Haida Gwaii: Human History and Environment from the Time of Loon to the Time of the Iron People

edited by Daryl W. Fedje and Rolf W. Mathewes


When Captain George Dixon sailed by a remote archipelago off the north Pacific coast in 1787 he named the islands for his ship, the Queen Charlotte. Today these islands are more commonly known as Haida Gwaii (“Islands of the People”), the Haida homeland that had already been occupied for over 10,000 years when Dixon appeared. This isolated archipelago has long fascinated academic researchers from a variety of fields, who have been intrigued by topics as diverse as the unique nature of endemic plant and animal species and the impressive Haida achievements in art and architecture. Archaeology also plays a role, particularly since the creation of Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, covering the southern portion of the archipelago, in 1987. The pace of archaeological research has greatly accelerated in recent years through the cooperative endeavours of Parks Canada and the Haida Nation. Such work has been multi-disciplinary, involving a considerable number of scholars examining past cultural and environmental history. This volume presents that data. The editors bring their own differing expertise to this compendium: Daryl Fedje is a Parks Canada archaeologist and Rolf Mathewes is a biologist at Simon Fraser University.

The book contains forwards by Guujaaw (president of the Council of the Haida Nation) and Knut Fladmark (whose pioneering archaeological research on Haida Gwaii set the stage for much that followed), as well as a short preface and conclusion by the editors. The bulk of the book consists of 16 papers, organized into three parts, each of which has a short introduction by the editors. Many of the papers have multiple authors, and many authors’ names appear on more than one article, reflecting the team nature of much of the research. In all, 27 people contributed to the articles in this volume. Fedje’s prominent role in this research is evident as his name appears on seven of the 16 articles, plus the preface and conclusion. There is an understandable emphasis on the recent research results from Gwaii Haanas, but other articles deal with more northerly sites, providing geographic balance. An important and exciting focus of the Gwaii Haanas research has been on early occupations, associated with earlier sea level stands, investigated by Fedje, Quentin Mackie and Al Mackie, among others. Temporal balance, however, is provided through several papers on the late precontact period, such as Steven Acheson’s work on settlement archaeology in Gwaii Haanas. The book ends at European arrival and does not attempt to deal with Haida culture as historically known.

Part 1, “Paleoenvironmental History,” contains six papers that deal with such topics as reconstructing past shorelines, climate, vegetation changes and faunal history. Environmental data...
provide essential context for the human story, whether assessing the feasibility of early coastal migrations or understanding the human presence on a dynamic landscape. Dramatic changes in relative sea level, along with marked climatic changes and vegetation shifts, affected human adaptations and the nature of the archaeological record. Bear remains from K1 Cave dating to about 14,500 years ago suggest the presence of open land capable of supporting other large omnivores such as humans at that time, although the earliest dated archaeological evidence is about 4000 years later. Lower sea levels of the early Holocene exposed large areas of open land that could once have supported animal and human populations but are now submerged. Several papers deal with the possibility that populations of plants and animals survived in ice-free refugia during the glacial maximum. Little evidence was found for such relict populations, and some island species that had earlier been proposed, such as the dwarf Dawson caribou, were specifically rejected. The general consensus is that if such refugia existed, they are now under the water of Hecate Strait. In one chapter, Fedje et al. examine the complex paleoshoreline record around Hecate Strait and conclude that any evidence for human presence along the coast from before 12,500 yr to about 9500 yr would now be drowned, sites around 9500 to 9400 yr would be in the modern inter-tidal zone, and sites after that time would be on raised strandlines well above the modern shore. Sea levels were rising so rapidly throughout this period that associated sites reflect only relatively brief occupations. Clearly such important information is vital in understanding the archaeological record of Haida Gwaii.

The Haida perspective on their past is presented in two papers in Part 2. Nang Kiing aay?tuuans (James Young), an elder teaching in the Skidegate Haida Language Program, recounts the story of Taadl (Loon) that takes place at the beginning of Haida time and makes a good starting point for the book’s subtitle. In the other paper in this section, Kii7iljuus (Barbara Wilson) and Heather Harris present Haida oral traditions of “Long, Long Ago.” Such narratives tell of a time when sea levels were lower and no trees grew on the land. The authors argue that these stories could refer to very ancient times, and possibly describe conditions existing in the early Holocene.

