

Vancouver Island aboriginals celebrate treaty



B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell and Aboriginal Relations Minister Mike de Jong greet the five Maa-nulth First Nations Chiefs at the Parliament Buildings in Victoria, B.C on Wednesday, Nov. 21, 2007. (Adrian Lam / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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VICTORIA — Five tiny First Nations on the rugged west coast of Vancouver Island begin new chapters in their collective histories on April 1, when a land-claims treaty that took almost 20 years to negotiate becomes a reality.

The Maa-nulth First Nations, which together represent an estimated 2,100 people near the coastal communities of Bamfield, Port Alberni and Ucluelet, has negotiated a treaty with the federal and provincial governments that includes more than 24,500 hectares of land and more than \$75 million in cash over 10 years.

The document becomes only the second modern-day treaty in B.C., with most of the province's 200 First Nations still without such agreements.

Chief councillor Robert Dennis of the Bamfield-area Huu-ay-aht First Nation said his people have been at the negotiating table for 18 years, and can't wait to begin their new lives free from the federal Indian Act.

"We're moving from a delegated authority, the Indian Act, to one of self-governing where we can draft our own laws and draft our own rules and regulations as it relates to our treaty land," said Dennis.

Huu-ay-aht residents are gathering at their community hall near Bamfield at midnight on April 1 for a treaty-signing celebration.

The five Maa-nulth First Nations -- Ucluelet, Toquaht, Uchucklesaht, Ka:'yu:'k'th'/Che:k'tles7et'h, and Huu-ay-aht -- will gather together in Port Alberni on April 2 to celebrate the treaty, along with representatives from the B.C. government, Ottawa and the B.C. Treaty Commission.

The Maa-nulth are part of Vancouver Island's 14-member Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, but the five bands decided to negotiate a treaty as a separate group after an earlier Nuu-chah-nulth treaty failed.

Dennis said the Huu-ay-aht will develop its own citizenship papers, which the band will give to its members. He said under the Indian Act, some Huu-ay-aht members weren't officially recognized by the government.

The Huu-ay-aht also have plans to develop their tourism potential with more developed sportfishing and sightseeing locations, said Dennis. A major priority is to meet with the B.C. government to upgrade and pave the bumpy gravel logging roads that provide access to Bamfield, he said.

The Maa-nulth treaty becomes only the second successful B.C. land-claims agreement negotiated with the federal and provincial governments under a process that began 20 years ago. The two-year-old Tsawwassen First Nation treaty was the first, while the majority of native bands in the province are still waiting.

There are currently 60 B.C. First Nations in treaty talks, with seven in the final stages.

Sophie Pierre, the chief commissioner of the B.C. Treaty Commission, acknowledged the slow pace of the treaty talks.

"We're not moving very fast in this whole process," said Pierre.

Pierre said the political process affects treaty process, and she said the May 2 federal election may put some of those talks on hold.

"It's hard to get this stuff done," she said.

The province's minister of aboriginal relations and reconciliation, Mary Polak, said the Maa-nulth treaty represents the first time in British Columbia aboriginal nations joined together to successfully negotiate such an agreement.

"Although each of these nations have their own unique history and culture, they came together, put aside their differences, and became united throughout this process," Polak said in an interview.

"This really is a monumental accomplishment for these First Nations.

In November 2007, when the B.C. government introduced legislation to ratify the Maa-nulth treaty, the five First Nations chiefs spoke inside the legislature.

Uchucklesaht Chief Charlie Cootes said the treaty gives his people a hold on the future.

"The treaty will provide us with constitutional assurance or our right to remain distinct," Cootes said at the time.

"At the same time, it permits us to participate in any meaningful and positive way with the rest of society. We are neither trapped in the past nor afraid of the future."

Former B.C. premier Gordon Campbell, who promised a "new relationship" with the province's First Nations, paid tribute to the Maa-nulth at a ceremony in December 2006. He said he understood the difficulties aboriginal people must have in setting aside past issues and starting on a new path.

"Nothing inspires me more than your ability to trust one more time," Campbell said at the ceremony.