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## **Heiltsuk Nation calls upon United Nations agency to ensure laws address Indigenous cultural losses from marine oil spills**

LONDON, ENGLAND – Today Heiltsuk leadership spoke before the International Maritime Organization (“IMO”), calling for stronger laws to address cultural impacts to Indigenous peoples from marine spills.

The IMO is the United Nations agency responsible for international laws about shipping and the prevention of pollution from ships. IMO Conventions are incorporated into Canadian law through the federal Marine Liability Act. Heiltsuk and the Inuit Circumpolar Council jointly presented to IMO delegates in London, England today about the marine spill liability regime’s failure to address Indigenous cultural losses.

“When a marine spill happens, international and Canadian laws enable compensation for ‘loss of profit’ and ‘reasonable’ measures of environmental reinstatement, while ignoring liability and restoration measures for impacts to the way of life of Heiltsuk and other Indigenous peoples”, said Heiltsuk elected Chief Councillor Marilyn Slett.

In 2016, Heiltsuk experienced the disastrous grounding of the Nathan E. Stewart (“NES”) in its territories, releasing 110,000 litres of oil into the waters surrounding Gale Creek. In spite of the national prominence of the incident, compensation for harms to Heiltsuk and the completion of important restoration measures are still unresolved over seven years later. Instead, Canada and the responsible company remain embroiled in litigation with Heiltsuk.

“The NES spill’s impacts on Heiltsuk are interconnected and go beyond damage to our economic and food security, breaching our ǂviłás and harming our connection to territory, the learnings of our next generation, and our cultural and governance practices. The spill has caused a sense of disconnection and loss that many Heiltsuk people have compared to mourning the death of a loved one”, said Heiltsuk Hemas (Hereditary Chief) Harvey Humchitt Sr. “It is unjust that Heiltsuk is still fighting to address

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council



our cultural losses from the spill, with no support from Canada or international laws.”

“We have traveled to London for two reasons” said Chief Slett. “First, we are calling on the Canadian government to fully participate in negotiations to resolve the NES litigation with Heiltsuk. If Canada is serious about its commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Canada must show leadership by sitting down with us to recognize Heiltsuk’s cultural losses from the NES spill, rather than continuing court battles.”

“Second, we are calling on all IMO states to begin a process to ensure international laws provide redress for cultural impacts to Indigenous peoples from marine spills and shipping activities” added Chief Slett. “We know we are not alone”.

Heiltsuk is attending the IMO on a delegation with the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), which is the only Indigenous non-governmental organization with provisional consultative status at the IMO, allowing it to send delegates to IMO proceedings. ICC is working to ensure its permanent status at the IMO in 2025, as well as to support a goal of multiple Indigenous peoples participating in IMO decisions in order to empower all Indigenous peoples to contribute their invaluable perspectives towards holistic marine governance at an international level.

“We're very pleased that the Heiltsuk Nation is sending a strong delegation to engage with international decision makers on our shared concerns, such as the inclusion of Indigenous cultural heritage in all aspects of the IMO’s work and regulations,” said Lisa Koperqualuk, ICC Canada President. “We share these concerns with the Heiltsuk Nation and we will speak as one voice at the IMO.”

To arrange interviews (time difference will affect availability):

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