

*House pits and fallen
beams are all that remain
of Haida longhouses at
T'aanuu Lnagaay
(Tanu Village).*





BOATING WITH RESPECT

How to visit Aweenak'ola, the lands we are on

BY DIANE SELKIRK



Poles at SGang Gwaay slowly returning to the earth.

F

From the Salish Sea to the Great Bear Sea, we are fortunate to boat through some of the richest and most productive cold-water marine ecosystems on Earth. This region is home to a diverse array of marine life, including whales, sea lions, seals and salmon, as well as seabirds, wolves and bears. Characterized by deep fjords, swirling currents and rocky islands, it's been managed and stewarded by dozens of First Nations communities for over 15,000 years.

With deep and enduring ties to the

winding inlets and bucolic islands, they have managed this region through aquaculture, sustainable harvesting, trade and spiritual practices.

While these Nations have always held a hereditary obligation to care for their lands and waters, over 100 years of cultural suppression and physical separation made this sacred task almost impossible. For decades, the people fought to regain their authority and jurisdiction over their ancestral territories. In recent years, courts have begun to affirm Aboriginal title along with the rights and responsibilities that accompany it.

Many boaters who set out to enjoy the coast often don't realize they're exploring unceded territory. Krissy Brown, manager of the K'ómoks Guardian Watchmen Program, hopes this is something the K'ómoks Guardians can help teach. Part of a network of Guardian

Programs that now span the coastline (and the country), these official stewards, sometimes known as Watchmen, have a unique role to play in upholding and educating their members and all visitors about Indigenous law.



Learn more about the importance of cultural and archaeological sites, and best practices in how to show *maya'xala*—respect—when spending time in Indigenous territories:

WHILE EVERY GUARDIAN program is different, all focus on protecting and preserving the lands, waters, and local species for future generations while re-establishing their rightful connection to ancestral territories. For the K'ómoks Nation, Brown explains the Guardian program's initial goal was simply to get community members back onto the land and restore their ancient relationships. For team member Caelan McLean, it was the opportunity to hop on a boat and help care for his territory, which "spans from the Englishman River in the south up to the Salmon River in the north," that drew him to the Guardian Program as a 16-year-old summer student. From there, he discovered a job that blends ancient law, Western science, and a hefty dose of public relations.

