



November 16, 2024

Re: Distinguished Ethnobiologist Award, Nomination for Dr. Leslie Main Johnson

Dear Members of the Awards Committee,

It is with sincere pleasure that we nominate Dr. Leslie Main Johnson for the Distinguished Ethnobiologist Award in recognition of her unparalleled contributions to the fields of ethnobiology, ethnobotany, Indigenous rights, and material anthropology. Leslie has dedicated over 40 years to advancing our understanding of the intricate relationships between humans and their environments, championing Indigenous knowledge systems, and transforming the way we approach and engage in community-based research.

Leslie's MA thesis, *Plants, Land and People: A Study of Wet'suwet'en Ethnobotany* (1993) from the University of Alberta explored Wet'suwet'en ethnobotany, focusing on plant-based resources and relationships and the nutritional role of plants. Her work underscored the knowledge and practices of Elders during, and in support of, the *Delgamuukw-Gisday Wa Aboriginal Rights and Title* case, indicating early on her dedication to community-based work. Dr. Johnson followed up on this work with her doctoral research *Health, Wholeness, and The Land: Gitksan Traditional Plant Use and Healing*, (1997) highlighting the significance of Gitksan traditional plant uses, with holistic health concepts and healing practices, while assessing the phytochemistry and pharmacology of medicinal plants. This dissertation is a basis for Gitksan ethnobotany with intersections with linguistics, cognitive ethnobiology, and Gitksan laws and protocol. This dissertation is widely cherished in Gitksan country, with copies prominently displayed in local FN buildings, in Elders' bookcases, and forever on the desks of every graduate student or scientist—whether anthropologist, ecology, or geomorphologist—conducting research in northwestern BC. As anyone who knows Leslie can attest, her exquisite depth of understanding of complex human behavioral and environmental phenomena is a gift to be cherished, and routinely re-visited. The second, third, and fourth life of her publications is one of her many contributions to the field of ethnobiology.

Leslie's graduate research came as a natural follow-up to the community-based research she was doing in northwestern British Columbia since the early 1980s. In her role as ethnobotanist with the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en Tribal Council, and working with renowned and beloved Elders like Charles Austin, Andrew George, Alfred Joseph, Olive Ryan, and countless others, Leslie

developed some of the earliest ethnobotanical indices in northern Canada. Her early work, published with Gitksan community members, well before it was customary (e.g., Johnson and Anderson 1988; published in the *Journal of Ethnobiology*), illustrates her commitment to doing research *with* and not *on* Indigenous colleagues and collaborators. Leslie has never written about doing applied and action-based research, probably because she was too busy actually doing it.

Leslie's work exemplifies a profound commitment to bridging scientific inquiry with Indigenous perspectives and rights. As a respected ethnobiologist and ethnobotanist, she has contributed seminal research that highlights the importance of traditional ecological knowledge, while simultaneously challenging its misuse outside of Indigenous orthodoxies and ideologies. Her groundbreaking studies on landscape ethnoecology, and the profound role of ideology, laws, and protocol in conservation have paved the way for new methodologies that integrate community knowledge and academic research, ensuring the active participation and recognition of Indigenous communities. She has published widely in an array of local and international journals and has worked collaboratively with other Distinguished Ethnobiology awardees for decades (e.g., co-editing *Landscape Ethnoecology* with Eugene Hunn, co-authoring a benchmark publication on edible fern roots with Nancy Turner (Turner et al. 1992) and Harriet V. Kuhnlein in the *Journal of Ethnobiology*).

Leslie is also prized and admired as a staunch supporter of students. She has served as a graduate supervisor and committee member for many current SoE members. As her former students (Armstrong, Baker) can attest, Leslie is an ideal mentor and collaborator, taking time out her own fieldwork to join her students' work, introducing students to Elders and Hereditary leadership, and always prying students to read more and never reinvent the wheel. As Armstrong notes,

“Leslie is so extremely well-read that whenever we thought we had a novel idea, she was sure to point out exactly who had the same idea decades prior—and she was always right, sometimes citing the year and page number of the publication those ideas came from. Leslie made me a more rigorous and generous scholar.”

