

Huu-ay-aht hope to turn Kiix?in village into B.C. tourism site

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Kiix?in has lain empty for more than 300 years, according to legend, but the descendants of the people who abandoned the village on the West Coast of Vancouver Island are hoping to bring it back to life as a cultural tourism site.

“It’s a rarity in that you don’t see examples of ancient village sites that often, and when you get there and see where the 15 to 17 longhouses stood, and see where the whale remains are still in the ground ... you certainly feel the history of the place,” said Chief Robert Dennis of the Huu-ay-aht First Nation.

Historians say Kiix?in was occupied until the 1800s, but the Huu-ay-aht believe it was abandoned much earlier, in about 1700, after a war party from the Klallam tribe paddled across from Olympic Peninsula in Washington State to attack the village, near Bamfield, about 120 kms northwest of Victoria.

“Almost everyone was killed.... Only 20 people escaped, and they fled up the Pachena River,” Chief Dennis said.

He saw Kiix?in (pronounced Key-hin) as a boy when his grandfather took him there, and his first reaction was: “Wow. Why aren’t we living here? It looks out over a really beautiful beach and is in such an amazing location.”

But he was told the Huu-ay-aht do not reclaim village sites abandoned after widespread death.

“It’s a bad omen,” he said. “You can’t live where so many people died.”

But people can still visit, walk among the ruins in the thickly overgrown forest, and climb up to the fortress look-out where the Huu-ay-aht watched for invaders or grey whales, which were hunted and dragged up on the beach for feasts.

“Our big hope is to make Kiix?in a corner stone in a cultural tourism business,” Chief Dennis said. “It is something we have started to work on.”

Chief Dennis said there had long been talk about opening the village site, and that got a boost recently when the Huu-ay-aht signed an agreement to work with Parks Canada in managing the West Coast Trail in Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, which passes through tribal territory. Parks Canada did not respond to a request for information on Monday.

Chief Dennis is confident there will be tourism interest, because examples of ancient villages are rare on the West Coast. The most famous, Ninstints and Skedans, on Haida Gwaii, are relatively inaccessible compared to Kiix?in, which in 1999 was designated a National Historic Site.

According to The Canadian Register of Historic Places, Kiix?in was designated because “it is the only known first nations village of the more than 100 villages on the southern British Columbia coast that still features significant, standing traditional architecture and which has a wealth of associated historic information from oral histories, archaeology, and archival records.”

“It’s a short boat ride from Bamfield,” said Chief Dennis. “Our plan is to take people in there with a guide, so they can appreciate what they are seeing and to make sure everything is protected. You can land an aluminum boat on the beach and walk up into the forest.”

Chief Dennis said two famous totem poles, welcoming figures with outstretched arms that were collected from Kiix?in in 1911 and now stand in the entrance lobby of the Royal B.C. Museum in Victoria, will not be returned to the site.

“We would like to get them back one day, but first we would have to have a place to keep them safely. For now they are best kept in the museum,” he said.