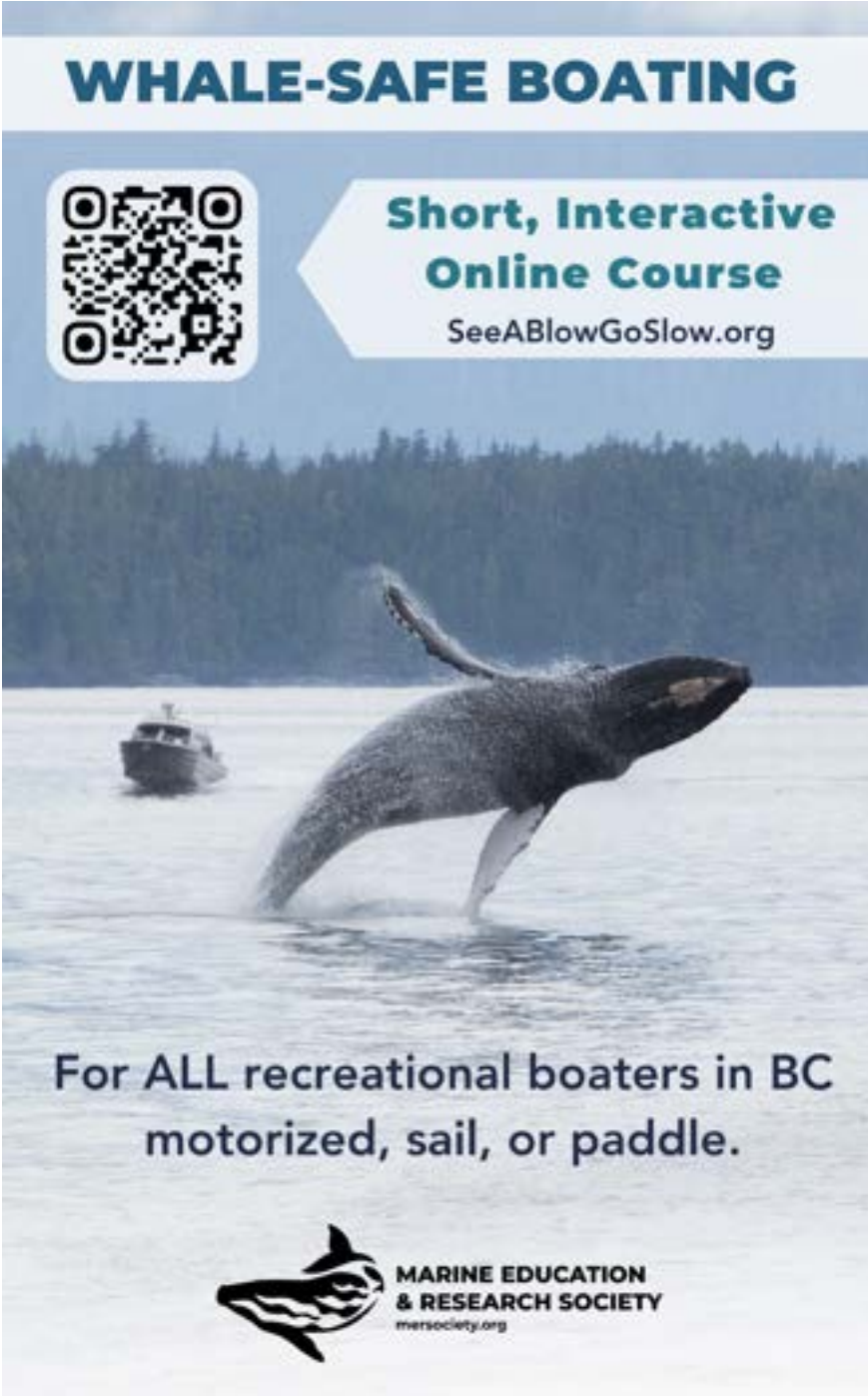
McLean explains that Guardians have a mandate to monitor and research wildlife and traditional plant inventories, protect wildlife from poaching or injury and keep an eye on cultural sites. Their work includes things like recent kelp and eelgrass surveys but may extend to educating boaters about slowing down for marine mammals or showing them how to identify fragile archaeological sites.

"There are a lot of places accessible by boat that are culturally sensitive, and people might not recognize them," he explains. To help, Guardians might show visitors how to spot a shellfish harvesting area (something important for food security), identify and avoid an old village site or safeguard an ancient mariculture innovation. "We want to help boaters understand, so we show them the things they can do to protect these places."

While Guardians don't have any enforcement authority, Brown says that for the most part, their interactions with the public are positive. "People are eager to learn about things like our big fish trap system or how to recognize cultural soils." Also called middens, Brown explains that, like many archaeological sites, these ex-

posed patches of stratified shell and black earth carry deep significance to Indigenous people. However, over the years, many sites have been disrupted by accident or through intentional digging by people searching for artifacts.

WHILE THE K'ÓMOKS Guardians have just begun creating an archaeological inventory of their previously recorded sites, studies further up the coast have shown how crucial it is for visitors and Indigenous people to learn to identify and protect these endangered rem-




WHALE-SAFE BOATING

**Short, Interactive
Online Course**

SeeABlowGoSlow.org

**For ALL recreational boaters in BC
motorized, sail, or paddle.**

 **MARINE EDUCATION
& RESEARCH SOCIETY**
mersociety.org



Once you know how to spot them, you'll discover a variety of clam gardens up and down the coast. To visit respectfully, don't disturb the rock walls or remove anything from the tidal flats.

nants of early habitation.

“You know that moment when you’re boating past a sheltered cove with a pristine-looking beach and think to yourself, ‘Wow, that looks like a really nice place to spend the day?’” asks Christine Roberts, an archaeologist and proud member of the Wei Wai Kum First Nation. “Well, on this coast, if it’s a good spot, chances are you’re looking at a place where First Nations people once lived.”

