

# Kindred Watchmen OF THE EARTH

Believed to be one of the oldest cultures in the hemisphere, Canada's Haida civilization forges ahead to preserve its ancestral and spiritual heritage as their corporeal world slowly returns to its Creator

by Judy Waytiuk



Eagles and ravens own the sky over Haida Gwaii. The great birds are everywhere, spiraling in updrafts, perched in tall Sitka spruce, battling along the water's edge over just-caught fish. They soar above the 68-foot ketch *Island Roamer*, sailing from remote Moresby Camp down Cumshewa Inlet on the first leg of a journey through Gwaii Haanas—the Islands of Beauty.

The air is salt-clean and cool, the mist-threaded inlet glassy with morning calm. Onboard the *Roamer*, sixteen of us, a dozen passengers and four crew members, are heading to the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site that encompasses the southern third of Haida Gwaii, the island chain edging Canada's West Coast province of British Columbia.

On sailors' charts, these are the Queen Charlotte Islands. In the Haida ancestral language, Haida Gwaii is "the people's islands." It has been the home of Haida civilization for 10,000 years or more.

It is also Canada's Galapagos, and we are sailing straight into the heart of its human and natural history.

Over our eight-day voyage, in addition to Skang Gwaay, we will walk through four more villages: K'uuna 'Llnagaay (Skedans), Hlk'yah GaawGa (Windy Bay), Gandll k'in Gwaayaay (Hotspring Island), and T'anuu 'Llnagaay (Tanu).

All five are tended each summer by two or more Haida Watchmen chosen by the Council of the Haida Nation. The Watchmen keep count of visitors and share a little of their knowledge of these places. "This is my favorite spot in the whole world," says Windy Bay Watchman Gary Russ, sitting on his porch steps. He tells us that Watchmen have always been part of Haida culture; often they are carved forms atop totem poles attached to the houses of the chiefs. In groups of three facing in different directions, the carved Watchmen look out for anything that might be a danger to the villagers.

Today, the living Watchmen guard ghosts and crumbling wooden ruins. At Skedans, Robin Rorick and Layla Charleson, both 25 years old, are thrilled to be Watchmen. "It's awesome," says Charleson. "You get to be in a really powerful place."

Following the Watchmen, listening to stories, we step past mossy mounds that mark the rotting log foundations of abandoned houses. Treading pathways marked by white shells, we pass fallen poles sinking into the earth; we stand before once cleanly-carved, painted poles now canted at precarious angles; and we struggle to distinguish the blurred outlines of mythic figures the Watchmen see so clearly—whale, bear, raven, wolf, and Dogfish Woman.

There are perhaps 600 more village ruins around Haida Gwaii. "Some are permanent habitations, some are seasonal, and there are other sites that were spiritual or burial or food-gathering sites," says Ernie Gladstone, the park reserve's superintendent, co-chair of the site's Archipelago Management Board and a man of Raven lineage.

But for more than 100 years, the forest has been taking them all back. In another 50 years or so, the last in-situ traces of an entire nation's visible history will likely be gone, slumped into the forest floor.

As far as the Haida are concerned, that is as it should be.

Haida elders, asked some 20 years ago what should be done about the slowly-eroding

remains of Haida settlements within the boundaries of Canada's brand-new Gwaii Haanas National Park and Haida Heritage Site, "felt very strongly that the historic and natural process is to allow those poles to go back into the ground, where they originally came from," explains Gladstone. "That's the way it's always happened."

That choice, though agonizing for some



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archeologists and historians, was the Haidas' to make. After all, this is their world.

So a hushed, benign neglect rules in the moldering villages. A shoring-up of some of Skaang Gwaay's tilting poles was permitted as a compromise more than a decade ago to slow the natural process in this World Heritage Site.

**T**hese islands rank among the planet's oldest continually-occupied places. Recent archeological evidence suggests that at their peak, the Haida numbered perhaps 30,000. They could have been here temporarily or as permanent residents well over 20,000 years ago. "Archeology here is really only just beginning," says Nathalie Macfarlane, director at the Haida Heritage Centre at Qay'lnagaay near Skidegate. "And it's changing the face of how we think Native Americans arrived in the New World. It is suggested more and more that people arrived on Haida Gwaii by boat at a time when ice still covered the mainland."

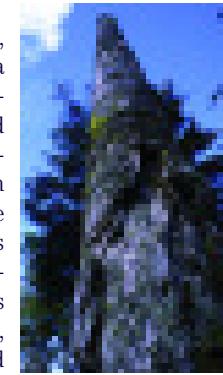
The Haida lived in a complex, rigid social structure. Every Haida was either of the Eagle or Raven social grouping, with dozens of lineage sub-groupings. Haida society is matrilineal; property, names, crests, masks, songs, and stories are passed on through mothers. A chief usually inherited his title from his maternal uncle. Raven married Eagle, and

vice-versa.

