

# 6. Time Before Memory



Before European contact, the Salish Sea supported more than 50 distinct Aboriginal societies, each with their own language, government, and dependence on the resources of their territories. Decisions about development projects in the Salish Sea are increasingly made with a focus on the purported economic benefit. Although many economic tools can be used to place a monetary value on social and cultural values, these methods do not adequately reflect the depth and diversity of our social and cultural connections to place. Most people relate to a sense of place that is considerably more than habitation. Often it comprises our historic connections, the plants and animals that live there, our cultural practices, and the natural and man-made features. Ultimately, public tolerance for activities that threaten our connections to place are ethical questions, distinct from those only concerning a matter of price (Sagoff 2004).



Popular culture often reflects our close connection to the marine world.

PHOTOS: [TOP] B. BAR; [BOTTOM] M. CULVER.

## Indigenous and Eurasian-Canadian Cultural Heritage

Eurasian-Canadian culture has strong and enduring links to the natural world. Business names, art, architecture, cultural festivals, and the murals on our city walls all reflect a close cultural connection to the ocean and marine environment.

Our strong social and cultural links are well illustrated by the extent to which nature and the marine environment are featured in our recreational pursuits in and on the ocean and its shorelines. The use of killer whales, salmon, and hawks to represent the region's cities and sports teams is a contemporary

## THE CARE-TAKERS



### THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE SAANICH INDIAN MAP

by  
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with  
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The Caretakers is a 1995 report led by Philip Kevin Paul of the WSÁNEĆ (Saanich) people to capture and preserve WSÁNEĆ place names, as well as the concepts and language the place names are built on. “Care-takers of the Earth” was how Philip Sr. described (to his son) the WSÁNEĆ peoples’ position with all living things. The report also captures the paradox of WSÁNEĆ oral tradition being written down in the English language. Cover art is by WSÁNEĆ artist Charles Elliot.

## WSÁNEĆ Identity

In reference to the Saanich Nation on Southern Vancouver Island, Earl Claxton Sr. and John Elliott Sr. explain:

It is the belief of the Saanich tribe that we have occupied this land and have lived according to the Sacred teaching of life given to us by XALS, our Creator, since the beginning. There were no winds, animals, birds, trees, fishes, or islands at that time. All of these beings were changed by XALS from Saanich people to be what they are today. ... To have connection to the land, according to ancient beliefs and teachings, is the Saanich identity (Mason and Ham 1994).

example of how cultural identity draws from the natural world.

Given the land use, harvesting techniques, and the spiritual connection to the natural world, the entire Salish Sea region could be termed a cultural landscape (UNESCO 2010). The United Nations now recognizes this type of cultural diversity as a distinct component of biodiversity by (UNEP 2007). In this chapter, we focus heavily on the connections of Indigenous communities to the land and sea, as these relationships have been established and sustained for millennia.

## Indigenous Socio-cultural Values

With a cultural presence documented at more than 10,000 years and understood to have been in existence for many millennia, the Indigenous communities of the Salish Sea region have unique socio-cultural links and values that continue to inform a way of life in the modern world.

The examples we provide merely help to illustrate a connection to place born of a world-view different from that of most Canadian immigrants, and one that remains at the core of efforts to protect our coastal environment. Contact with Europeans decimated Indigenous populations, yet despite decades of cultural repression, a strong and enduring culture exists. These connections are inextricably linked to place.

## A Connection Since Time Before Memory

Indigenous creation stories, including those from around the Salish Sea, share many common threads. One is that ‘personhood’ is open to both humans and non-humans. Accordingly, when the Creator added humans to the mix of life on Earth, humans did not see themselves as anything different. Rather, the interdependence with all others was seamless. This connection between people, animals, and the land and waters that sustained them persists.



### **Swinomish Tribal Community**

“The Swinomish live in the Skagit—rooted along the Salish Sea. We are the people of the Salmon and our way of life is sustained by our connection to the waters and to the lands, where we have fished, gathered, and hunted since time immemorial.

We often say to our friends, Swinomish always has been, and always will be, a fishing tribe. Salmon are at the heart of Swinomish cultural and ceremonial life. The ceremonial and subsistence harvests by tribal fishers support a thriving cultural life, sustains the elders and nurtures each new generation of our children”.

