



UVic's field school crew posing with the *Sea Pride* near base camp.

## University of Victoria Archaeological Fieldschool at Hiikwis, 2008

Nicole Smith

This summer the Tseshah First Nation invited the University of Victoria to participate in the Hiikwis Archaeological Project on the Tseshah reserve of Equis overlooking Barkley Sound on western Vancouver Island. The project was initiated in response to threats of logging and development in the area. The Tseshah First Nation possess rich oral histories and ethnographic information about the traditional village sites on the Equis reserve, but prior to this summer this detailed history had not been investigated archaeologically. The Hiikwis Archaeological Project examined the cultural occupation of two important sites, Uukwatis and Hiikwis. Ethnographically, the village of Hiikwis was reported to be created and occupied more recently than Uukwatis, yet a visual assessment of archaeological deposits at the former location indicated a much longer period of occupation was possible. Over the course of an eight-week field season, participants in the project determined the horizontal and vertical extent of archaeological deposits at both sites and recorded the presence of additional archaeological features in the area. The results of the fieldwork will be used to establish chronologies for both Hiikwis and Uukwatis, and will help resolve the timing in which these sites were occupied. The resultant data will be situated within the context of archaeological knowledge already established for Tseshah territory (see for example McMillan and St. Claire 2005). The project was directed by Denis St. Claire (Director of Research, Tseshah First Nation) and Dr. Alan McMillan (SFU), well-known experts in Nuuchahnulth archaeology with decades of experience working cooperatively with First Nations on the west coast. The UVic fieldschool was instructed by Nicole Smith (Parks Canada), a professional archaeologist and educator based

out of Victoria.

On July 13th, the Tseshah, St. Claire and McMillan welcomed the UVic fieldschool to Nettle Island. The fieldschool consisted of 14 undergraduate students, research assistant, and instructor who worked alongside Tseshah archaeologists Barry Watts, Hank Gus, and Jordan Dick, as well as senior on-site archaeologists Brendan Gray and Jenny Storey (MA candidates at UVic and experienced consulting archaeologists) and experienced UBC volunteer, Ian Sellers. Tseshah member Wanda Robinson worked tirelessly as the camp chef and ensured we were always well supplied with freshly baked bread and goodies. Alex Clark captained the *Sea Pride* (project flagship) and, with the aid of tireless volunteer Ted Knowles, cheerfully constructed essential structures and screening stations. Denis St. Claire also arranged for a fleet of volunteers to join us throughout the summer, including local Barkley Sound residents Stella and Hjalmer Wenstob who generously provided boat transportation and

entertained us with their singing and an infallible *joie de vivre*. In addition to directing the day-to-day excavations held at the ethnographically known village sites of Hiikwis and Uukwatis, St. Claire and McMillan assisted UBC PhD student, Iain McKechnie, in coordinating his graduate field research at a nearby defensive fortress in the Broken Group Islands. While McKechnie and UBC volunteer Bryn Letham spent most of their days in the Broken Group, they also supported the overall project by providing boat transportation and conducting total station mapping of the Uukwatis site. Everyone lived together in a tent camp on the Tseshah reserve at Nettle Island, which was complete with a dock, two outhouses and two cabins. One cabin served as a cook house while the other was transformed into the field lab.

The UVic fieldschool ran from July 3rd to August 20th. Students earned credit for two courses; one focusing on field methods in archaeology (Anthropology 343), and the other examining the history of archaeological research in Nuuchahnulth territory (Anthropology 344). The first week and a half of class was spent in intensive lectures and labs at UVic, and included a field trip to the Royal BC Museum for exposure to Nuuchahnulth pre-contact material culture and the historic archaeological collections from Nettle Island. We then traveled to Barkley Sound for five weeks of fieldwork, before returning to UVic for the final week of classes. In the field, students participated in the excavation of six 2x2 m units located in spatially distinct locations of Uukwatis and Hiikwis where they were trained in excavation techniques, dry and wet screening, profiling, sampling strategies, artifact identification, note taking, compass use, auger testing, site survey, and backfilling. Students were also required to spend time in the field lab on Nettle Island where they processed sediment samples and sorted faunal remains. Research assistant Stephanie Sketchley (BA, UVic, 2006, research assistant with Pacific Identifications) was responsible for overseeing the operations of the lab and instructing students in faunal identification. Using comparative specimens loaned by Pacific ID, Stephanie and the students separated faunal elements into land mammal, sea mammal, fish and bird, and where

possible identified individual elements using the comparative specimens.

