

Charlottes: a Canadian Galapagos

by John Watson

The Queen Charlotte Islands are, at the closest, about 60 miles from the B.C. mainland. This isolated and sparsely populated archipelago was first discovered in 1776 by Captain Cook, but it was not until 1787 that the British took possession of the islands. Bart Robinson in *Harrowsmith Magazine* said "the Queen Charlottes are reputed to have the cleanest waters (and) the richest sealife... of the Pacific coast from southern California to Russia."

They are known as Canada's Galapagos because they contain ecosystems that are unique in the world. This is because of several factors.

One is the climate is very mild because of the *Kuroshio*, or Japanese Ocean Current. The average yearly temperature is about 8 Celsius, and though the islands do get snow, it does not last for long.

The physical geography is unique. Scientists believe the Charlottes escaped glaciation and thus preserved many flora and fauna. The genetic variations between islands is also of interest to them.

The black bear is the only large predator indigenous to the Charlottes. It, along with rodents (such

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as mice and shrews) and the Dawson Caribou were the only mammals (excluding humans) on the island until the introduction of blacktailed deer 70 years ago. The islands support animals and plants not found anywhere else. Land animals, birds, and sea life also flourish. The largest concentration of peregrine falcons in the world is on the Queen Charlottes.

The sealife includes eleven species of whales and the largest rookery of Stellar's sea lions on the west coast of North America.

For all these reasons, and more, UNESCO has nominated South Moresby as a candidate for designation as a World Heritage Site.

The Haida Indians, who first inhabited the islands, have a traceable history of more than eight thousand years. There were about 6,000 Haida living in several dozen villages in Captain Cook's time. The Haida were skilled artisans, they

built elaborate totem poles, carved stone, and worked silver. Their work reflected their integration with the components of their environment: the sea, the trees, the animals, and the land.

The Haida were fisherman and rarely ventured inland. "Before the coming of white prospectors and settlers no inland trails penetrated the dense forest growth. The Haidas occupied the shores and the islands of the inlets," wrote Mary Stearns in her Ph.D. thesis *Culture in Custody*.

It was not until the mid 1800's that settlers began to occupy the islands. The 1850's saw the first trading post on the islands, and in 1876 the first missionary arrived. A few years later the first Anglican church was built.

The Haidas current troubles began in 1882 when the Indian Department of the federal government laid out reserve lands. The Haida

asked for, and were given, "the title to sixteen ancient village sites and fishing stations" according to Stearns.

Ninstints was once the main village of the Kunghit Haida Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands. An expedition of 1957 removed and preserved a number of totem poles (for which the Haida are renowned). They now stand in the UBC Museum of Anthropology. But director of the museum, Michael Ames, warns: "If history has a lesson it is that the survivors are equally deserving of respect as any monument."

James Swan wrote in a report to the Smithsonian Institute in 1874 that "There they (the Queen Charlottes) lie waste and fallow, yet marvellously productive, and awaiting nothing but capital, enterprise, and skill to return manifold profit to those who will develop their resources." Almost a complete cen-

tury later, the Haida began protesting the development Western Forest Products and the B.C. government envisioned for South Moresby.

Western civilization has been slow to spread to the Charlottes. By 1955 only about 3,000 people were living on the islands, but that had increased to 5,000 by 1975. Still, the population is mainly restricted to Graham Island where 80 per cent of the island's inhabitants live.

Logging has formed a large part of the island's industry. About half of the island's working population was involved in logging in 1975. For the most part, logging was restricted to the more accessible Graham and Moresby Islands, but the smaller islands of the archipelago are now being harvested as well. The Haida began protesting the encroachment on their ancestral homeland in 1974.

South Moresby is the part of the archipelago the Haida claim as a Tribal park. It amounts to almost 988,000 acres and includes Lyell Island as well as a long string of smaller islands. The Haida have launched a land claim while Western Forest Products continues logging operations.



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