Brian 'Spee-pots' Cladoosby

## Cultural and Personal Identity

The connection of cultural diversity and biodiversity is core to the very identity of Nations, tribes, clans, families, and individuals. Clan systems identify with wolf, bear, eagle, killer whale, and many other species. Similarly, family and individual crests represent names, genealogy, and narratives shared by people and place, where other animals are considered as sisters and brothers.

## Spirit in Place

For many Coast Salish peoples, spirit power (s'uylu) is directly embedded and experienced in the land, which includes the living and non-living components. Importantly, this is not restricted to existing sites, and spirit power can be experienced directly, through dream, myth, and narrative (Thom 2006). Dreams and stories are shaped by the land and individual experiences of the land. Preservation of the natural environment permits these experiences to continue.

## Cultural Keystones

Just as keystone species exist in an ecological sense, cultural keystone species can also exist. They are based on the significance to cultural identity via roles fundamental to a culture that can include food, medicine, materials, and spiritual practice (Garibaldi and Turner 2004). The salmon of the Pacific Northwest are a pertinent example.

## Fossil Fuel Transport Threatens Culturally Important Species

A study on the impact of six fossil fuel proposals\* in the Salish Sea (Gaydos 2015) analysed the potential affects on 50 species of recognized cultural importance to indigenous Coast Salish peoples. When considering potential oil spills associated with increased vessel traffic, 72% of the 50 culturally important species (n. 35) were likely to be affected, 18% (n. 9) possibly affected and 10% (n. 5) unlikely to be affected. Importantly, threats associated with these six projects also include noise and ship strikes and likely have an overall additive or synergistic interaction.

\*Fraser Surrey Docks, Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain, Gateway Pacific Terminal, increased rail shipment of Bakken Shale crude oil, Tilbury LNG, Woodfibre LNG, Roberts Bank Terminal 2.





Cultivated by First Nations for centuries, the Garry oak ecosystem is now endangered. In the past, Garry oak meadows were maintained by lightning and fires set by First Nations to promote production of camas, an important food plant. Today, fire suppression, land development, and invasive species have compromised much of this ecosystem.

PHOTO: C. ZITER

## Tl'chés—Cultural Keystone Places

Cultural keystone places are now also being proposed (Turner 2013) to represent areas of high cultural importance that can communicate the value of specific places beyond economic potential. These places represent a source of cultural identity, sustenance, spirituality, and associated traditional ecological knowledge. Tl'chés, Chatham Islands, near Victoria, BC, in Lekwungen traditional territory, has been identified as an example (Turner 2013). For generations, the islands have been vital to the cultural expressions and livelihoods of the Straits Salish people, especially the Lekwungen.

Tl'chés is key to the 'Origin of Salmon' story, which tells of how salmon gave themselves to the Straits Salish people. Tl'chés also served as a critical refuge for many Lekwungen families during the smallpox epidemic of 1862-3 (Lutz 2009). The islands helped sustain the Lekwungen with fishing, fruit and vegetables, and sheep rearing until residents moved to the main Lekwungen reserve in Esquimalt in the mid 20th century (Gomes 2012). The site was also used for secret potlatches and winter dances during periods when cultural expression and practices were prohibited (Lutz 2009).

Tl'chés is also one of the few remaining remnants of the Garry oak ecosystem, one of the rarest and most endangered ecosystems in Canada (Lea 2006). These forests and woodlands represent culturally maintained landscapes formed from thousands of years intensive Indigenous management, especially low-intensity fire for the benefit of hunting and production of camas and other edible plants (Turner 1999).

The Garry oak meadows include habitat for rare native species including red-listed Macoun's meadow-foam, California buttercup, and the endangered sharp-tailed snake, among many others (COSEWIC 2009).

Tl'chés also encompasses numerous culturally significant sites such as shell middens, culturally modified trees, and sacred areas, all of which are threatened by invasive species and land use conflicts (Gomes 2012). Now elders, the last generation of Tl'chés-born-and-raised Lekwungen, are sharing their memo-



Tsleil Waututh emblem

**Say Nuth Khaw—  
Two-headed serpent**

“A two-headed serpent once lay across the Inlet blocking all that wanted to pass. To paddle up the Inlet, they had to carry their canoes around Say Nuth Khaw. It is said that on the ground over which his frightful body crawled as it traveled to Lake Beautiful [Buntzen Lake], no living thing has ever grown. Not a blade of grass or moss could survive.”

Adapted from story as told by Annie George, 1966 (SNKY 2010)



ries and local knowledge with younger generations during field outings and traditional pit-cookings at Tl'chés, aiming for cultural renewal and long-term protection of the islands (Gomes 2012, Gomes 2013).

