New Tribal Parks Declared in Clayoquot Sound

On behalf of our Nation, we would like to welcome all of you to Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks! Tribal Parks are land designations on our Ha’huulthii (territories), managed by our people to better harmonize human needs and environmental well-being.

With two new additions this year, there are now four declared Tribal Parks in Tla-o-qui-aht territory: Wah-nah-jus – Hilth-hoo-is (Meares Island), Ha’uukmin (Kennedy Lake Watershed), and the newly declared Tranquil Tribal Park and Esowista Tribal Park.

Instead of following the heavy industrial model of unsustainable resource extraction, we aim to benefit from our territories by enjoying and respecting them, rather than exploiting them. This is where you come in!

One of our priorities for economic activity within our Tribal Parks is sustainable, low-impact tourism. We hope to develop this into a vibrant economic sector that is a point of pride for our people, and a way for you to experience the power of our territory – the lands and waters surrounding the town of Tofino on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

On your way into town, stop in for some action at West Coast Wild Adventures in Ha’uukmin Tribal Park, just off Highway 4. The popular zipline and canyon tour is sure to get your heart racing, and the company is hoping to offer river kayak tours soon.

At Wah-nah-jus – Hilth-hoo-is (Meares Island), our first declared Tribal Park, you and your family and friends can hike in the old-growth rainforests that make Clayoquot Sound legendary. Although only a short water taxi ride from Tofino, the Big Tree Trail is a world away. On this well-maintained boardwalk loop you will see some of the biggest redcedar trees in the world, and marvel in the beauty of a forest saved from clearcut logging in the 1980s. Tla-o-qui-aht guides are available for this walk to provide insight into the cultural significance of the plants, animals, and medicines that make up this rich forest.

For those seeking more adventurous hiking, a trail is now completed from the Big Tree Trail to C’is-a-qis, a small bay on the other side of Meares Island. This trail is more strenuous, taking about six hours one-way, with rough campsites along the route.

Also on Meares Island, visitors can take guided hikes from the Tla-o-qui-aht village of Opitsaht up Wah-nah-jus (Lone Cone Mountain), the iconic peak across the water from Tofino. The trail winds through several types of old-growth rainforest, and the views from the top of the mountain are absolutely breathtaking. Finish the day off with a refreshing swim in Hinsit Lake before returning to Opitsaht to catch a boat back to Tofino.

The trail system in Wah-nah-jus – Hilth-hoo-is Tribal Park is constructed and maintained by Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks staff and Wilderness Committee trail crews, and they’re now ready for you to enjoy!

Fishing, paddling, and bear-watching tours are also available in our Tribal Parks, and this is just the beginning. With four declared Tribal Parks within our territory, we hope to become leaders in sustainable tourism, and we want you to be a part of it!

We hope to see you out this year to experience our unique recreational opportunities and have some fun in our Ha’huulthii!
The History of Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks

When the Tla-o-qui-aht peoples, the original inhabitants within the area known today as Clayoquot Sound, our oral histories speak of an advanced system of traditional Tla-o-qui-aht governance that took care of the people and the environment. Strict laws were established to ensure that we as human beings would not disrupt the natural order of the world in which we lived. Even after many generations of Tla-o-qui-aht people had lived within our Ha’wilh (Chief) territories, we still enjoyed a fully intact way of life until European contact. In the 19th century, the Tla-o-qui-aht children – as young as four or five years old – would endure several generations of government and church-run residential schools that enforced strict rules against speaking our language and practicing our traditional ways, and involved forced labor, months away from parental care, and religious indoctrination. Along with the Indian Act, the federal government established the reserve system, creating small parcels of land that would further displace and obstruct our access to our Ha’wilh lands. These laws were implemented in a modern context with traditional practices that included the protection of intact rainforest and waters, and the development of recreational opportunities.

Today, our Tla-o-qui-aht leadership has utilized the values and teachings of the Tribal Park Declaration to implement a watershed-by-watershed approach that will encompass all Tla-o-qui-aht territory. By learning from our elders about how they upheld traditional values and teachings with the Tribal Parks declaration, we hope to continue to ensure the well-being of our natural environment and our people.