Daily excavations and coursework were complimented by guest lectures from St. Claire and McMillan, as well as other prominent researchers working on western Vancouver Island including: Dr. Gay Fredrick (Pacific Identifications and Malaspina University College); Alexander Mackie (Archaeology Branch); Martina Steffen (Royal BC Museum); Sharon Keen (Independent Consultant); Iain McKechnie (PhD student, UBC); Neil Vallance (Lawyer and Applied Anthropologist); Dr. Audrey Dallimore (Royal Roads University and Geological Survey of Canada); and Byron Malloy (MSc Candidate, UVIC). St. Claire also led an ethnographic and archaeological tour through the Broken Group Islands in Barkley Sound. On July 18th we were honoured by a very special visit from Tseshaht Chief Councillor Les Sam, Tseshaht elder Fred Gus (age 90) who lived at Equis as a boy, and approximately 40 other members of the Tseshaht First Nation including elders, council members, and administrative staff who spoke of the importance of the Hiikwis project to their community.

In addition to hearing stories from those mentioned above, and while trying to find time to enjoy our spectacular setting, fieldschool students were asked to complete a "Special Project". This assignment required them to contribute to our understanding of Hiikwis, Uukwatis, or one of the archaeological features at Nettle Island. The students' enthusiasm was outstanding with each selecting an innovative topic resulting in an original research contribution. Topics included: mapping previously unrecorded archaeological deposits associated with the ethnographically known place of Kiina'aa across the creek from Uukwatis (Emily Benson); a spatial analysis of lithic debitage and raw material distributions from Unit 2 of Uukwatis (Jenny Cohen); a comparison of the historic trade beads recovered from Hiikwis with those excavated at Yuquot (Josh Cook); an experiment exploring the effectiveness of curing mussel shell prior to use for tools (Hart Duinker and Kelsey MacLean); an attempt to locate pre-6000 BP archaeological deposits at Equis (Jacob Earnshaw); a spatial analysis of faunal remains versus lithic debitage in Unit 2 of Uukwatis (Ivannia Herrera-Garza); a comparison of fauna from historic and pre-historic layers in Unit 1 of Uukwatis (Marie Hunt); an exploration of wet-site potential at Uukwatis (Adam Love); a comparison of differential faunal recovery using wet and dry screening techniques in Unit 3 at Uukwatis (Jessica Miller); mapping the standing house remains at Hiikwis and comparing the results to house dimensions at Kiix'in and Huu7ii as recorded by Mackie and Williamson (2003) (Justin Smith); time-lapse photography and observations of fish trap features on Nettle Island to better understand the features' utility and interactions with the tide (Robin Smith); exploration of possible rhizome garden features at Hiikwis (Rodney Steadman); and, an examination of above-ground vegetation to identify potential vegetal indicators of subsurface midden (David Tanner).

A discussion of the students' findings is beyond the scope of this summary but their results will hopefully complement the formal analysis and reporting being completed in the near future by McMillan and St. Claire. As one familiar with Nuu-chah-nulth archaeological sites might discern from the students' topics, the



Students excavating through layers of shell at this early village site.

excavations at Uukwatis and Hiikwis produced many exceptional and unexpected finds for the west coast of Vancouver Island. The abundance of flaked stone and near absence of whale are two such examples that will make future publications on the Hiikwis Archaeological Project "must-reads" for anyone interested in Nuu-chah-nulth (or Coast Salish) archaeology.

The Hiikwis Project was truly an exemplar of positive collaboration with funding and support in kind coming from the Tseshaht First Nation, Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council, University of Victoria, Coast Heritage Consulting, University of British Columbia Laboratory of Archaeology, Parks Canada, Simon Fraser University, BC Hydro, Pacific Identifications, and the many participants and volunteers in the project. The University of Victoria would like to thank the Tseshaht First Nation for welcoming us to their traditional territory, and Denis St. Claire and Alan McMillan for inviting us to participate in such a fascinating and memorable field season.

#### Acknowledgements

Many heartfelt thanks to everyone mentioned in this article for making the summer so memorable, and also to Dr. Quentin Mackie, Marie Page, Sandra McConnell, and Dr. Lisa Mitchell in the Department of Anthropology at UVIC, and to Iain McKechnie, for all of their help and support leading up to, during, and after the fieldschool.

*Note:* Please contact Denis St. Claire or Alan McMillan should you have any questions about the Hiikwis Archaeological Project (dstclaire@shaw.ca). Questions about the fieldschool can be directed to Nicole Smith (smithnf@gmail.com). Photographs provided by Nicole Smith.

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