UVIC 2010 Archaeological Field School

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The University of Victoria's 2010 archaeology field school, held from July 9th until August 8th of this year, took place in the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve (GINPR) in Southwest British Columbia as a joint project between UVic, Parks Canada, and several First Nations from the Gulf of Georgia. Led by Dr. Duncan McLaren (UVic) and Daryl Fedje (Parks Canada), six undergraduate students from the University of Victoria participated in the month-long field school, learning a host of field methods and getting an opportunity to work on several sites within the Park Reserve. They were joined by expert volunteer Quentin Mackie, intern Ambrose Jim from Cowichan, Parks Canada archaeologist and GPR specialist Bill Perry, and Parks Canada archaeologist/landing-craft operator David Dyck.

The Gulf Islands National Park Reserve is located among the Canadian Southern Gulf Islands in the Strait of Georgia, off the northern tip of Vancouver Island's Saanich Peninsula. The UVic archaeology field school was based on Portland Island, but also carried out fieldwork on Russell Island and Sidney Island. The joint UVic/Parks Canada endeavour was structured to introduce field school students to archaeology under the auspices of a pre-existing summer fieldwork programme as laid out by the Parks Canada archaeology section. This arrangement provided the field school a number of sites, already known to varying degrees, to work on, enabling students to learn a suite of archaeological skills and techniques. Furthermore, they could apply these skills in a setting where their work would have immediate relevance, as it applied directly to a number of projects previously identified by Parks Canada archaeologists. Also, Parks Canada provided logistical support, using a landing craft to shuttle crews to and from sites around the GINPR as well as to bring fresh water and supplies from Sidney, B.C. to the field school base camp on Portland Island.

The fieldwork component of the field school may be split into four primary areas: (possible) clam garden surveys on Russell Island and Portland Island; site survey, mapping and erosion risk assessment at Arbutus Pt. on Portland Island; intertidal survey and excavation on Sidney Island; and a series of individual student research projects at various sites. The first of these, the clam garden surveys, took place immediately upon arrival in the field. Since July 10th, 11th and 12th were predicted to have the lowest low tides of the field season, these three days were dedicated to investigating possible intertidal cultural features (specifically clam gardens) at Portland Island's Shell Beach and on Russell Island's north side. These sites were mapped using a total station laser surveying unit, and a series of shovel tests were carried out in order to determine whether or not the flat, sandy areas identified as clam gardens had a different sediment pattern than the areas immediately downslope of the rock berm marking the clam garden's lower margin. Unfortunately, the tides were not low enough to permit shovel testing below the berm.

The shell midden site at Arbutus Point (1659T) was a major activity focus for the field school. This site, located on a point on Portland Island's northern side, has been battered by ferry wake for several years, resulting in accelerated rates of midden exposure and erosion. The goal of the project here was to map the site in some detail, identify where shovel tests from previous years' projects had been placed, and to create a comprehensive yet minimally invasive testing strategy to try to understand the site's structure and exactly how it was being affected by the ferry wake. First, three main site areas were identified: the southeast portion of the site is made up of a bank of midden exposure, generally 30-100cm deep, above a beach made up primarily of rock shelf, but with some shell. A number of unofficial trails cut through the bank, increasing midden erosion. The northeast area encompasses the park campground, where tent pads have been established on the midden itself. Trees and grass appear to prevent much damage from campers, though trail erosion regularly exposes patches of crushed shells. Also, the rocky shelf beach here is accessed by a number of unofficial trails which, like in the southeast area, cut through exposed midden. Finally, the western area is a long, north-facing shell beach which is constantly pounded by ferry wake waves. The shells appear to be the remnants of a midden that was once much larger, as can be seen by residual patches of midden held in tree roots 3 metres up a rocky bluff above the beach's western edge. This area also has a muddy pond or bog, trapped behind the ridge of the beach/midden. This entire beach is favoured by kayakers, boaters, and many other park users, as it offers a sunny, comfortable and picturesque place to enjoy the GINPR's scenery from. Unfortunately, the traffic around the remaining areas of intact midden along the beach's upper margin also appears to be contributing to accelerating deterioration of the site.

