

MID-HOLOCENE CULTURAL OCCUPATION OF BARKLEY SOUND, WEST VANCOUVER ISLAND

by Ian Sumpter, Denis St. Claire, and Stella Peters

Archaeological investigations in Barkley Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island are currently making significant contributions to our understanding of mid-Holocene lifeways and towards establishing a regional chronology. Building on previous archaeological site inventories (Haggarty and Inglis 1985; Mackie 1986; St. Claire 1975;), and excavation programs (McMillan and St. Claire 1991, 1992, 1994, 1996; McMillan 1999; Sumpter, Fedje, and Sieber 1997) in the sound, exploratory testing and/or excavation work in two Nuuchahnulth group territories (Tseshah and Huu-ay-aht) during 2000 thru 2002 have yielded an archaeological record pre-dating 5,000 calibrated years before present (CYBP). Evidence for an "early" cultural occupation of Barkley Sound is now present at three sites.

The reader should note that "early" is used here in a relative sense. In other areas on the Northwest Coast the term usually means an age greater than 5,000 years (Carlson 1996). Such sites have been unknown on the west coast of Vancouver Island until now.

Research on a raised ridge landform (~10 m above mean high tide [amht]) positioned behind a large village midden at Ts'ishaa (DfSi 16) on Benson Island (Pacific Rim National Park) in central Barkley Sound during 2000 and 2001 uncovered a cultural component dating 5,310 to 4,840 CYBP (McMillan 2001; McMillan and St. Claire 2001). An older date obtained from the site, 5,920 to 5,640 CYBP, came from charcoal within a clay matrix shortly below the base of the lowest shell layer. However, as there was no associated cultural material, it cannot be absolutely certain that the oldest date refers to a cultural event (McMillan 2001). Preliminary analysis of the earliest Ts'ishaa lithic items

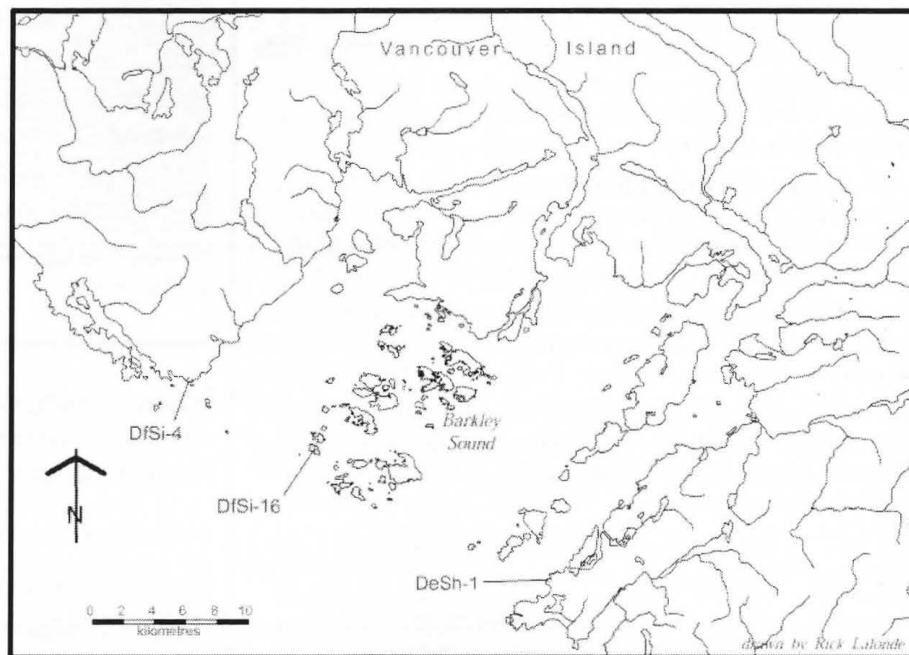


Figure 1 Barkley Sound showing the three mid-Holocene sites

(predominance of stone, particularly chipped stone) reveals strong similarities to those Charles and Locarno Beach culture-like materials from the lowest levels (3-4 m amht) at nearby Ch'uumat'a (DfSi 4) along western Barkley Sound.

Archaeological investigations at Kiiix7in National Historic Site, near Bamfield, in 2002 produced additional information to support the "early" human occupation of Barkley Sound. AMS radiocarbon dating results for a single charcoal sample recovered from a raised sand landform (~5 m amht) at the west end of Kiiix7in village (DeSh 1) reported a date ranging 5,320 to 5,050 CYBP. The sample, collected from the base of a 2-m-thick shell midden deposit with the use of a soil probe, is contemporary with the early deposit at Ts'ishaa.

Kiiix7in and Ts'ishaa now represent the oldest radiocarbon dated cultural sites in traditional Nuuchahnulth territory. Interestingly, the two pre-

5,000-year-old cultural components, plus the 4,800-year-old basal Ch'uumat'a component, are positioned on elevated landforms adjacent to late pre-contact/contact villages. The "early" component/elevation correlation fits well with the proposed Holocene sea-level history for the region (Friele 1991; Hutchinson 1992; Friele and Hutchinson 1993) that suggests a maximum sea-level rise reached 3-4 metres above present during ~6,000 to 4,800 CYBP.

As researchers in Nuuchahnulth cultural history, we are excited by these "early" results and the potential for future exploratory work that will contribute to our understanding cultural development in Barkley Sound.

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