In response to unhealthy logging practices in the 1960s and 1970s, our Ha’wilh declared Wah-nah-juus – Hith-hoo-s (Meares Island) Tribal Park. The 1984 Tribal Park Declaration envisioned how resource management could be integrated into modern Tla-o-qui-aht ways while maintaining traditional practices that included the care and can therefore have many relationships to their Ha’huulthii. One Ha’wiih can serve as a representative in the decision-making process. Along with a strong foundation rooted in the Wah-nah-juus – Hith-hoo-s (Meares Island) Tribal Park Declaration of 1984, our leadership and our people hope to achieve modern management areas based on our traditional Tla-o-qui-aht values and practices.

Traditional governance is integrated into modern Tla-o-qui-aht culture and society, and its laws preserve our environment and promote well-being of our people and the environment. The Hereditary Chiefs are known collectively as Ha’wilh, and each Ha’wilh has complete title and rights within their traditional territory, of Ha’wilh. Included within these Ha’huulthii are responsibilities to rivers, flood merchandises, songs, dances, and ceremonies. These components are passed down to the Ha’wilh through inherent rights or marriage. The Ha’wilh have a responsibility to the Creator to take care of their Ha’huulthii.

The Tla-o-qui-aht community is organized according to “Houses” or family clans. People descending from one lineage belong to a specific House. Each House has an appointed “Head of the House” who serves as a representative in the decision-making process, and is referred to as T’as’uklin. The House and the people have access to the names, songs, rivers, land and resources that belonged to the Ha’wilh of Ha’huulthii. Therefore, each House falls under the care of a Ha’wilh and has access to their Ha’huulthii. One Ha’wilh can have many Houses under his or her care and can therefore have many T’as’uklin.

In 1984, we declared Meares Island a Tribal Park, making it one of the first Tribal Parks in Canada. It was one of the best ideas our people had to care for our territory, especially with the pressures put on our lands by industrial logging at that time. Today, the pressure of logging is compounded by the threats of mining and the like, and our people must stay vigilant and aware of these threats.

It is our responsibility to leave this place for our children in better shape than we received it, and it will be difficult due to decades of heavy resource extraction. Growing up here, this place was incredibly rich and diverse. Stocks of many different kinds of fish were strong and bountiful, and they supported an amazing and healthy place. Now, after the impact of destructive logging, we see less salmon than there used to be.

As we declare Tribal Parks on our territory, we must consider the implications of this on the treaty process. Our tribal has Ha’wilh treaties, and we are out of that process – all of the land belongs to us, not just some of it. We see Tribal Parks as a way to visit our land our way, to unite and move away from destructive activities like fish farming and industrial logging. We can get out and use the resources of the forest in ways similar to our ancestors. We must adapt to what we have today, yes, but it is still possible to utilize the resources in our own sustainable ways.

The journals of the first Europeans to arrive here describe mountains covered in evergreen forests – they couldn’t see the true value at that time. But there were huge numbers of people living here on the coast at the time of contact, and they utilized the resources of the forest in a very respectful way. The mountains and the trees appeared untouched, because our people selectively used the forests based on laws and teachings that pertained to these things. I learned some of these laws from my late father while canoeing canoe, or selecting trees to make a canoe. I like to share these laws and teachings with people, and am very happy to have a couple of our young followers who are interested in learning them.

Caring for a canoe in the forest and bringing it out of the trees to finish is the method our ancestors used for centuries. We didn’t rely on logging companies or anyone else for anything. When I made my first canoe my father said, “Son, now you have access to all the resources because a canoe gives you access to everything. You can go anywhere, visit villages and near by catch your food, and you can protect the resources too.” That was a huge lesson that my father left for my brothers and I. In 1984 when we drafted our Tribal Parks declaration, we only considered Meares Island because of the immediate threat of clearcut logging. At the time, this was a huge thing for our people, and now a lot of us are beginning to see the value of extending Tribal Park status to all Tla-o-qui-aht lands. We envision all of our territory designated as Tribal Parks, including areas like Tofino inlet, the Kennedy Lake watershed, the Upper Kennedy River, Clayoquot Lake – even our territory that falls within Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. The whole world looks, stock, and barfell! We want Tribal Parks under our management – lands and resources that our people have always looked after.

MODERN TRIBAL PARKS MANAGEMENT BASED ON TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS

Over our history, we managed parts of our territories in different ways, with varying levels of activies and resource use. Some waterheds were managed with the intent of conservation – water, foods, medicines, and other resources were left for future generations. These areas are called qwa siin hap, which loosely translates to “leave it as is.” Other parts of our territories were managed to integrate human activities and ecosystem well-being. In these areas, our ancestors would harvest resources in a respectful way, focusing on ecological restoration. These areas are called wayuu thluk nish, which means “we take care of.” We currently have a management plan in place for Ha’wilh Soviet Park (the Kennedy Lake Watershed) that includes both qwa siin hap and wayuu thluk nish areas.