This western area was the focus of most of the fieldwork carried out at Arbutus Point. The beach, midden ridge and bog were mapped in detail with the total station, and a grid of auger tests were taken. Also, two evaluative units were excavated in the upper and middle intertidal near the western end of the beach

in order to assess whether there was intact midden underneath the wave-churned beach, and how deep those intact layers were. While these operations were being carried out, a basic surface survey identified dozens (n=50+) of formed stone tools and hundreds of flakes. The formed lithics were virtually all contracting-stemmed points, usually so waterworn as to be barely recognizable.

Sidney Island's Hook Spit (1820T) was the other primary activity area for this season. Here fieldwork was designed to add to an existing body of data recovered primarily during the 2009 field season by a team of Parks Canada archaeologists. Initial plans to investigate cultural features found among the shrubs and grasses of the spit were abandoned as an endangered species of bird was nesting at the time, and the archaeology crew was restricted to the sandy beach. Nonetheless, evaluative units excavated in 2009 had uncovered cultural material in the intertidal zone, so a slightly more intensive excavation programme (three 1m x 1m units) was adopted. In addition to these excavation units, Parks Canada archaeologist Bill Perry and UVic field school student Drew MacLennan conducted a GPR survey of the upper intertidal zone in that area of the spit, and identified what appeared to be a house platform. A 4m x 50cm trench was excavated across the margin of the feature, and a stone labret, faunal remains and several lithics were recovered.

One particularly strong aspect of this field school was the introduction of independent student projects. Each of the six students was assigned a project, which they would conduct with one or two assistants. The student in charge of the project would direct field operations (with guidance from senior archaeologists) and be responsible for producing a final report for Parks Canada, detailing the project and making recommendations for further action(s) at the site(s). This exercise not only provided students with the opportunity to design a research strategy and carry out fieldwork largely independently, but it also provided Parks Canada with valuable information regarding aspects of GINPR archaeology that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Student Projects

Emily Benson's project involved surveying and mapping a burial cairn site on the west side of Portland Island (1843T). Benson was able to identify several previously unknown cairns, using both a systematic ground survey and referring to a detailed 3D contour map produced using the total station. This latter method was especially valuable as it created a bare earth model, giving Benson a view of the terrain underneath the chest-deep salal that surrounds the trail. As a result of Benson's work, Parks Canada may be able to reroute a park trail that currently runs through the cairns.

Erin Gregg directed the intensive mapping project at Arbutus Pt., where she used the total station to map the site's surface contours and the locations of the auger tests and the evaluative units. Gregg also defined the extents of the exposed midden banks and recorded the areas threatened by erosion from trails or campers. This detailed map will permit Parks Canada archaeologists to closely monitor the site, and quickly identify areas that have been damaged further since this survey.

Nicole Greenhalgh was assigned to survey Portland Island for culturally modified trees. This survey was carried out primarily around the perimeter of the island, within 50m of the park trail. In addition to recording many cedar CMT's, Greenhalgh identified several large douglas fir trees that had had bark removed in large patches. These were especially interesting as they frequently exhibited clear toolmarks where the bark had been chopped away, rather than the partly-overgrown scar that was common on many of the cedars.

As mentioned earlier, Drew MacLennan worked closely with Bill Perry, a Parks Canada archaeologist, to conduct a GPR survey of Hook Spit (1820T). This survey was instrumental in guiding excavation efforts at the site. MacLennan and Perry also carried out a GPR survey of the beach/midden ridge on the western edge of the beach at Arbutus Pt.

Finally, Phoebe Ramsay and Galen Morris each led the excavation of a 1 x 1 m unit at Hook Spit. Morris's unit was located in the extreme upper intertidal zone, nearly level with the grassy verge behind the beach, while Ramsay excavated in the middle intertidal zone. Both recovered cultural materials from their units, including utilized lithics and a fragment of a projectile point from Ramsay's unit, and over 20 stone beads from Morris's.

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