

# Cultural Continuity

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**“Our Squamish Ancestors and leaders protected and preserved our knowledge systems through practice, rather than the written word. It is by our people’s tenacity, grace and collective memory, passed from generation to generation, that we maintain an intimate connection to our lands and traditions.”**

**SXWELHCHÁLIYA (COUNCILLOR JULIE BAKER), SQUAMISH NATION<sup>1</sup>**

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## What’s happening?<sup>2</sup>

The people of the Squamish Nation are in a time of powerful cultural renewal and revitalization. Interest in and adherence to cultural traditions and practices, including learning **Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh snichim** (the Squamish language), is growing strongly. This follows a period when cultural continuity was somewhat interrupted by external forces. Thus, while **Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh snichim** is critically endangered, the language is still a vital part of the Squamish culture.

The **Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh snichim** word for Squamish people, also the word for villages and community, is **Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw**.<sup>3</sup> The Squamish Nation consists of 23 villages from the Greater Vancouver area and Gibson’s landing to the Squamish River watershed, though only 0.423 percent of the traditional territory was allotted to the Nation under the Indian Act, in scattered parcels of land. **Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh snichim** traces ancient connections to the territory through place names.

Ceremonial events of the Squamish people are customarily conducted in the Longhouse. The Longhouse is a sacred place that plays a significant role in the culture of the Coast Salish people. At one point in history, the Squamish

Nation proudly possessed more than twenty Longhouses from the Upper Squamish Valley to False Creek and Burrard Inlet.<sup>4</sup> Longhouse-like buildings, such as Totem Hall in the Squamish valley, are still used for ceremonies of celebration, witnessing and healing.

Art and sport are integral to the rich cultural tradition of the Squamish people. Canoe pulling, including ra-

cing, reflects the strong connection to the marine part of the territory, and paddling is a crucial part of the Nation's history and culture. However, over the past 30 years, the popularity of canoe racing has dropped. At the same time ocean journey canoeing has been revived internationally. Several tribal journeys have been undertaken by canoe over the last few years.

## Why is it important?

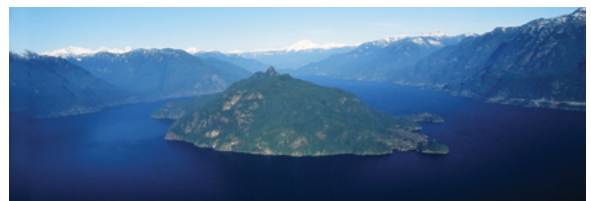
The wealth of the Squamish people lies in their culture, in the stories connected with their lands. As Chief Ian Campbell stated during discussions leading up to **Xay Temíxw** (Sacred Land land use plan):<sup>5</sup> "This is what keeps us together as a people. We're not going to be packing up and moving. This land is where we come from. This is where our songs come from. This is where our power is. It's on the land. When you go on the land, that's when your dreams get strong, your feelings get strong." These deep values apply as strongly to the waters of Howe Sound as to the watersheds. Every little creek in the Sound has a **Sk̓w̓x̓w̓ú7mesh snichim** name.

General values and uses of the Squamish traditional territory that community members care deeply about include:<sup>6</sup>

- secluded places for traditional cultural practices (e.g., storing regalia, vision quests);
- wildlife and wildlife habitat;
- fish for fishing, and healthy rivers and streams;
- clean air, and clean water for drinking, for the ecosystem and for ritual bathing;
- resources from which Squamish members can earn a living; and,

- places to heal, recover and re-connect with the land.

The Howe Sound ecosystem is critical to the well-being of the **Sk̓w̓x̓w̓ú7mesh Úxwumixw**. Integral to Squamish culture is the consumption of food harvested from Howe Sound, and in modern times seafood has been essential to supplementing store-bought food, especially for the elders. In the past, Squamish fishers harvested herring, rockfish, salmon, crab and many other species. Cod could be speared as they would get stuck in pond traps as the tide receded. Elders recall that killer whales used to go up the west side of Howe Sound to calve and rub on the rocks. Canoe travel, village to village, from areas around Vancouver to the Squamish River and between, was commonplace.



