



Restoration efforts begin on Grace Islet sacred burial ground

Salt Spring Island, BC (August 10, 2015) – Crews have started deconstruction on the partially built residence on Grace Islet, a culturally and ecologically significant island located in Ganges Harbour, Salt Spring Island.

The Nature Conservancy of Canada in British Columbia made the announcement today in collaboration with partners to update the public and media.

Grace Islet has a rich human history, notably as a sacred burial ground for Coast Salish ancestors. It has significant cultural and spiritual significance to the area's First Nations. There are at least 16 cairns on the islet.

Grace Islet also contains rare examples of intact Coastal Douglas-fir and Garry oak ecosystems as well as important terrestrial and inter-tidal habitats.

Public concern occurred last fall when a private land owner, after obtaining necessary permits, began construction of a home, despite the documented presence of burial cairns. First Nations and community leaders registered their concerns about the project.

Work ceased in December after resolution was found by the Government of British Columbia, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the landowner. Land title was transferred to NCC in February of this year.

A working group was formed made up of the Chiefs of 8 First Nations of whose traditional territory the islet resides, as well as representatives from the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Province and the Capital Regional District (CRD). The group was tasked with developing a deconstruction approach that respects Coastal Salish cultural laws and spiritual practices while meeting regulatory and work safety requirements.

Once the islet is restored to its original cultural and ecological state, discussions will commence between the Nature Conservancy of Canada and First Nations to develop a joint management plan for the long-term stewardship and protection of the ecological and cultural features of the islet.

For the deconstruction, the Capital Regional District (CRD) is acting as project manager on behalf of the NCC and its First Nations partners. Through a competitive bid process, the contract firm Brod Demolition has been hired to take down the structure. The archeology and building permits have been approved, clearing the way for mobilization of the equipment and barges to the site.

Great care has been taken to ensure the demolition activity is carried out in a safe, respectful and sensitive manner. Activity on the site is expected to occur for 8 weeks and is being closely monitored by First Nations cultural workers.

Quotes:

"The Nature Conservancy of Canada is honoured to play an important role in the restoration and permanent protection of both the rare ecological systems and the cultural integrity of Grace Islet," said Linda Hannah, NCC's Regional Vice President in BC. "Once de-construction is complete, we will partner with First Nations to develop a management plan for Grace Islet that addresses restoration objectives and permanent protection of the islet's ecological and cultural heritage".

“Thanks to the collaborative partnership that has been formed, we’re able to work together to return the site to its natural form,” said Steve Thomson, Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations.

“The CRD is committed to building relationships with our First Nations neighbours. Grace Islet illustrates the critical importance of improving the heritage protection permitting process to ensure the preservation of the cultural history and protection of the resting places of indigenous ancestors,” says CRD Director Wayne McIntyre. “The First Nations Chiefs and elders, the Province, the NCC and the CRD are working collaboratively to ensure the site is restored in a culturally respectful manner to its natural state and remains protected as a place of important heritage.”

“We are pleased to see resolution and to be working with our provincial and local government counterparts on this important issue,” said Cowichan Tribes Chief William Seymour. “Although there is some cause for celebration, we are also mindful that this is solemn work. We are obliged to protect and honour our ancestors; We still have a lot of work ahead of us to bring back peace to their resting place”.

Facts:

- ✦ A partnership Protocol Agreement was signed between the Government of British Columbia, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Capital Regional District and eight local First Nations (Cowichan Tribes, Tseycum, Penelakut, Tsartlip, Tsawout, Halalt, Lyackson and Pauquachin). This was a framework for collaboration among the partners to achieve the shared goal of restoring Grace Islet in a timely manner with respect for spiritual practices, cultural traditions, archeological protocols, public safety, and financial and environmental accountability.
- ✦ A Chiefs’ Oversight Committee was formed to provide guidance for the deconstruction process. The 8 First Nations represented on that committee are: Cowichan Tribes, Penelakut Tribe, Halalt, Tsawout, Lyackson, Tseycum, Tsartlip and Pauquachin First Nations.
- ✦ Despite its small size, Grace Islet contains important Garry oak habitat, as well as intertidal habitat for herring and other marine life. As part of the rare Coastal Douglas-fir ecosystem zone, Grace Islet will become a small haven of conservation in an area where the majority of the original habitat has been converted through urban and agricultural development. Grace Islet itself has 200 year old juniper, Garry oak and Douglas-fir trees. Its intertidal area offers sea grass meadows that are particularly valuable spawning habitat and are in decline region-wide.

About:

The Nature Conservancy of Canada is the nation's leading land conservation organization, working to protect our most important natural areas and the species they sustain. Since 1962 NCC and its partners have helped to protect more than 2.7 million acres (1.1 million hectares) coast to coast. More than one-third of these conserved lands are in British Columbia. For more information visit:www.natureconservancy.ca/bc.

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