Qwa siin hap management zones include the Upper Kennedy River, the Clayoquot River Valley, and the western shores of the Clayoquot Arm. These areas contain pristine old-growth forests and rare ecosystems, and hold special cultural significance as our place of origin. Many culturally modified trees and recorded archaeological sites can be found in these areas, and they are considered sacred for our Tla-o-qui-aht people.

The rest of Ha’wilh Soviet Park has been subject to logging or other industrial use, and in their management, we aim to integrate economic development and ecosystem restoration, such as salmon habitat restoration. Eventually we will create similar qwa siin hap – wayuu thluk nish management plans for our other declared Tribal Parks: Wah-nah-juus – Hith-hoo-s (Meares Island) Tribal Park, Esowista Tribal Park, and Tranquil Tribal Park.

Activities that have too great an environmental impact are not permitted at all within Tribal Parks. An example of this is the randall’s gold mine, being proposed by Imperial Metals within our Tranquil Tribal Park without our consent. We will be working to ensure there is proper time in the future, and will be looking for support in these efforts.
How can we meet our economic needs and reduce our impact on our shared environment? How can rare ecosystems be preserved in a just and sustainable way? How can we engage in responsible resource management that benefits local communities and doesn’t detract from the long-term natural capital?

These are pressing questions on the west coast, and we believe Tribal Parks will be part of the answer.

The Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation has shown tremendous leadership on this front, and the Wilderness Committee has welcomed each of their Tribal Park declarations, from Wah-nuh-jus – Hiltl-hoo-is (Meares Island) in 1994, to Ha’uukmin (Kennedy Lake Watershed) in 2008, to the newest additions, Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Park and Esowista Tribal Park, declared this year. These Tribal Park declarations are in keeping with our support for Aboriginal rights and title, and our view that First Nations should have decision-making authority within their territories.

Tribal Parks are special conservation areas, zones for sustainable economic activities, or a combination of both, and they’re envisioned, declared, and managed by local First Nations communities. Based on traditional teachings and guidance by local First Nations communities, Tribal Parks management aims to better balance ecological health and human well-being within a Nation’s territory.

Some places, like the legendary old-growth rainforest of Meares Island, are set aside for future generations, to be cared for and protected for all time. In other areas, such as previously logged valleys in the Kennedy Lake watershed, small-scale economic activities such as salmon hatcheries and selective logging are undertaken, with a focus on sustainability and ecosystems restoration. In these Tribal Parks, the potential for growth in low impact wilderness and cultural tourism is limitless.

Tribal Parks are designed to keep economic benefits within First Nations and local communities – a critical step in achieving sustainability on this coast. This is also in direct contrast to the environmentally destructive logging, fish farming, and mining industries that operate in the region and are all managed at the multinational level, with minimal financial benefit to local communities.

Official government recognition of Tribal Parks will be a big step towards a positive and long-lasting environmental solution in Clayoquot Sound. The Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation has always been a leading voice for environmental stewardship, and Tribal Parks are a result of their dedication to incorporating traditional teachings into the modern context and developing sustainable and ecologically respectful economies. If successful, Tribal Parks could become a template for environmental solutions and indigenous empowerment in other places, and that is a truly exciting prospect!

Your Clayoquot Sound adventure starts in Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks! With options for tours, hikes, and accommodation getting out into the Tribal Parks is easier than ever!

Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks

Get in touch with our Tribal Parks staff for more information about guides, tours, hikes, and other ways you can enjoy our territory!

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Show your SUPPORT!

Contact Premier Clark, and let her know you want to see official government recognition of Tribal Parks and acknowledgement of Tribal Parks as effective environmental and socio-economic solutions in BC!

Hon. Christy Clark, Premier of BC

PO Box 9041, STN GOVT
Victoria, BC, V8W 9E1

250-387-1715
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I support the TLA-O QUI-AHT FIRST NATION’S TRIBAL PARKS!

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Using the Wilderness Committee raises the bar for other environmental organizations.

By joining the Wilderness Committee, you can get involved in local advocacy and take action to protect important ecosystems and natural resources in your community.

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If you’re interested in joining or learning more about the Wilderness Committee, please visit our website at www.wildernesscommittee.org.

Thank you for your support! We look forward to working with you to protect the natural environment for generations to come.

Wilderness Committee

Towan Island Campaigner
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