



An Ocean of Understanding

There are stories on the West Coast that have yet to be told. This isn't one of them, but it is, perhaps, a hint of many to come.

When European settlers came to what is British Columbia and Canada's West Coast, it was populated by people who used the ocean like we use highways. If you talk to Aboriginal elders, many can tell you about the great canoes, of times when families travelled up and down the many shorelines, among islands and inlets—fishing, gathering food, trading, and just meeting people.

At a canoe race on Saanich Peninsula this summer, recollections of one of the last families that paddled up and down Vancouver Island until the early 1960s were shared with me. Trips along the coast and to Vancouver from the Island had been commonplace up until that time. I was also told that in the early '60s, Indians weren't allowed above the car deck on ferries.

There are many stories. There's always change—transitions into new times, new ways of thinking and being.

Attending some gatherings in the Tribal Journey of 2004 on the Saanich Peninsula and the Chemainus First Nation,

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I thought how the canoe revival is both symbolic of the past and of the future.

In Graham Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods*, he recalled how in the early 1990s geologists used advanced scientific methods

and computer analysis to convince the world that the Sphinx in Egypt was water damaged, not eroded by wind as the Egyptologists had professed. This was a significant leap in knowledge afforded by keen questioning and new and powerful technology. It also pointed out the fact that the sophisticated early-Egyptian culture was a lot older than previously thought.

The great flood has always interested me: I started asking Aboriginal people where their ancestors went when the big flood happened. In Nisga'a, it is said the people tied up their canoes at the top of





mountain peaks. They were pointed out to me. In Squamish, I was told people tied up at the Black Tusk. I read that “Saanich” in the Coast Salish language meant “emerging from the sea” when some of the flood waters receded.

In a fertile coastal land—with abundant food and shelter resources, dotted with islands and inlets, in what is a maritime province today—the ocean-going canoes played an important role in life. Today, I am told ocean-going heritage is one of the most important aspects of Northwest Coast culture.

Today, a revival of ocean travel by canoes is well underway. Aptly documented 10 years ago by David Nell in *The Great Canoe, Reviving a Northwest Coast Tradition*, he speaks of the canoe coming back as a metaphor of community where young people are taught the importance of “pulling” together. In the canoe they are taught the respect for the tree from which the canoe is carved and respect for themselves and others. Flexibility and perseverance in the elements, currents, and weather are good lessons for all of us. Through travel to other communities each Summer, paddlers are part of a great cultural regeneration. The teachings are part of the gift.

For young people and for those individuals and communities recovering from addictions and the abuses of residential schools and other systematic oppression, Nell points out the canoe is a powerful symbol of healing. The current renaissance of the canoe on the West Coast allows people to go back in time, as well as move forward with their dreams.

The great canoes are carved from

red cedar trees. There are still some left; logging companies often graciously deliver 50-foot logs for carving. They, in turn, have received tax benefits and good will from carvers, communities, and paddlers.

Some logging companies in the past, however, often cut the biggest trees, especially targeting other big cedar trees that had been “culturally modified,” whereby cedar bark strips had been removed for clothing, baskets, rope, and other needs. Demonstrating ancestral settlement, “culturally modified” trees, often many hundreds of years old, have been used as evidence in legal cases concerning Aboriginal rights.

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The canoes, as ancient witnesses, are continuing to help Aboriginal people come to grips with their heritage and connection to this place called British Columbia. In fact, many of the waters travelled by canoes hold secrets and perhaps evidence of Aboriginal rights and title below the water.

Just as the Aboriginal canoes move slowly through the water into each paddler’s future, science relentlessly discovers new ways of knowing. Science’s new friend “technology” continues to rapidly evolve; just as Hancock recently described that water, not wind, created the erosion of the Sphinx, I anticipate science will confirm some of the elders’ stories about early coastal habitation, before the flood.

Coastal mapping is rapidly moving toward accurately recording physical attributes as well as biological attributes. Techniques are today capable of subdividing the shoreline into geomorphic units, those that scientists can describe in detail, like those of sand and rock. With aerial photography and global-positioning satellite technology, such things as overhanging trees, eel grass beds, sea

walls, and much more are currently being mapped by a BC company called Coastal and Ocean Resources. Compared to just a few years ago, these newer processes provide much more map detail.

This in itself is very useful but it gets more interesting than just mapping at extreme low tide. People such as John Harper of Coastal and Ocean Resources are starting to look carefully at the ocean floor with things such as side-scan sonar technology. With it and other marvels, the ocean bottom is getting clearer for us to understand.

In a new book, *Lost World: Rewriting Prehistory – How New Science is Tracing America’s Ice Age Mariners*, veteran journalist Tom Koppel provides insight into both the emerging technology and how it can affect our perceptions of history.

It is not out of the range of science and our understanding to realize that secrets of Aboriginal human habitation lie in village settlements around the shorelines of our coastal waters. Koppel discusses the possibilities of looking through the waters and mapping out the actual coastlines when the oceans were 350 to 400 feet lower than they are today.

What of the artifacts, the tools, and carved rocks? What of the yet-undiscovered clam gardens and middens, where hundreds of years of clams and seafood shells lay testimony to early human life? What of the settlements, fish camps, and berry camps? And what effect will new knowledge about early peoples have on the rights and title of land? It was only a decade ago that people thought the Egyptologists were right.

The ocean holds understanding of the past and the future. Until science confirms the elders’ stories, their myths, and legends passed on through almost countless generations, I will continue to listen and think that what they are telling is possible and wait for science to catch up and confirm their stories. ▲

Nigel Atkin is a communications consultant and university instructor.

nigel@pinc.com