

Five First Nations get new treaty

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PORT ALBERNI, British Columbia – The majestic and colorful ceremonial curtains of the Ha'wiih (Chiefs) lined the walls of the barn-like Alberni Athletic Hall for the historic signing of the Maa-nulth Treaty.

Grand designs of thunderbirds clutching whales, and depictions of ancient tales of heroic deeds and ancient conquests served as a backdrop for politicians in business suits trumpeting their latest treaty, 16 years in the making.

“This is the beginning of the end of the Indian Act here, and that’s a wonderful thing for all of us,” said Chuck Strahl, Canada’s minister of Indian affairs and northern development, who signed the massive treaty as hundreds of people rose to cheer.

“The federal government’s recognition of First Nations’ governance models is a landmark accomplishment in this agreement, and worth celebrating in a big way.”

Members of the Huu-ay-aht, Uchucklesaht, Ucluelet, Toquaht, and Kyuquot First Nations commuted from their villages up and down the rugged west coast of Vancouver Island, gathering in the central city of Port Alberni for the signing April 9.

Like many First Nations agreements here, the Maa-nulth Treaty was born out of conflict.

In 2001, after eight years of heated negotiations, 12 First Nations united under the Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council, had reached an agreement-in-principle with the federal and provincial governments. When Nuuchahnulth leaders brought the agreement back to their communities, the table split; six First Nations voted in favor, and six voted against.

After months of acrimonious debate and finger-pointing among the two sides, the

NTC treaty table broke after five of the “yes” nations announced the formation of their own treaty table called Maa-nulth.

Maa-nulth is a Nuu-chah-nulth word for “along the coastline,” as most of the communities are located deep inside remote inlets and bays, accessed by boat or via long, windy logging roads.

Maa-nulth negotiations with the federal and provincial governments concluded in December 2006, but a battle between the Huu-ay-aht First Nation and federal government delayed final signing.

Huu-ay-aht was involved in a lawsuit against Canada over their right to sell Native-caught seafood products.

In an opening statement, lawyers for the federal government claimed, “the Nuu-chah-nulth do not exist.”

After two years of arguments, the Canadian government agreed to ratify the treaty.

The five First Nations and their 2,000 members will share in more than 92.66 square miles of land and \$73 million in cash payments to be made over the next decade.

The Final Agreement defines the Maa-nulth First Nations’ rights regarding self-government and the ownership and management of lands and resources, including rights with respect to the harvest of fish and wildlife.

“With this treaty we have embarked on a new road,” said Huu-ay-aht Chief Councillor Robert Dennis. “We as Huu-ay-aht are very proud to be Nuu-chah-nulth, and I look forward to continuing that relationship for the future generations.”

The Maa-nulth Final Agreement is the third modern-day treaty signed in British Columbia within the past decade.

With more than 200 individual First Nations in the province and only a handful of treaties, the federal and provincial governments have been attempting to negotiate

agreements with First Nations over the past 20 years with limited results.

Since most First Nations do not have treaties with the governments, Canada's highest courts have ruled aboriginal rights and titles exist on all provincial lands, and judges have urged politicians to negotiate.

"This important step provides the basis for the Maa-nulth First Nations to build a new future and bring new economic opportunities to their communities, as well as to the regions along the west coast of Vancouver Island. It also clearly shows what can be accomplished when partners commit to finding solutions to complex issues through dialogue," Strahl said. "We are moving forward, and we'll keep moving forward so other First Nations can enjoy similar celebrations like today."