The largest part of this book consists of the eight archaeological papers in Part 3 (“Haida History Through Archaeological Research”). In the first paper, Fedje and Mackie present an overview of cultural history for these islands. Along with the editors’ introduction, this provides general context for the detailed articles that follow. Many of these papers deal with the recent research in Gwaii Haanas, particularly investigating early occupations. Despite the key location of these islands in assessing the coastal migration hypothesis, and the claim that a viable environment for human settlement existed as early as 14,500 years ago, the rising sea levels of the early Holocene have submerged any areas that might have supported such occupations. At present, the oldest evidence of human presence comes from two inland caves that have yielded chipped stone spearpoints in contexts dated to about 10,500 radiocarbon years. The search for early coastal settlements is constrained by the sea level history, as all sites earlier than about 9500 years are submerged. A number of sites dating to only slightly later have been located in the modern inter-tidal zone. Kilgit Gwaay, the subject of a detailed article in this section, is the

**CONTENTS OF HAIDA GWAI,**

Foreword by Guujaaw
Foreword by Knut Fladmark

**Part 1: Paleoenvironmental History**

1. Late Quaternary Geology of Haida Gwaii and Surrounding Marine Areas
   J. Vaughn Barrie, Kim W. Conway, Heiner Josenhans, John J. Clague, Rolf W. Mathewes, and Daryl W. Fedje

2. Hecate Strait Paleoshorelines
   Daryl W. Fedje, Heiner Josenhans, John J. Clague, J. Vaughn Barrie, David J. Archer, and John R. Southon

3. Terrestrial Paleoecology of Haida Gwaii and the Continental Shelf: Vegetation, Climate, and Plant Resources of the Coastal Migration Route
   Terri Lacourse and Rolf W. Mathewes

4. Vegetation History of Anthony Island, Haida Gwaii, and Its Relationship to Climate Change and Human Settlement
   Richard J. Hebda, Marlow G. Pellatt, Rolf W. Mathewes, Daryl W. Fedje, and Steven Acheson

5. The Evolution of Endemic Species in Haida Gwaii
   Tom Reimchen and Ashley Byun

6. History of the Vertebrate Fauna in Haida Gwaii / 96
   Rebecca J. Wigen

**Part 2: Haida Traditional History**

7. Tlitsda Xaaytad K’aaygang nga: Long, Long Ago Haida Ancient Stories Kii7iiwa (Barbara J. Wilson) and Heather Harris

8. Taadl, Nang Kiilaaas, and Haida Nang Kiing aay?tuuans (James Young)

**Part 3: Haida History through Archaeological Research**

9. Overview of Cultural History
   Daryl W. Fedje and Quentin Mackie

10. Millennial Tides and Shifting Shores: Archaeology on a Dynamic Landscape
    Daryl W. Fedje, Tina Christensen, Heiner Josenhans, Joanne B. McSporran, and Jennifer Strang

11. Kilgit Gwaii: An Early Maritime Site in the South of Haida Gwaii
    Daryl W. Fedje, Alexander P. Mackie, Rebecca J. Wigen, Quentin Mackie, and Cynthia Lake

12. Test Excavations at Raised Beach Sites in Southern Haida Gwaii and Their Significance to Northwest Coast Archaeology
    Daryl W. Fedje, Martin P.R. Magne, and Tina Christensen

13. Raised Beach Archaeology in Northern Haida Gwaii: Preliminary Results from the Cohoe Creek Site
    Tina Christensen and Jim Stafford

14. The Graham Tradition
    Quentin Mackie and Steven Acheson

15. Gwaii Haanas Settlement Archaeology
    Steven Acheson

16. Shoreline Settlement Patterns in Gwaii Haanas during the Early and Late Holocene
    Alexander P. Mackie and Ian D. Sumpter

Conclusion: Synthesis of Environmental and Archaeological Data
Daryl W. Fedje and Rolf W. Mathewes

The Midden 38(3) 17
best known. This site is particularly important as waterlogging and shell deposits have resulted in excellent preservation of organic materials, including a variety of faunal remains and evidence for woodworking. Kilgii Gwaay was occupied only for a short period between about 9450 and 9400 BP as the sea continued its relentless rise. By 9000 BP sea levels were about 15 metres higher, leaving sites of this age on raised strandlines well removed from the modern shores. Richardson Island, also in Gwaii Haanas, is the major excavated example. The people of this early stage had a maritime economy and efficient watercraft, with a stone tool technology that featured bifacial implements. Fedje and his colleagues define the Kinggi Complex, dating from greater than 9500 to 8900 radiocarbon years, for these materials.

Following Kinggi are the Moresby and Graham traditions, defined by Fladmark through his research in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Fedje and Mackie add a transitional Early Moresby stage, from about 8900 to 8000 BP, marked by the addition of microblade technology to the bifacial stone industry of the Kinggi Complex. Fladmark's Moresby Tradition becomes Late Moresby, from about 8000 to 5000 BP. Late Moresby sites, characterized by microblades, microblade cores, and pebble tools, with an absence of bifacial implements, are found on raised beaches well above the modern sea level. Cohoe Creek, described in detail by Tina Christensen and Jim Stafford, is a raised beach site spanning the Late Moresby and the early Graham traditions. Its northern location provides a balance to the Gwaii Haanas raised beach sites described in a chapter by Fedje, Christensen, and Martin Magne. Microblade technology disappears in the Graham Tradition, with references up to 2005. Fedje and Mathewes describe the archaeological record as conservative and continuous, fitting with Haida oral traditions to attest to the stability and time depth of Haida culture. This book provides an excellent statement of existing knowledge on human and environmental history in Haida Gwaii over the past 10,000 years or so, while holding the door open for exciting new discoveries and interpretations in the future.