

# ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

## Controversy at Bear Mountain

Eric McLay

Archaeology became a focus of contention in BC politics and media in 2006 over First Nations' interests to protect heritage sites threatened by Bear Mountain Resort — a \$5-billion dollar 1,400 acre resort involving over 5,500 homes, two hotels and a pair of Jack Nicklaus — designed golf courses atop Skirt Mountain, near Victoria.

In late 2005, Cheryl Bryce, Lands Manager for Songhees First Nation, and archaeologist Grant Keddie visited Skirt Mountain and contacted the Archaeology Branch to express concerns for potentially unrecorded inland archaeological sites threatened by development plans on the prominent mountain east of Goldstream Provincial Park. In February, the City of Langford supported that Bear Mountain Resort complete an archaeological impact assessment (AIA) of the property; however, the AIA study languished until local First Nations brought media attention to the small limestone karst cave atop Skirt Mountain reportedly used as a sacred bathing pool.

AIA studies have since identified at least three previously unrecorded inland shell middens and two isolated lithic scatters located atop Skirt Mountain, including a serrated projectile point that may be over 5,000 years ago. These inland sites add to other recent archaeological discoveries made on mountainous areas on Vancouver Island and Gulf Islands, such as Channel Ridge on Salt Spring Island in 2004.

It is the sacred cave, however, that has caught the public's imagination and sparked further media attention and political conflict. Bear Mountain CEO Len



Cheryl Bryce from Songhees First Nation at Skirt Mountain (Photo by author).

Barrie's reaction to First Nations' cultural concerns, admittedly, may have helped provoke such confrontation: "You know, if we want to blow up a cave and put up a hotel we will. I bought the property, I own it, we have the mining rights, so what?" (*Victoria Times Colonist*, May 25, 2006).

In November, First Nations occupied the cave entrance to protest the proposed archaeological investigation of the cave prior to Bear Mountain's construction of a new roadway. The permit methodology reportedly involved draining the water

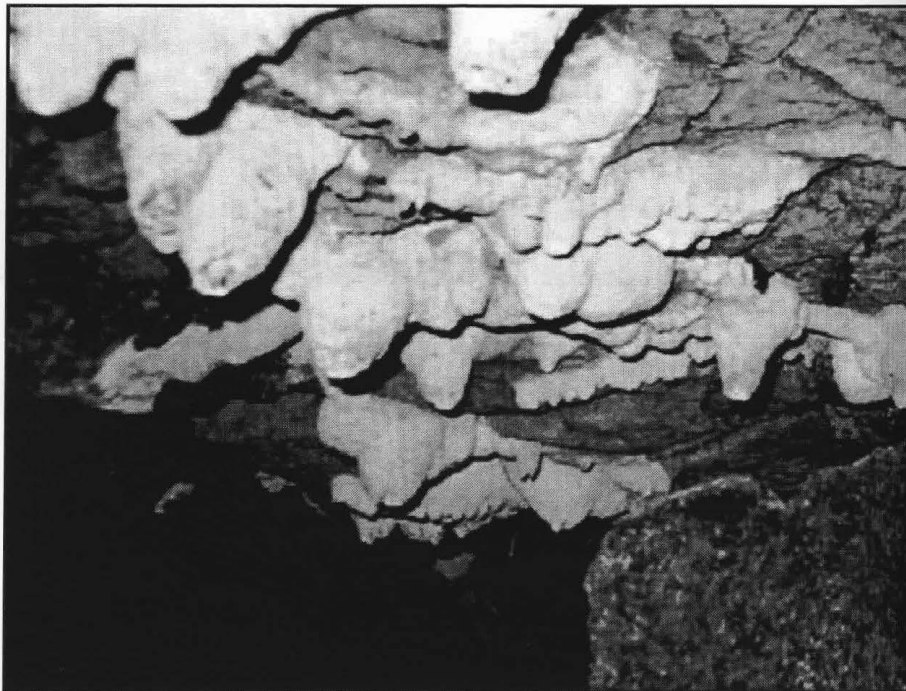
and removing the roof — a plan that would allow researchers to work safely but destroy the cave in the process. "Their methodology is insane and horrific," said Cheryl Bryce. "To damage a site to prove there might be some physical evidence — We know we used it and how sacred it is. There's evidence all round this mountain of use and occupation." (*Victoria Times Colonist*, November 16, 2006). The Archaeology Branch received harsh criticism in the media for not being able to adequately protect such sacred First

Nations heritage sites under the provincial Heritage Conservation Act.

The Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, Michael de Jong, initiated emergency negotiations between local First Nations, Bear Mountain Resort and the City of Langford in an attempt to resolve the conflict. But further public controversy was spawned over a leaked document that purportedly involved a joint venture between Bear Mountain and First Nations to build a casino and provide other economic incentives in exchange for the destruction of the cave.

At the time of writing, Songhees and Esquimalt First Nation have signed agreements with Bear Mountain to amicably resolve the dispute (without reference to any casino), while other local First Nations, notably the Tsartlip First Nation, have protested against any agreement. The state of the cave is not presently known.

Of all the recent controversies over the destruction of heritage sites, the high-profile media events at Bear Mountain have perhaps made the largest impact on provincial policy to make an effort to improve heritage conservation in BC. Bear Mountain has provided a clear example to Victoria politicians that there is an urgent need for provincial and local governments to reduce such conflict by coordinating heritage conservation at the earliest planning stages of the land development approval



Stalactites in the sacred cave at Skirt Mountain (Photo by Cheryl Bryce).

process. Of equal importance, Bear Mountain has demonstrated to government that there is a need to meaningfully integrate First Nations into the provincial heritage conservation process to effectively address aboriginal rights and cultural interests. More broadly, the Bear Mountain controversy has publicized heritage awareness

among the business community and the public to respect the Heritage Conservation Act and help protect our threatened archaeological heritage in BC.

## ERRATA

In the last issue's article on Sxwóxwiymelh, by Michael Lenert and Dana Lepofsky, one house depression was incorrectly indicated: A reference made to House 18 should actually be to House 21. Moreover, this applied to its location in the surface map figure. A corrected figure to the right shows the location for House 21.

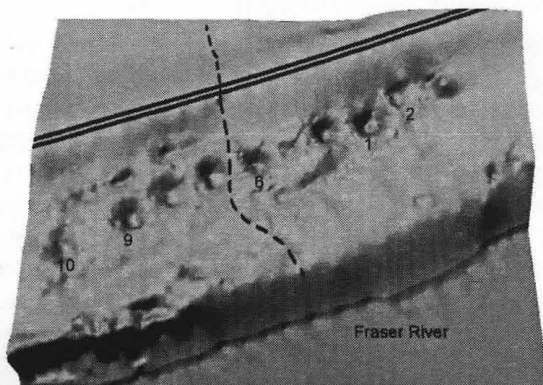
## Sxwóxwiymelh

### House

### Depressions



Northern House Depressions



Southern House Depressions