Roberts has spent the past several years studying these inviting beaches and sheltered coves. She is passionate about educating people on why protecting this landscape is so important. As a descendant of the original inhabitants, Roberts is just beginning to understand how deeply intertwined her

ancestors were with the landscape. She marvels at their ingenuity. “It’s incredible to see how many resources were used up and down this coast. You can’t walk along a beach or enter a forest that hasn’t been used, modified or accessed by our ancestors.”

While some signs of earlier habitation have disappeared—erased by development, industry, or defacement—Roberts says many sites are just starting to be identified and studied, making it almost a race against time. For instance, in an extensive archaeological project

on Quadra Island, Roberts collaborated with a team that included the Hakai Institute to study clam gardens. She was astounded when they located dozens of human-made, terraced beaches on the island’s northern end. “Clams were clearly a main staple,” she says of the remarkable food-producing technology, “but then the people died off.”

ANOTHER COLLABORATIVE project tracing human history on Quadra involved aircraft surveys using LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging), which provided elevation models and helped pinpoint sites where humans likely lived during a time of great sea-level fluctuations. The excavations that followed yielded stone tools and other artifacts from as far back as 13,900 years ago.

Revolutionizing our understanding of coastal migration, Roberts says the discoveries on Quadra Island—coupled with obsidian cutting tools, fishhooks, and other items from 13,600 to 14,100 years ago found further north in Heiltsuk territory—showed how important these sites can be when they bolstered the “kelp highway” theory. This theory, which also aligns with oral history, suggests the coast’s first inhabitants weren’t land-bound migrants who crossed the Bering Land Bridge, but seafarers who navigated down the West Coast at least 5,000 (some estimate more than 15,000) years earlier than previously believed.

For Roberts and many other Indigenous people living along the coast, these scientific findings also hold a per-

sonal message. Every stone burial cairn, ancient rock shelter, tool, fish trap, sea garden and culturally modified tree is a connection to their ancestors. And the artifacts don’t just offer ancient history—they provide details about how the First People adapted to dramatic climate shifts at the end of the ice age. Each discovery offers clues about how they developed sustainable food production techniques and built resilient communities in the face of huge environmental challenges.

“They hold our history. But they also hold our future,” Roberts explains. “Every single element in this landscape was managed by First Nations people and carries the stories of who we are and where we might go.” However, when visitors don’t treat the land with respect—such as inadvertently digging in a burial mound or knowingly taking an artifact—a piece of this complex and wondrous story is lost.

WHILE THE GUARDIAN Watchmen are working to uphold traditional laws that have never ceased to bind all who enter and use these territories, many

Be respectful of former village sites like Qalogwis (in Tlowitsis Territory) and areas marked “Indian Reservation” on charts. Even when places look abandoned, they may hold sacred meaning and are often the locations of artifacts or burials.



RESOURCES

Do not disturb any archaeological finds or remains that you may encounter, instead photograph, take GPS co-ordinates and report them to the nearest Guardians and to BC’s Archaeology Branch at archaeology@gov.bc.ca or 250-953-3334

Identify or report a clam garden site: clamgarden.com

Discover how to recognize ancient mariculture sites including clam gardens, fish traps and root gardens: seagardens.net

Learn more about the member First Nations of the Nanwakolas Council: nanwakolas.com

Find the Guardian Watchmen closest to your location: indigenousguardianstoolkit.ca/program-map

Get an overview of some of the responsibilities of Coastal Guardians: coastalfirstnations.ca/our-stewardship/coastal-guardian-watchmen

of us are still catching up. Roberts, McLean, and Brown all agree that the first step is education. They encourage boaters to stop in coastal communities, visit the museums and cultural centres, and ask questions. And if you see Coastal Guardians on the water—stop by for a chat and an orientation to the place you’re visiting.

Perhaps someday, a new set of archaeologists will sift through the soils off Vancouver Island and discover the story of our time here. Hopefully the results will show that by engaging with the wisdom and traditions of the First Nations, we helped preserve their heritage and that our actions contributed to the protection of some of the most ecologically significant marine ecosystems on the planet. 