"The island commonly referred to as Anvil Island is the northernmost of the four major islands in Howe Sound. Its name is derived from the anvil-like appearance created by its narrow angular profile. The original Squamish name is **Lhaxw̓m** and it has been an important place of spiritual training."<sup>11</sup>  
(Photo: Gary Fiegehen)

“Songs are a way of keeping history — who owns the songs and how they “received” the songs, it all has a history.”

CHARLENE WILLIAMS, SQUAMISH NATION



Photo: Gary Fiegehen

The ceremonies of the Squamish people are integral to community life, involving young and old, men and women, people from all walks of life. Songs, stories, dancing and regalia are still featured in most ceremonies even today, despite the fact that the design and materials of the regalia might have changed somewhat. The spirit of the regalia remains the same, to connect to Ancestors by paying respect to earthly things such as animals and birds, as well as the supernatural.<sup>1</sup>

## What's the current state?

The **Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw** have a profound connection to Howe Sound. Squamish people learned everything about their surroundings from their parents and extended family prior to contact. This provided a continuity of traditional knowledge and uses of the resources within their homelands and waters. However, intensive use of Howe Sound by Squamish members has skipped a couple of generations due to a number of tragic circumstances, primarily residential schools and industrial pollution:

- In a meeting in early 2016, Squamish Nation elders commented that “We have a long history of not being home.” Children were taken away to residential schools for eight years or so, some starting as early as age 5. They never had an opportunity to learn cultural ways such as canoeing. “Grandma and Great Grandmother would take me to the river to bathe and harvest and would show me what and how to gather. Once residential schools came along, we could not go to the land and gather.” Communities were broken up as some of those taken away moved and settled elsewhere, and those returning from school didn't know each other.
- Squamish members were advised by their elders to stop fishing when pollution from Britannia Mine became a threat. That pollution, as well as pollution from the Woodfibre pulp mill, lasted for decades. A comment in the input to **Xay Temíxw** was “My father used to say ‘No longer can we go up and even fish for the oolichans.’” More recently, an elder related that “Before [the pollution] you could put branches in the water and get herring eggs to eat.”
- The tradition of ritual bathing in streams has been compromised by privacy issues. As a Squamish member put it during input to **Xay Temíxw**: “We'll be seen if we don't go really early to bathe.”
- Canoeing has become more difficult and hazardous as larger boats and ships have become more numerous in the Sound. This is due to the wakes of the vessels and the sheer volume of traffic.
- First Nations were pushed out of the prawn fishing industry in the 1960s. First Nations youth now re-entering the fishery have a learning curve due to this period of lack of access to the resource.

Despite the interruption of **Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw** intensive use of Howe Sound, harvest of resources from Squamish territories is still an important part of the contemporary and ongoing activities of the Nation, providing resources for food, medicine, ceremonial and spiritual uses as well as other benefits.

## What's being done?

Squamish hereditary chief Ian Campbell said recently that his people are in a chapter of building up the language and culture again. A rhythm of flourishing, crashing, and building up again is echoed in all natural processes.<sup>7</sup>

Much is being done to encourage learning *Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh snichim*, including a certificate program at Capilano University. The program is designed to give Squamish Language teachers training in the Squamish Language and to provide a range of courses relevant to Squamish culture (told from a Squamish perspective).<sup>8</sup> The arts and education organization, Kwi Awt Stelmexw, focuses on restoring *Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh snichim* as the primary language of communication, and is co-hosting with Simon Fraser University an adult immersion program called *Temstl'í7 ta Sníchim*.<sup>9</sup> In 2015, a new Language Immersion House was opened where learning through “living the language” is encouraged.<sup>10</sup>

Many organized events support growth in the awareness and practice of thriving Squamish culture. These include annual canoe races (the most recent of which was held at Ambleside Beach in July 2016), the annual Squamish Nation Youth Powwow (the 28th one was also held in July 2016), and the Annual Squamish Nation Amalgamation Gathering, which includes storytelling, drumming, singing and dancing. Other events celebrate Squamish culture on a “one-off” basis, such as a Squamish Nation Arts and Culture Exhibition at the Gibsons Public Art Gallery in the summer of 2016.