Village houses, each containing a chief and household, were arranged in a row or two, facing the sea. Each house had a single carved pole at its front center to illustrate the family's power and wealth, and each house had carved end posts facing the sea. Elaborate designs told myths, read from the poles' tops downward, about ancestral encounters with the creatures whose images were portrayed on them. Chiefs held occasional potlatches to celebrate their wealth by giving away food and material goods that it took years to amass.

Haida dead were interred in mortuary houses, in boxes on carved mortuary poles in front of the houses, or sometimes in caves. Mortuary boxes were small; the dead were removed to the forest for a year before burial, so it was their bones, scoured by nature, that were then interred in the boxes affixed to poles raised in solemn ceremony.

The Haida used exquisitely-crafted wooden war canoes to raid mainlanders'



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tribes and take slaves or to trade for goods not available on the islands: oil-rich eulachon fish, mineral pigments, or stone and metal for tools. They bartered wooden chests, bowls, ladles, spoons, woven baskets, and—beginning in the late 1700s after Europeans and Japanese traders arrived—copper shields, silver and copper jewelry, and sculpted pieces of argillite (a soft black stone unique to the islands) that appealed to the newcomers.

But along with trade goods, the Europeans brought smallpox that decimated the islanders. The worst epidemic peaked in the late 1800s, and by 1915, the Haida numbered fewer than 600, huddled in two villages, Skidegate and Old Massett, on the northern-most island of the chain,

Graham Island.

Convinced the Haida were about to become extinct, researchers and archeologists began removing poles and ancestral remains from abandoned villages to preserve them at museums in Germany, Britain, Chicago, New York, and Prince Rupert and Victoria in British Columbia.

Meanwhile, more damage was done to the islands. The sea otter population was destroyed for fur, and whale populations dwindled. Mining was tried, but made too little profit, so resource extractors turned to the forests and began clear-cutting—stripping slopes bare and wrecking salmon streams. The carnage occurred mostly on Graham and on the northern end of Moresby Island, but by 1974, one logging

company, IT&T subsidiary Rayonier Co., planned to log southern Burnaby Island, where the Haida had gathered food for centuries.

Local Haida artist and activist Guujaaw (which means drum), and Thom Henley, a new islander, drew up a wilderness protection proposal and began enlisting public and media support. Rayonier was denied logging rights on Burnaby Island but was allowed to log on neighboring Lyell Island, touching off ten years of escalating protest while Lyell Island's trees fell. In 1985, Haida protesters formed a human blockade to stop logging trucks and were arrested and hauled off while news media recorded their removal. The same year, the Haida Nation filed a major land claim with the

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Canadian government for all of Haida Gwaii and its surrounding seas.

Decades later, that claim is still pending, but the idea for a national park reserve took hold immediately—in part to quell public outrage over the government's treatment of the protesters and environmental advocates' concern about the mounting devastation of the islands. In 1987, the Haida, the province of British Columbia, and the federal government created the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. Skang Gwaay had been designated a World Heritage Site in 1981.



here, but the forest clearly owns Haida Gwaii. Massive stands of Sitka spruce, western hemlock, and red and yellow cedar tower over dim-lit earth, thick with mosses and ferns. The coastal temperate rain forests along North America's Pacific Northwest hold the planet's largest accumulation of living matter, with more biomass than in tropical rain forests. That life is most intensely-concentrated in these islands, and perhaps nowhere is richer than the intertidal zones that lie exposed during low tide and are submerged as the tides come in.

Some parts of Haida Gwaii were never covered with ice during North America's glacial period; these islands offered small patches of unfrozen refuge to plants and animals that evolved a bit differently here. Black bears and pine martens are larger than their mainland cousins. Deer mice, dusky shrews, and short-tailed weasels not found anywhere else burrow about in the mosses.

There are other animals, introduced more recently, like raccoons and the diminutive black-tailed deer. Both pose continuing problems for an ecosystem that never factored their greedy appetites into its natural equation.

Human greed is still visible here, too. As the *Roamer* leaves the protected reserve on our last day of sailing, we notice bare patches from the clear-cut logging that continues outside the park. After eight days immersed in forests where breaking a fern frond would be frowned upon, the scars on the rich green slopes shock the soul, even though logging here is more regulated than in the past and many contemporary Haida make their livings working for forestry companies.

Remarkably, the Haida have held onto their culture over a century or more of savaged population levels, displacement from home villages, energetic religious conversions, and disruption by laws that ignored Haida matrilineal culture and disenfranchised Haida women who married outside their people. Nika Collison, co-chair of the Skidegate Repatriation & Cultural Committee, the group leading the retrieval of Haida artifacts and remains from around the world, says that

Today, a unique joint Haida and Canadian government, the Archipelago Management Board, governs Gwaii Haanas, where 33,000 "visitor nights" are permitted, with a third of that reserved for independent travelers, a third for Haida-owned tour operators, and the remaining third for other private tour operators. Since few travelers come here on their own and there are only a couple of Haida operators, private operators bring in most of the annual 2,000 visitors who spend from seven to ten days here. All of the visitors are given 90-minute orientation talks impressing on them the importance of respecting this place. Only 22 visitors per day, per operator, may visit a village site, and only a dozen can be onsite at a time.