Leslie has always been ahead of her time and consistently works and writes to the beat of her own drum. Despite the nature of scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s, which referred to Gitksan and Wet'wuet'en as “hunter gatherers”, she often waved off such terms, remarking “Well, I've never heard a Gitksan woman call herself that”. After almost two decades living full-time in northwestern BC, Leslie and her daughter Rose moved to northern Alberta, where Leslie was Professor of Anthropology at Athabasca University, until her retirement in 2022. During this time, Leslie continued to publish high quality works that remain to be read as novel and impactful contributions to Gitksan and Wet'suwe'ten environmental and heritage research, including her award-winning book, *Trail of Story, Traveller's Path: Reflections on Ethnoecology and Landscape* (2010).

One of the reason's Leslie's works are so timeless is because of her ability to be rigorous with data, but open and honest with interpretation. Later in her career, Leslie expanded her research into the northern BC-Yukon region, where she worked with Kaska Dene and Gwichi'in Elders on landscape ethnoecology and changing impacts on health (2012) and perceptions of environmental change (2014). As longtime SoE member, Nancy Turner points out:

“Leslie Main Johnson has made outstanding contributions in the fields of ethnobotany and ethnoecology in northwestern Canada her work has focused on regions previously little known or covered in ethnobotanical and ethnoecological literature, and on topics that have not been well recognized until relatively recently.”

Leslie worked closely with Kaska Elders like Mida Donnessy, Ann Maje Raider, and Mary Maje, and Gwichi’ in Elders like Mary Teya, all of whom she published with in her two recent edited volumes; culminations of Leslie’s collaborative and community-based work. *Wisdom Engaged: Traditional Knowledge for Northern Community Well-Being* (2019) explores how Indigenous knowledge contributes to health and resilience in northern communities and includes contributions from Elders, healers, scholars, and health practitioners, making it a rich resource for understanding the interconnectedness of culture, environment, and health in Indigenous contexts.

Walking Together, Working Together: Engaging Wisdom for Indigenous Well-Being (2022), again, brings together Elders, healers, physicians, and scholars, addressing diverse topics like traditional medicine, the role of diet and traditional foods in health promotion, and culturally sensitive approaches to healing in Indigenous and urban settings.

In addition to her academic and community impact, Leslie has contributed significantly to the field of material anthropology, with a particular focus on the material heritage of Indigenous communities, including basketry, tumplines, and snowshoe technologies. In her retirement she continues to travel to museums and collections to collect data on the material, morphometrics, and origins of these important artifacts. Their work has illuminated the cultural and historical significance of traditional materials, tools, and artistic expressions, fostering greater appreciation and respect for both the idiosyncrasies and commonalities of cultural heritage.

Leslie’s influence is widely recognized, as evidenced by her extensive publication record, her long-term commitment to SoE, and the high regard in which she is held by colleagues and Indigenous collaborators alike. Her exemplary work has not only enriched our understanding of ethnobiology, ethnobotany, and anthropology but has also set a standard for how scholars and institutions can work alongside Indigenous communities in a spirit of respect, reciprocity, and shared purpose. She is a stalwart attendee of the annual Society of Ethnobiology, where she presents new, revised, or ongoing works—often utilizing unique formats (video recordings of moose hide scraping *without* music because it distracts the senses! Etc.)

For these reasons, we wholeheartedly recommend Dr. Leslie Main Johnson for the Distinguished Ethnobiologist Award. Her career embodies the very ideals of this award—excellence in scholarship, dedication to ethical collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to advancing knowledge in ways that honor and uplift Indigenous communities. Thank you for considering this nomination. Please feel free to contact us should you require any additional information in support of this recommendation.

With gratitude,



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