

Ancient west coast village is revealed

Treaty lets band control access to remote historic village

BY JUDITH LAVOIE, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 13, 2011



Chief Robert Dennis, of the Huu-ay-aht, walks through brush en route to the ancient village of Kiixin.

Photograph by: Lyle Stafford, timescolonist.com

Massive trees have overgrown many of the ancient posts, sometimes holding them up and sometimes pushing them into the damp, fern-covered ground.

But, standing back, the outline of the old longhouse becomes clear.

"This is my place of origin. The place of origin for the people of our nation.

"When I am in here, my body tingles," said Huu-ay-aht Chief Councillor Robert Dennis, pushing through a curtain of cedar branches.

"This is where my ancestors came from. They lived here for thousands of years."

Over the last century only a handful of non-aboriginal visitors have been taken to the ancient village of Kiixin and, with a history of artifacts being taken or sold -- including the pair of carved welcoming figures at the Royal B.C. Museum -- its secrets and stories have been carefully guarded.

Requests to see the village site were usually politely ignored, say Bamfield residents.

But now, with completion of the Maa-Nulth Treaty giving the band independence from the Indian Act, together with land and cash settlements, Kiixin is set to become a cornerstone of the Huu-ay-aht First Nation cultural tourism strategy.

The band plans to offer guided tours to Kiixin within two years, and, this week, Dennis agreed to escort a reporter from Postmedia and a photographer into the village.

In the dim light under the trees, shielded from sunlight and with the sound of crashing waves muffled, the spirit of the ancient village of Kiixin is almost tangible for Dennis.

"My great grandfather, Chief Louis, told me the stories," said Dennis, recalling hours of being forced to remain at the dinner table while he was regaled with tales tracing the history of his people and the village, which weathered tsunamis and attacks by enemies before being abandoned in the 1800s.

"This tells the story of the beginning of time," Dennis said, touching a marked house post.

"Our origin is from the wolves and killer whales -- that's not really any different from the scientists saying we evolved from monkeys -- when you look at the bones of a whale you can see the fingers."

Much of the Huu-ayaht oral history was recorded by Chief Louis Nookmiis shortly before he died in 1964 aged 84. Now it is time to open up that history for others, Dennis said

"Chief Louis went to great lengths to tell the history of this place and I believe it's my destiny now to tell other people," he said.

Kiixin, which once had 15 longhouses, is designated as a National Heritage Site.

According to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, middens show continuous occupation of the area for almost 3,000 years.

Dennis said other archeological surveys indicate that the site was occupied for about 6,000 years.

Some longhouses were rebuilt in the early 1800s and the village was abandoned later that century after a dispute with the Klallam Indians from Port Angeles.

Execution Rock, towering above the dramatic beach in front of Kiixin, played a key role in that skirmish, Dennis said, looking at the rock, now softened by trees.

The vantage point was used to drop rocks and whale oil onto invaders, but its secret is it also has a deep hole in which survivors hid when the battle went awry.

When they crept out, they abandoned Kiixin and rebuilt farther down the coast.

The village will be a key tourist attraction, but the spectacular, isolated beaches may be an equal draw.

During good weather, small boats can navigate the jutting rocks, landing close to Kiixin. But, when the wind is up or seas are high, visitors must land on mudflats at the head of Bam-field Inlet.

The hike to the village wends through the forest, across rocks -- covered in bright green seaweed -- and along three, hardpacked sand beaches littered with shells and starfish.

A wild mink stares at visitors from under a log and then runs alongside, daring them to stay on his beach, where scratchings in the sand show he has been tumbling and jumping.

Now 63, Dennis still knows the traditional territory like the back of his hand.

Now, with stewardship of the land returned to Huuay-aht, band members are beginning to realize the possibilities.

"This is going to be zoned commercial," said Dennis, emerging from the forest to the expanse of First Beach.

But any development of tourist cabins or a lodge will leave a light footprint, Dennis pledged.

Second Beach will be a culturally protected zone, where a replica of Kiixin is planned, allowing people to see how the Huu-ay-aht ancestors lived without disturbing the genuine historic site.

"It's one of the medium-range projects. It should happen within five years," Dennis said.

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