL), owned by TC Energy (formerly TransCanada) aims to connect the fracking operations of Northeastern B.C. with a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) facility near the coastal town of Kitimat. The Wet'suwet'en people, under the governance of their hereditary chiefs, are opposing the largest fracking project in Canadian history.

What is LNG Canada and who owns them?

This export terminal, called LNG Canada, is owned by a consortium of multinational oil giants (Shell, PetroChina, Petronas, KOGAS, and Mitsubishi). In a previously attempted LNG pipeline (Pacific Trails Pipeline) there was an agreement for the stakeholders to consider transition to bitumen after five years of operation, while [Coastal Gaslink's benefit agreements with Indigenous communities outline the prospect of converting the 48" pipe to transport bitumen.](#)

Why do the Wet'suwet'en oppose the construction of a pipeline?

CGL is one of many proposed pipelines attempting to cut across the Wet'suwet'en traditional territories. If built, it could expedite the construction of subsequent proposed bitumen and fracked gas pipelines, the expansion of LNG Canada, and create an incentive for gas companies to tap into shale deposits along the pipeline right of way. This project aims to blaze a trail, where several other proposed pipelines would be built through some of the only pristine areas left in this entire region. If CGL were to be built and become operational, it would irreversibly transform the ecology and character of Northern B.C. This is why the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs have all unanimously opposed the construction of ALL pipelines through their territory, ratifying this numerous times in the bahlats.

When did the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs deliver an eviction notice to Coastal Gaslink?

On January 4, 2020, Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs from all five clans of the nation issued and enforced an eviction notice against the Coastal Gaslink pipeline. Roads leading onto Gidimt'en and Unist'ot'en territory were blocked in an assertion of Wet'suwet'en law, several support camps along the Morice Forest Service Road were constructed, and the RCMP responded to land defenders with a series of consecutive, large-scale militarized raids. Two Unist'ot'en hereditary chiefs, Tsakë ze' Howilhkat and Tsakë ze' K'eltiy, were arrested and removed from their territories, along with the daughter of Hereditary Chief Woos and Indigenous land defenders from the Gitksan, Mohawk, Tlingit, Dene, Nlaka'pamux, and Cree nations. In total, 28 arrests were made.

What was Shutdown Canada?

In response, dozens of solidarity blockades and protests occurred throughout Canada under the moniker #ShutdownCanada, blocking government offices and legislatures, and shutting down highways, railways, and ports.

More: <https://www.yintahaccess.com/media-background>

Credits

**THIS FILM WAS MADE UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF
'ANUC NIWH'IT'ĒN (WITSUWIT'EN LAW)
WITH THE GUIDANCE AND PARTICIPATION OF**

<i>C'ilhts'ekhyu clan</i> Dinī ze' Nedībīs Warner William Tsakē ze' Masgibu Helen Mitchell Tsakē ze' Welīh Catherine Michell Tsakē ze' Lht'at'en Doris Rosso Tsakē ze' Howilhkat Freda Huson Tsakē ze' K'eltiy Brenda Michell Dinī ze' Gohawk Percy Michell Skiy ze' Thelma Cutler Skiy ze' Karla Tait Skiy ze' Faye Michell Skiy ze' Marlene Buchholz Skiy ze' Natalie Michell	<i>Gidimt'en clan</i> Dinī ze' Wos Frank Alec Tsakē ze' Timberwolf Mabel Forsythe Tsakē ze' Dunen Lucy Gagnon Tsakē ze' Sleydo' Molly Wickham Skiy ze' June Wickham Skiy ze' Jennifer Wickham Skiy ze' Janet Williams Skiy ze' Fran Brown Skiy ze' Savannah Prince Skiy ze' Jocey Alec Skiy ze' Jeff Brown Jr Skiy ze' Deanna Brown
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