The Squamish Líl'wat Cultural Center in Whistler was specifically built to preserve and grow the cultures of the two nations and share them with others.<sup>11</sup>

First Nations culture and spirituality have a deep-rooted connection to the land and water. Amongst the Squamish Nation's goals for Howe Sound, conserva-



Two generations of master carvers at the canoe shed — *Sxayilkin Siyám* (Chief Cedric Billy) and *Kaapul / Sesiyám* (Ray Natraoro) of the Squamish Nation in front of a 14-metre ocean-going canoe which *Kaapul / Sesiyám* carved from a single red-cedar log, featuring a Thunderbird design on the prow. (Photo: Gary Fiegehen) Reproduced with permission from “Where Rivers, Mountains and People Meet”, Squamish Líl'wat Cultural Centre.

tion of natural and cultural resources is the highest priority: Critical habitat for species has to be protected, and heritage, traditional use and sacred and cultural sites also have to be protected.

Working with the other communities of Howe Sound is important to the Squamish Nation, but members of those communities must be aware of cultural and spiritual values within the planning process, rather than being focused only on recreational, economic and scientific perspectives. Inclusion of scientists in the planning process is based on their knowledge of specific areas and they don't typically have an integrated perspective on the values of Howe Sound. As one person described the problem (in their input to *Xay Temíxw*), "The Spaniards and the British didn't get along very well ... so they said 'we're up here doing scientific work on this coast.' But look at what that

science and technology has done to our land ... That's why our traditional knowledge, our elders' wisdom, is so important to us, to help bring Mother Nature back to health. We have to look at developing our traditional knowledge again to heal our land – that's critical."

Restoring and maintaining Squamish Nation access to the marine area of the territory is also critical to reestablishing the essential cultural connection with it. The rights and opportunities of Squamish members to harvest or otherwise use sea resources for cultural, spiritual, sustenance, economic and trade uses must be assured and take precedence over all other uses, within the limits of the ecosystem. Development and use cannot substantially deprive future generations of the benefits of Squamish territories. It is often said that the priority is to sustain the traditional territory for "our children's children for seven generations."



Squamish Mount Chaki Canoe Club practicing in Howe Sound. (Photo Gary Fiegehen)

# What can you do?

- Study the Nation's stories and cultural history — see below for some resources.
- Visit the Squamish Líl'wat Cultural Centre at [slcc.ca](http://slcc.ca). The Centre manages cherished collections of the Squamish Nation, and has many ambassadors from the Nation who work there and provide a daily tour of the facilities.
- Keep an eye open for events you can attend, like art shows or Powwows – try the Squamish Nation Facebook page — [facebook.com/SquamishNation](https://facebook.com/SquamishNation)
- Engage with the Squamish Nation on planning for Howe Sound.

The Squamish Nation will conduct its Howe Sound planning process and consult with other governments as appropriate. Cooperation with non-government interests is also appropriate in some aspects of planning, recognizing that concerns of Howe Sound communities beyond the Squamish Nation overlap with those of Squamish Nation members. Relationship-building between the Squamish Nation, governments and non-government organizations in connection with Howe Sound is well underway, thanks in part to the Howe Sound Community Forum (HSCF). Established in 2002, eleven parties including regional districts,

municipalities and the Squamish First Nation signed a document called “Howe Sound Community Forum Principles for Cooperation.” The Forum meets regularly to share information and discuss current issues.

People from outside the Squamish Nation can support cultural continuity for the Squamish Nation by continuing to cultivate the cooperative approach described above while appreciating the fundamental importance of spiritual and cultural values, and by preventing these priorities from being overwhelmed by scientific and economic worldviews.

# Resources

## Bibliography from Wikipedia article on Squamish Culture<sup>12</sup>

<http://www.squamish.net/about-us/our-culture/>

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# Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Reproduced with permission from "Where Rivers, Mountains, and People Meet", Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the information in this section comes from <http://www.squamish.net/about-us/our-culture/>

<sup>3</sup> Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh is pronounced Squ-HO-o-meesh.

<sup>4</sup> In June Baker's description of the Legacy of the Longhouse. Source: <http://www.squamish.net/about-us/our-culture/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.squamish.net/about-us/our-land/xay-temixw-sacred-land-land-use-plan/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.straight.com/news/572066/despite-limited-resources-indigenous-language-programs-persevere-bc>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.capilanou.ca/linguistics/Squamish-Nation-Language-and-Culture-Certificate/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.kwiawtstelmexw.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nsnews.com/news/a-house-for-language-1.1762955>

<sup>11</sup> <http://slcc.ca/visit/about-us/>

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squamish\\_culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squamish_culture)