

Island First Nation to open ancient capital to public

Village of Kiixin, near Bamfield, has been abandoned since 1880s

BY JUDITH LAVOIE, TIMESCOLONIST.COM MARCH 21, 2011



Execution Rock, where, centuries ago, Huu-ay-aht warriors dropped logs on to invading canoe crews, overlooks a pristine beach by the ancient village of Kiixin. Huu-ay-aht First Nation plans to open up the village, which is a National Heritage Site, to members of the public as part of an economic development plan.

Photograph by: Courtesy Marleen Nookemus, Timescolonist.com

A dramatic First Nations historical site, seen by only a few handfuls of non-aboriginal people over the last century, will soon be on B.C.'s list of tourist attractions.

Kiixin (pronounced Key-hin), the ancient capital of the Huu-ay-aht First Nation, sits beside pristine beaches about two kilometres south of Bamfield and can be reached only by shallow-bottomed boat, followed by a hike through the forest.

"We have kept Kiixin covered for 100 years and now we're almost ready to share it with the world," said Huu-ay-aht Chief Councillor Robert Dennis, who wants to make the village a cornerstone of the community's cultural tourism strategy.

Huu-ay-aht is drafting economic development plans to start kicking in April 1, when the Maa-nulth Treaty will be implemented.

The band is working with Parks Canada to see how to best develop Kiixin as an attraction without ruining the almost untouched area, which is designated as a National Heritage Site, Dennis said.

"We hope to develop trails and, within two years, we will be having guided tours," he said.

Kiixin has been abandoned since the 1880s, when residents were massacred after a dispute with the Klallam Indians from Port Angeles.

"When you go there you can just feel the electricity of the place. People talk about feeling the history," Dennis said.

The village, which was the centre of Huu-ay-aht government, once included 15 massive longhouses. Dozens of the large house posts still stand, some of them once again sprouting branches.

Many of the house posts pre-date 1700, Dennis said.

Middens and the remains of smaller houses "demonstrate continuous occupation of the area for almost 3,000 years," according to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

"It is the only known First Nations village of the more than 100 villages on the southern B.C. coast that still features significant, standing traditional architecture," says the Historic Sites description.

The middens are laden with whalebones from long-ago feasts. It is not uncommon to step on what seems to be a rock, only to discover a whale vertebra.

The pair of carved Welcoming Figures that greet visitors to the Royal B.C. Museum in Victoria were carved in Kiixin before 1900 in preparation for a potlatch, but were bought by British researcher Charles F. Newcombe for the provincial museum in 1911.

The figures were first erected in Thunderbird Park, but were removed in 1968 and are now among the best-known symbols of the museum.

Ultimately, Dennis would like to see them returned. But first, a suitable site where they would be protected, must be found, he said.

The possibility of building a replica village on the beach to the north of Kiixin, where visitors could be given an idea of what the village once looked like, is also being researched, Dennis said.

"We want to leave [Kiixin] intact with minimal disturbance," he said.

Huu-ay-aht already works with Parks Canada to jointly manage parts of the West Coast Trail flanked by traditional territory. Dave McVetty, Parks Canada superintendent of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, said expanded co-operation is under discussion.

Kiixin is close to the West Coast Trail, so options are being considered, McVetty said.

But access is always a fine balance.

"One of the reasons it is so pristine is that it is difficult to get in there," McVetty said.

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