

JUSTINE TOWNSEND

Starkey-Robinson Award for Graduate Research on Canada

Dr. Justine Townsend is a community engagement professional, educator, and environmental practitioner with nearly 20 years' experience working at the intersection of environmental sustainability, community development, and corporate social responsibility. As a Canadian citizen of European descent, Justine supports Indigenous governance and Indigenous-led conservation in part to advance reconciliation among settler and Indigenous peoples and with the earth. Justine is passionate about Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), braiding Western scientific and Indigenous knowledge systems, and communicating knowledge for impactful change. She works with an Indigenous NGO, the IISAAK OLAM Foundation, an organization that empowers Indigenous-led conservation.



In Dr. Townsend's dissertation, she interrogates the rise of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA), a term coined by the Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) in 2018 to represent area-based conservation initiatives led by Indigenous Peoples. The 2018 report titled *We Rise Together* catalyzed significant momentum for Indigenous led conservation in Canada with the Federal Government committing over \$500 million dollars to date towards the establishment of IPCAs. IPCAs are now viewed by the conservation community as the way towards increasing the conservation estate and by Indigenous communities as another possible tool to advance self-determination in their territories. *We Rise Together* celebrated the reconciliatory potential of IPCAs and called for the transformation of mainstream conservation to recenter Indigenous governance, knowledge systems and legal orders. Dr. Townsend's dissertation examines this hope for IPCAs by asking: What is motivating Indigenous Nations to establish and govern IPCAs? and How are IPCAs articulating with the discourse and practice of reconciliation? So these are timely questions and she enrolls Indigenous and decolonial scholarship, theories of Indigenous settler relations and scholarship in the political ecology of conservation to deliver answers to the reader. It is how she does this, however, that is truly exceptional.

Dr. Townsend began her 'field research' with two First Nations with IPCAs in the winter of 2019/2020. When covid hit, she did not turn from her responsibilities but 'pivoted' to conduct work not 'in' the communities but 'with' and 'in service of' them. Kitasoo Xai'xais was particularly interested in examining legal barriers to IPCA establishment and possible models of legal recognition which became Chpt 5. Dasiqox Tribal Park wanted to better understand governance arrangements for IPCAs and so she held a series of webinars and project managed and contributed to the Governance Scan, soon to be released through the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership (CRP)). She has mobilized knowledge emerging from her work in multiple ways including writing reports, Op-Eds, hosting webinars and writing peer-reviewed articles, reaching a broad audience and serving the communities she works with. The dissertation is but the culmination of several contributions Justine has been able to make to our collective

understanding of the growing IPCA movement in Canada. The work will become a foundational reference for anyone studying conservation in Canada.

The most important insights generated from her dissertation are the identification of possible roadblocks preventing IPCAs from being able to live up to their reconciliatory potential. By tracing the rise of IPCAs from both previous land use and conservation planning exercises and analyzing interviews with IPCA proponents, she names and examines resource extraction, crown law, financing, capacity and jurisdiction as areas where, if not addressed, IPCAs can end up appropriated by non-Indigenous governments and conservation actors. With the current enthusiasm for IPCAs, this cautionary tale is of critical importance. She also does not leave us without hope, but speaks of pathways forward including legal pluralism.

The external examiner for Dr. Townsend's thesis was Dr. Dan Longboat, Director of the Indigenous Environmental Studies and Sciences Program at Trent University. He wrote

The thesis is an exceptional piece of work. The candidate's writing and organization into distinct yet overlapping and connected chapters worked exceptionally well, in meeting a wider audience. Apart from a handful of minor corrections, the work is outstanding. The logic used in its chosen wording and building understanding to illustrate the complexity of the subject area, was exceptional. The candidate has demonstrated a high level of knowledge accumulation with respect to the topic and a high degree of understanding of Indigenous reality through her experience and respectful engagement with community. The approach, engagement and artful presentation of the research is commendable. To this, I would support this work being awarded a more formal recognition of its high quality, with regards to its academic and professional integrity and respectful engagement with Indigenous communities.

While Dr. Longboat also commended her contributions to the emerging discipline of Indigenous Environmental Studies and Sciences, I can see her strong contribution to an emerging decolonial Political Ecology. Both are true of course and at a moment when the academy in Canada is grappling with appropriate theories and practice associated with inquiries into Indigenous land and water relations, especially for non-Indigenous scholars, this dissertation stands up as the bar to meet in ethical community engaged research. Dr. Townsend is the whole package – an excellent writer, researcher, knowledge mobilizer and action-oriented scholar. She is an excellent candidate for the Starkey-Robinson Award.