

Flying Shingle, October, 2005: The price of a park, 33(17), p.11

When asked how long they have lived here, the Hul'qumi'num-speaking people of Gabriola will answer, "forever". And in a sense that's true. For when this place was buried beneath a mile or more of ice, twenty thousand years ago, there really was no place that remotely resembled the island we know. Aboriginal people have lived here ever since people have lived here; and they have lived here ever since they were a people.

If one wants to be scientific about it, we can point to the oldest yet-known radio-carbon dates from the burial caves in the False Narrows Bluffs, which go back to 1600 BC. That's two thousand years before the Anglo-Saxons set foot in England; almost a thousand years before the founding of Rome; hundreds of years before the first telling of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*; before Tutankhamen was born; before the earliest dynasties of China, the Hsia and Shang, appeared. If it's not "forever", it's pretty close, and it would be no surprise if the date were pushed back by new measurements another thousand years, as it has been on neighbouring Valdes.

The massive de-population of the Island that resulted from the introduction of smallpox in the late-18th century—a time during which two-thirds of the population may have died—could not fail to have changed the way people lived. It has become convenient for us to believe that the people whom we displaced didn't really occupy this land, but were somehow merely "summer visitors". Yet, if you ask the elders of the Snunéymux^w, they will tell you that the False Narrows Bluffs, now owned by Centre Stage Holdings, is probably the most important place to them of all of the sites within their traditional territory, and certainly on Gabriola. And if you ask the archaeologists and anthropologists, there's no question in their minds that this whole area, with its complex array of petroglyphs, inland middens, rockshelters, and cave burials, is of incalculable value to our future understanding of the prehistory of Gabriola and the Gulf Island region.

It's fashionable these days to talk about solitudes. It's strange that in an era when there is so much communication, there often is so little. I'm not wishing to blame anyone here for that, but the list seems extraordinary long when it come to the Centre Stage Holdings proposal. Do the First Nations read the Island's newspapers and follow local issues? No they don't. Do they attend meetings? No they don't. Do advocacy groups on the Island keep in touch with First Nations (as they do on Saltspring)? No they don't. Does the Islands Trust offer background explanations of proposed bye-law changes when they refer them to First Nations for comment? No they don't. Do local newspapers always get the "other side" of the story when they run an article? No they don't.

Does anyone tell us that the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group doesn't see eye-to-eye with the Snunéymux^w over Gabriola on all treaty-related issues; that developers are not adverse to trying to exploit such differences; that First Nations have no say in who can conduct archaeological investigations within their territory? No they don't. Do Islanders and First Nations take the time

to understand the procedures that the Islands Trust follows, and often has to follow, in making its land-use decisions? Do First Nations have the tools to protect their heritage sites on islands where they no longer live and seldom visit? Does the Islands Trust, or any form of local government, have the resources needed for heritage conservation and landowner recompensation? No they don't.

Perhaps some of this will change now that the Treaty Negotiation Process has either reached an impasse, or else proceeds in glacial isolation, and there has been a shift in emphasis from negotiations between senior governments to negotiations between First Nations and local governments. I hope so. But I can't help wondering if it will ever be understood by all involved that the value of these sites is not just their tangible "assets"—to use a word the business community might approve of—but their intangible ones. Just the feeling of a place that has been used for so many centuries for people to honour their dead and celebrate who they are. A place of mystery and connections with the past. Is this somewhere that should be fenced off and lorded over by the super-rich elite of an alien culture? Is this a place we should look to for dollars?

So, why the threat of sub-division development? Can agreements with landowners protect the sites? Won't covenants with many different owners, as many as ten in some of the sub-division proposals, make more distant the dream of the elders of having the right to say what happens to these sites, sites that are rightfully theirs? Do the Aboriginal people have confidence that our institutions will honour their obligations, when only the courts appear to hear their concerns? Why is there an overwhelming need for 49-and-counting big houses? Right here? Why have First Nations been asked to pay so exorbitantly not to have them? Why can't we just let it be?

This planned sub-division is just not an appropriate usage of the land by anyone's measure, and that we are even contemplating it, sends the signal that "preserve and protect" applies, or is only allowed to apply, to ecosystems, not cultural and heritage sites, even ones as special as this one. The price of a park may be one that, yet again, Aboriginal people are being asked to pay, when it is we who owe them so much.
