

NEWS RELEASE – July 15, Chilko Lake, British Columbia
Government funding is still being used to squeeze Non-Indigenous businesses out of BC's Chilcotin country

After 6 years of negotiations, the non-indigenous lodge and adventure operators of Chilko Lake, British Columbia, are now without permits or guaranteed access to their own private lands. In June of 2014, the Tsilqot'in National Government (TNG) took ownership of nearly 1 million acres of former Crown Land leaving a number of commercial lodges landlocked in the middle of Canada's first-ever Indigenous Title Land transfer.

"Initially it was an exciting announcement as we believed the Tsilhqot'in National Government shared the same beliefs about the environment, however, it has been disappointing ever since. Exhaustive efforts have been made to try and collaborate but the TNG just want us out", says Brian McCutcheon, co-founder of [ROAM Adventures](#) and [Bear Camp](#), an eco-tourism operation at the juncture of Chilko Lake and the Chilko River.

In 2017, after 16 drafts of an attempted protocol agreement, the negotiations fell apart. "As tourism operators we need to plan in advance. We've been trying to seek clarity so we can continue to operate, provide local employment and contribute to the struggling Chilcotin economy" says Phil Huston. The Huston family has invested more than 10 million US dollars into their world-class guest ranch, [The Chilko Experience](#). The project was built by Williams Lake-based and "[Timber Kings](#)" television sensations, [Pioneer Log Homes](#), and the investment rippled through the local economy.

"After 6 years of waiting for resolution, our land has been devalued by 80 percent. What a terrible message for potential investors in British Columbia" says Huston. "This is a total betrayal by the government and I wish the negotiators had all of their life savings tied up in the Title Lands so we could get some results. They just don't seem to care and feel no need to consult us. The situation could not be more unfair".

The lodge owners contacted government officials when the announcement came out in 2014 but the federal and provincial governments have been doing all the negotiations behind closed doors and the results have been disastrous for the BC businesses. So far, the province and federal government have given the TNG more than 55 million dollars and 10's of millions more in assets but there has been no assistance whatsoever to the non-indigenous stakeholders. The government's deals with First Nations have

effectively expropriated the lodges ability to do business. Even the ownership of the roads is still in dispute.

The TNG are true warriors when it comes to negotiating. Lead federal negotiator, Paul West and the provincial negotiator, Alexandra Banford, have been severely out maneuvered during these negotiations as the TNG has received millions of dollars from the federal and provincial governments, while only conceding two short-term bridging agreements. Now, the TNG controls all of the areas where the lodges used to take visitors, creating a choke-hold on the businesses trapped inside the Title Lands.

"It's not really a negotiation. We have no say and the government (federal and provincial) just continues to give away millions of dollars and gets nothing in return" says Hausi Wittwer. "Nothing has been achieved in 6 years and it's only getting worse". Wittwer, who owns [Chilko River Lodge](#), has lost access to his own home as an easement for his driveway, now on Title Lands, was refused.

McCutcheon says "the government simply underestimated the ramifications of the Supreme Court decision and is taking too long to resolve it. While some people argue the TNG is being given too much, I believe returning ALL of the land in the Title Area to the TNG is the right thing to do. However, we invested under the laws of the day and now the government has to compensate us for our energies, investments and lost income. The BC government has already compensated Chinese mineral right holders in the Wet'suwet'en area, so the same should apply for Canadian businesses.

In the summer of 2019, the TNG sent out some low-ball offers to purchase non-indigenous businesses through an acquisition fund provided by the government but the offers were so disrespectful it made the relationship worse. This failed reconciliation process may prove to be the Achilles heel of the federal Liberals and the provincial NDP. It's been a colossal disaster thus far and tensions are rising in the Chilcotin as people and businesses in the larger "Declared Title Area" are starting to wake up and see the potential problems. In response, a group from the West Chilcotin have formed the organization called ["Canadians For Fairness and Transparency"](#) and they have been rallying community support.

If anyone is still uncertain about the TNG's long-term intentions, Xeni Gwet'in Chief, Jimmy Lulua, makes it loud and clear in his recent pronouncements:

"We have always owned this land. Everywhere you look belongs to us. The land is who we are as Tsilhqot'in people. We say we are people of the river, people of the blue water. This is not B.C., this is not Canada. The jurisdiction is ours, and there's no one

that can manage this area like we can. We will definitely go for more. We are not stopping until we have 100 per cent of Tsilhqot'in territory. Our people are pretty persistent."

"Taxpayers across Canada are completely unaware of what's happening. The government keeps spinning make-believe press releases saying that everything is going well, but it is not. Nothing could be further from the truth" says McCutcheon. The lodges cannot understand why federal Minister Carolyn Bennett and Provincial Minister Scott Fraser are dragging their heels on this issue as their own consultants which included the CEO of the Indigenous Tourism Association, Keith Henry, have recommended that the non-indigenous operators should be bought out.

The lodge owners will be quick to point out that the staggering amount of mismanaged funds could have been used to purchase their properties several times over and returned ownership to the TNG, resolving much of the problems. Needless to say, the message is very clear that people should be wary of investing in British Columbia as the reconciliation process now trump's private land and ownership rights.

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Contacts: Each of these businesses has an incredible story to tell

ROAM Adventures Inc 888 639 1114, 250 551 7600

Brian McCutcheon

brian@iroamtheworld.com

Bear Camp and Chilko Operators Association chair

Ashley Scanlan. 250 551 7650

chilkoassociation@gmail.com

Chilko Experience

Phil Huston

chilkophil@gmail.com

Chilko River Lodge

Hausi Wittwer

crlodge@xplornet.com