## Tsleil-Waututh Nation— People of the Inlet

The Tsleil-Waututh declaration states “We have lived in and along our Inlet since time out of mind. We have been here since the Creator transformed the Wolf into that first Tsleil-Wautt, and made the Wolf responsible for this land.” (Tsleil-Waututh Declaration extract).

The Tsleil-Waututh are stewards of their rivers, streams, forests, and beaches with an over-arching obligation to ancestors and future generations alike. These obligations are the basis for the Nation’s Sacred Trust Initiative, a direction sanctioned by Tsleil-Waututh Chief and Council and specifically developed to stop the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline project.

## Say Nuth Khaw Yum Provincial Park

Say Nuth Khaw Yum (serpent’s land) lies within the core of Tsleil-Waututh traditional territory in the area commonly known as Indian Arm. It represents the spirit and connection of the Nation to their territory in future, present, and past.

The southern mouth of Indian Arm was once the location of winter villages, summer villages and spiritual sites that occupied every accessible point of shoreline. At the outlet of the Indian River, the Inlailawatash Estuary supported generations of Tsleil-Waututh in the village proper, and in numerous hunting and fishing camps. The area provides a glimpse at the depth of cultural connection to place beginning with the name itself.

The Nation considers Say Nuth Khaw Yum a place to be cared for and restored, believing that the health of the park and the health of the Nation are intimately



**Archaeological sites in Inlailawatash Estuary and Croker Island.**

Evidence of sustained use in Say Nuth Khaw Yum includes cliff side pictographs, archaeological sites, settlements, and shell middens

PHOTO: TSLEIL-WAUTUTH NATION

connected. In addition, the Nation sees the park as another means to help establish contemporary connections to the land and waters and that sharing of culture and history will help others develop a sense of respect and care for the air, land, water, and wildlife.

## Traditional Use

### Traditional Food Sources and Harvesting

Before contact, some Coast Salish communities obtained 90% of their protein from marine sources (Suttles1987) with up to 10% from locally gathered vegetables and fruits (Chisholm et al. 1983). These traditional foods included more than just nourishment. The harvesting experiences, techniques, consumption, and reciprocity were key aspects of cultural expression, identity, and well-being (Donatuto and O’Nel 2010). Sharing of food resources through feasting, trade and social events also provided, and provides, a means to reinforce relations, share knowledge, and maintain kinship ties within

### Food Resources



A harvest study (Fediuk and Thom 2003) with the Hul’qumi’num Treaty Group identified 188 culturally relevant species. These include:

- 27 species of fin-fish (including sockeye, Chinook, pink, coho and chum salmon, herring, lingcod, halibut, rock cod and snapper);
- 26 species of shellfish and other marine foods (including Dungeness crab, oysters, little neck clam, butter clam, manila clam, prawns, basket cockle, red urchin, octopus, shrimp);
- 3 species of marine plants;
- 31 species of birds (including black scoter, white scoter, bald eagle, mallard, western grebe, trumpeter swan, murre, ruffed grouse, blue grouse);
- 16 species of mammals (including marine mammals, mule deer, white tailed deer, elk, moose, black bear);
- 22 species of berries (including salmon berry, black cap, soap berry, huckleberry, thimble berry);
- 43 species of food and medicinal plants;
- 16 species of trees; and
- 4 ‘other’ species.



## Ceremonial and Religious Use of Sites with the Salish Sea.

For many Saanich people, the Salish Sea region also includes numerous sites for ritual bathing, a practice used to gain power and strength. Many such sites have already been lost to development and water pollution.

**Saanich Reefnet Fishery From Turner and Burkes (2006).**

DRAWING: J. ELLIOTT

and between Nations (Lepofsky and Caldwell 2013).

For 10,000 years or more Tsleil-Wautt men, women and children cut trails from the shores to the mountain peaks to enable food harvesting. Lingcod and snapper were caught from shore near Croker Island along with shellfish and shrimp. Twin Islands were used to hunt geese and ducks including goldeneye, mallard, and scoters. Surrounding islands and forests were used to hunt deer, bear, goat, and elk.

Inlailawatash was a fall fishing camp used to catch pink, coho, and chum salmon, which were then smoked or salted. Upstream, huckleberries, blueberries, salmon berries, devil's club, wild parsnip, wild onions, and nettles were gathered in the spring and early summer.

