



The Protection of Archaeological Sites in British Columbia

Archaeology is the scientific study of the physical evidence of past human societies recovered through excavation.

Although hardly the stuff of an *Indiana Jones* adventure, the excavation of these sites helps archaeologists discover and describe past cultures, develop a local cultural history, and in the bigger picture, explain how cultures develop.

An example of real archaeology at work can be found right here in BC. For thousands of years, the peoples living along the coast and up the major river valleys had all the trappings of agriculture—large permanent villages, sophisticated political systems—without farming.

This situation was unique in the world. Archaeologists noted this pattern wasn't seen until salmon stocks stabilized and the large annual runs of salmon established. These ancient peoples of British Columbia were harvesting salmon the way the peoples of other regions harvested crops. This one adaptation affected every facet of their lives.

Archaeological sites are the localities containing the physical evidence of past human activities. They can range in size from a few square metres that were once

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a temporary hunting campsite, to square kilometres where a town, occupied for hundreds or thousands of years, moved along a river bank as buildings were abandoned and rebuilt.

In British Columbia, archaeological sites are protected by legislation. They are protected because these sites have value to First Nations, local communities, and the general public, as well as for the scientific information they hold.



Area of Nanaimo Bay Village 2002

Protection for archaeological sites applies to all of BC, whether the site is on private or Crown land. Protection means the archaeological site cannot be altered without first securing a permit from the Archaeology and Registry Services Branch. Practically speaking, a permit is needed if any land-altering construction is considered within the archaeological site.

There are approximately 25,000 recorded, protected sites in BC and many times that number of unrecorded sites. Most sites date to the last 3000 or 4000 years, but some sites are older than 10,000 years. One of the most active areas of archaeological research is locating these older sites.

Legal professionals should be aware that archaeological sites are not noted on title. The provincial government, however, maintains an inventory of these recorded sites. An essential part of all land-conveying transactions is that the archaeological inventory is checked to determine the



Nanaimo Bay Village 1858

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presence of recorded sites on properties. Failure to identify a site on a property may mean the purchaser is facing unanticipated restrictions or costs for development.

Because many of the records require professional interpretation, the archaeological inventory is not directly accessible but it can be checked through one of the following activities.

- Hire a qualified consulting archaeologist to conduct a quick, Web-based search. In British Columbia, many archaeologists belong to the BC Association of Professional Consulting Archaeologists. A membership listing can be found on their Website at www.bcapca.bc.ca. Alternately, a Google search for “archaeological consulting British Columbia” will give you a Google directory of consulting firm Websites. Many companies list their services in the *Yellow Pages*.
- Place a data request with the Archaeology and Registry Services Branch of the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management at srmwww.gov.bc.ca/arch/forms/datarequest.htm. The branch strives to fill data requests within five working days, but this timeline does fluctuate, depending upon the workload. ▲

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