

## Protecting Indigenous Cultural Heritage in the Islands Trust Area

Last month, I reported that the Islands Trust Council passed a motion affirming that the “unique amenities” it is tasked with protecting include the cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples within the Trust Area.

What does this mean? Why did Trust Council decide to make this statement?

The Islands Trust Area is located within the treaty and territorial areas of the BOKÉĆEN, Cowichan Tribes, Halalt, Xwémalkwu, K’ómoks, Klahoose, Ts’uubaa-asatx, Lək ʷəŋən (SXIMEĒĒ, Songhees, T’Sou-ke), Lyackson, MÁLEXEĒ, Penelakut, Qualicum, Scia’new, səilwətaʔt, SEMYOME, shíshálh, Snaw-naw-as, Snuneymuxw, Słwxwú7mesh, SʔÁUTW, Stz’uminus, Tla’amin, scə́wəθən məsteyəxʷ, We Wai Kai, Wei Wai Kum, WJOLĒLP, WSIKEM, and xʷməθkʷəyəm.<sup>1</sup>

This list of names represents peoples who have lived in this region for countless generations. The land we current residents live on, build on, farm, protect, take inspiration from, buy, sell, and sometimes argue about, and the waters we enjoy and rely on, hold their long, long history.

In fact, before Europeans arrived, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous people lived in the Salish Sea region, making it one of the most densely populated parts of North America.<sup>2</sup> “Villages lined the shore every four or five kilometers...there were probably 500 – 1000 people living within an easy day’s paddle.” People travelled extensively on the ocean, trading, sharing culture and knowledge, intermarrying, and negotiating rights to resources.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>

These inhabitants developed deep relationships with the land and water. When settlers arrived, the islands were already developed, in a very different way than they are now. If we could travel back in time, we’d find not just villages but also resource gathering areas, spiritual places, medicinal plant areas, fish weirs, clam gardens, burial places, petroglyphs, public art, and more.<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup>

These places still exist. The Salish Sea Islands hold thousands of archaeological and cultural heritage sites dating back as much as 10,000 years.<sup>5</sup>

There are many reasons to protect and preserve this heritage:

- These places still have their original meaning and value and many are used today by Indigenous people, and will be used by their descendants
- There may be potential for restoration of some features
- These sites are valuable parts of human history, similar to other ancient sites all over the world that are protected, studied, and visited
- Many sites include ancestral loved ones’ remains. These have deep spiritual, community and personal

value in Indigenous cultures, as in all human cultures, and need to be treated with dignity and utmost respect and protocol

- Physical evidence provides a record of how Indigenous people lived, thus can fill in knowledge gaps caused by the disruption of colonization
- Destruction of these sites has legal implications, potentially impeding treaty processes and other reconciliation initiatives
- Protecting these sites nurtures positive relationships with local Indigenous Nations and aligns with personal, community and government reconciliation obligations and aspirations
- The past provides opportunities to learn things that can help us today

For instance, evidence shows that Indigenous aquaculture, as practiced in Salish Sea clam gardens, was managed so effectively that shellfish grew larger and lived longer due to cultivation and harvesting methods. This effect declined rapidly after colonization. Clam gardens are being renewed and rebuilt in several places in the Trust Area, bringing valuable insight into how to better manage this food source.<sup>6, 7</sup>

Similarly, fish traps, notably those in the Comox Harbour, were vast, highly productive, technologically complex fish harvesting facilities which “enabled the operators to regulate escapement of spawning stocks and maintain abundance, precisely the sustainable resource management model we strive for today,” as reported in the *Vancouver Sun*.<sup>8, 9</sup> When the Province created the Islands Trust, protection of Indigenous cultural heritage was meant to be central to its work. But this didn’t happen, part of a wider pattern of neglecting First Nations presence, history, and rights. The decision by Trust Council sets the Trust on a course to rectify this.

### Sources

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