

FORUM: *Media Representations of Archaeology in B.C.*

A Letter to the Editor...

The recent controversy at the Willow's Beach site in Oak Bay reveals some serious misconceptions regarding archaeology and heritage held by the public. The article published in the *The Vancouver Sun*—claiming a \$600,000 archaeology bill for the archaeological impact assessment (AIA) at the Willow's Beach site upon which homeowner Wendi Mackay wanted to develop—inspired much anger in the general populace, revealing saddening ignorance and blatant racism towards First Nations people. It seems that many people do not understand what archaeology actually is—hence why high school students volunteered to excavate to avoid the expense of professional archaeologists (see comments for McCulloch "Oak Bay Homeowner Stuck with \$600,000 Archaeology Bill," *The Vancouver Sun* 8 March 2011).

Being a recently graduated Archaeology student with a certificate in Cultural Resource Management from Simon Fraser University, my experiences give me some insight regarding this contentious situation. I have always been a history buff with a fascination for the stories behind material culture. At SFU my studies and personal influences resulted in an increasing appreciation for local heritage and a passion for engaging in publicly relevant archaeology.

As a budding archaeologist, my personal experience is that many people seem to think archaeology only exists in Egypt, Greece, or Rome, even South America, but not North America. Hence the surprise when people find archaeology under their house. I understand the conflict of interest between heritage protection and the need for modern development and resource harvesting, yet people who live here need to be reminded of the history of this province. Let us not forget that 'British' Columbia was once a British Crown Colony, having an even deeper history preceding colonialism.

Although the colonial times are over to many of us, they had and still have

serious and tragic effects on local First Nations people whose heritage is beneath the ground's surface. Conflict between archaeology and domestic development gives the impression that traditional territories are once again up for grab. This land is not *terra nullius*—a "land belonging to no one," as Columbus once declared. Sadly, in this case all people seem to see is the \$600,000.00 price tag, without considering what contributes to the cost. The problem is obvious: why should people care about protecting heritage that is not their own, that they have not learned about, and that allegedly costs so much money?

Archaeological resources are part of someone's heritage, which is not easy to put a price on. Laws exist for a reason—in this case to protect heritage resources. It is homeowners' and citizens' responsibility to know provincial legislation. It is also the responsibility of the government to inform us of these laws, and that of real estate companies to inform us of archaeological resources on properties.

It seems to me this controversy is a continuation of a power struggle that has been going on since Europeans first set foot in B.C. Moreover, it is characteristic of our province; the commotion raised only signifies its importance and need for acknowledgement. Most people are not familiar with the time frame involved in AIAs, as expressed by Mackay's discontent with the slow excavation pace. Expedience is highly variable depending on the type of the site. Site types bring up another point of interest. The site on the Mackay property has been identified as a "midden." In lay terms, "midden" means a garbage dump. So why all this controversy over ancient garbage, wonders the public? As archaeologists, we know why middens are important. The public clearly does not, presenting a great opportunity to teach them.

An even greater link needs to be made between the collaborative work done by archaeologists to benefit descendant communities (as in Pemberton, "Ancient

History of Vancouver's First People," *The Vancouver Sun* 5 April 2011; and "A time for Healing" *The Vancouver Sun* 26 June 2006) so people can see how archaeology can be a positive that helps people reconnect with their lost past. Contemplate for a moment what would it mean to you to learn about your ancestors and your culture that yourself or members of your family were once legally forbidden to celebrate. Archaeology, including data from AIAs, can establish these missing links for people. We must emphasize this if we want people to care and, moreover, to understand why AIAs are legal requirements.

The Mackay case is going to be appealed to the Supreme Court. The racist backlash and homeowner grievance with the *Heritage Conservation Act (HCA)* exemplified by this case demonstrate that there is a problem with our education system, and perhaps with the enforcement of the *HCA*. There must be a better solution that does not result in high individual expenses, and disrespectful, racist attitudes. Preserving the heritage of our province and our country is something we are all accountable for as Canadian citizens. As archaeologists, it is our responsibility to collaboratively educate people so that ignorance can no longer be used as an excuse for such discrimination.

Nicole Slade
Vancouver, B.C.

Correction: Issue 43.1

In Grant Keddie's article in our last issue (43.1) entitled 'Bird Leg Rings on the Northwest Coast?', the description for artifact EbRj-Y:1172 on page 13 should have read: "On side 2 there are two incised circles around this hole (outer 15mm diam.)..." and "Side 1 has 13 radiating lines with three groups of three and one of four lines."