Importantly, food harvesting remains embedded within ceremonial use. For many Indigenous communities food harvesting, preparation, sharing, and eating provide a means to feed ones own spirit and the spirit of passed relatives.

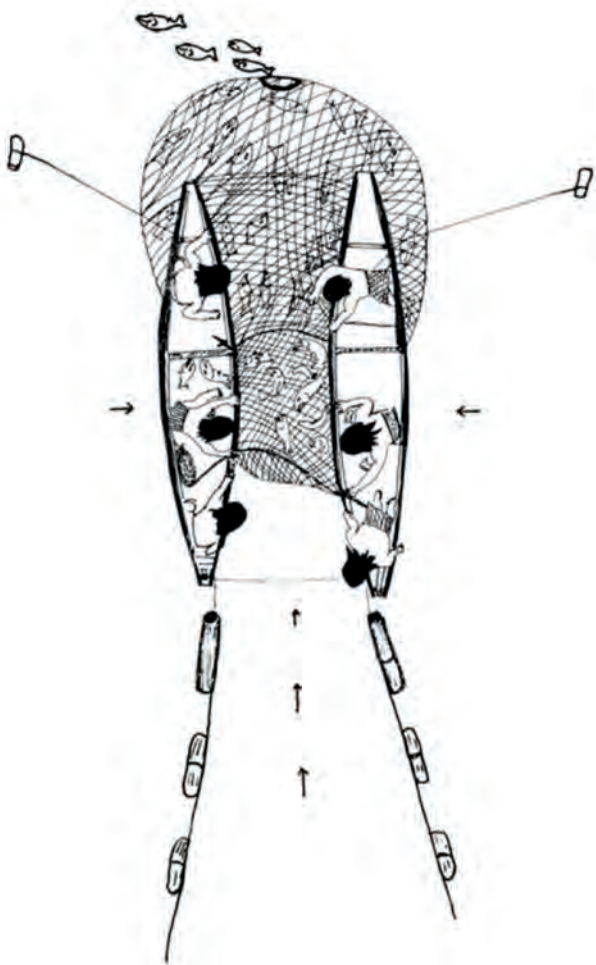
## The Saanich Reef Net Fishery— A Way of Life

The SXOLE, or 'reef net' is another example of ways in which cultural practices demonstrate how place, identity, and the natural world are inseparable. WSÁNEĆ (Saanich) history and teachings recognize the reef net fishery as more than just a fishing technique, it was integral to what it means to be 'Saanich' i.e. fish and fishing are the Saanich identity.

Saanich teachings consider this technique a gift from the Salmon People to the Saanich in exchange for a beautiful princess. The key fishing sites, SWÁLET, are passed down through families with community elders holding and passing on knowledge of the fishery. Importantly, families belong to the fishing site (Claxton 2003).

### The Reef Net

The Reef Net was constructed from specific local materials including Hooker's willow, cedar logs, and cedar rope.





## Canoe Journey

Canoes are a well-recognized identity of coastal Indigenous communities across the Pacific Northwest. As part of a broader movement of cultural revival, the Heiltsuk First Nation of Bella Bella paddled their Glwa (ocean going canoe) to Expo 86 in Vancouver. Paddle to Seattle followed in 1989.

Since then, tribal journeys have emerged as major celebrations of contemporary culture. Canoes and paddlers from Indigenous communities have travelled thousands of kilometers to be hosted by other communities and nations. The events provide an opportunity to share art, culture, history, heritage, song, dance, and food.

PHOTO: TRIBAL JOURNEYS

**Senanus Island in Saanich**  
Grave islands of the Saanich or Malahat Nations exist throughout Saanich Inlet.

PHOTO: WIKIMAP

The technique also relies on an in-depth knowledge of salmon, salmon habitat, and tidal flow. Cedar log buoys and cedar rope formed leads, held in place by anchors, and attached to two anchored canoes. The sides and floor of the net were held with purpose made rock weights and threaded with dune grass to create the illusion that the salmon were safely swimming near the ocean floor. The net was suspended between the two canoes and positioned to open with the tidal flow. Releasing the rear anchors brought the canoes together so the salmon could be collected and brought ashore.

A key feature of the fishery was a small hole at the end of the net, specifically designed to allow some fish to escape. Beyond the principles of conservation and sustainability, the technique comes from a deep respect. Knowing that each salmon run reflected a unique lineage, the technique honoured these lineages so they would continue to persist.