One of the private operators, Randy Burke, owner of Bluewater Adventures' *Island Roamer* and her sister ship, the *Island Odyssey*, has sailed these islands for almost 20 years. It shows. Thin, blue-eyed, and red-headed, Burke does not resemble a Haida in the least, but he carries himself with the same peculiarly-unruffled tranquility.

"It is the place on the coast that my heart is in. And I think it is the most spiritual place you can visit on the coast," he says. "Going to Haida Gwaii is a very moving experience for everybody who goes there, and people feel that at different levels, depending on their personality and their outlook on life. But I don't think anybody goes there without feeling touched."

Humans may be respectful stewards

## The Solitary Raven

Even before popular culture embraced protection of these islands, the distinctive, graphic style of Haida artists fascinated art connoisseurs around the world and became a part of Canada's international identity. The best-known of those artists, Bill Reid, created the cast-bronze, five-ton Spirit of Haida Gwaii: *The Black Canoe*, installed at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC. Its burnished green twin, *The Jade Canoe*, sits at Vancouver's International Airport in Canada, with the original plaster version preserved at Canada's Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec.

Reid is buried at his maternal grandmother's birth village of T'anuu 'Llnagaay (Tanu). His ashes were carried by water to the site after his death in 1998 by Haida who paddled his burial chest there in the 36-foot-long war canoe *Lootaas* (Wave-Eater) that Reid had designed and that Haida carvers had built in Skidegate.

He does not have a mortuary pole. His simple headstone, adorned only with his Wolf clan crest, identifies him by his Haida name, Iljuwas Yalth-Sgwansang (Solitary Raven).





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when potlatches were banned, “they still happened, maybe not as often and not visibly. They’d have church dinners or Christmas dinners or birthday dinners, but everyone who was at them knew what was going on. They were potlatching.”

The carving of mortuary poles may have given way to inscribing headstones, but those headstones are still raised in traditional fashion. “We get our culture from our lands and waters,” says Collison. Today, she estimates the total population of the islands at about

6,500, about half of them Haida, with another 2,500 to 3,000 Haida worldwide.

In recent decades, private collectors, museums, and Parks Canada have voluntarily returned ancestral bones and some artifacts and poles. By mid-2005, fifteen years after the Haida began to seek out and return the remains of Haida ancestors, all the known bones held across North America had been brought home and reburied; 466 of them are now interred in local graveyards in Old Massett and Skidegate. Now, the Haida are turning to museums in Europe, hoping to retrieve ancestors and cultural treasures held there, and they are negotiating with the Royal British Columbia Museum, the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization for the return of artifacts.

“Since the early 1990s, the Haida have contacted more than 300 institutions around the world—mostly in Europe,” says Collison. “We know a large amount of our cultural treasures are there.”

In coming years, the Haida will house their returned artifacts in the Haida Heritage Centre at Qay’lnagaay. “The old primary industries of logging and fishing are in decline, and tourism is really the major new economy here. The heritage center is really a symbol of that new enter-

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prise on the island,” says Macfarlane. “What’s happened over the last ten years is that the museum and the repatriation committee have developed relationships with museums worldwide. The Haida approach to repatriation is based on partnership and exchange.”

First opened in 1976 as a small building on a rocky peninsula at the edge of Skidegate, the museum began a massive expansion and reconstruction in 2001. Set to open informally in summer 2007, with its official opening planned for the spring of 2008, it already houses the headquarters of the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site and the Skidegate Repatriation & Cultural Committee.

When construction began, almost the first thing done was the carving, then raising, of six monumental poles. The poles mark the place that will tell the Haida story, house cultural artifacts and art, and enable the passing-down of traditional carving skills, knowledge, and stories that have been told through countless generations.

Legend says Raven brought people into

the world by coaxing them out of a clam shell, having created the earth when he tired of flying over a world of water. A battle between Raven and Eagle, symbol of power and prestige and bringer of peace and friendship, brought the sun, moon, and stars into being.

That was a very long time ago. Much has changed.

But the forest still rules the earth here, ravens and eagles own the sky, and the people still live on these islands and tell their stories through song and words, and by carving new tall poles—poles that may some day fall back into the earth, just as the old ones are falling now.

Eighty or a hundred years from now, says Collison, the elders will undoubtedly be consulted for their thoughts on whether the poles that are new today should be preserved, or allowed to fall back into the earth. However the cycle continues, it will be as it is meant to be. ❁

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