

Tseshahat and Maa-nulth ink accord prior to treaty

Chief councillors glad to work together as they go into exciting future

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Tseshahat First Nation has announced it will sign an accord with the five Maa-nulth Nations this week, just prior to implementation of the Maa-nulth Treaty on April 1.

Tseshahat Chief Councillor Les Sam said the agreement will set up protocols for resolving differences between his nation, which remains under the jurisdiction of Indian and Northern Affairs, and the new treaty nations. Sam said the Tseshahat have lived in close proximity with the Barkley Sound nations for centuries, and there were few disputes over territory or resources until Canada imposed a political structure.

"When Ottawa established the reserve system and started drawing boundaries on a map, that's when we began to see 'overlap' issues," Sam explained, adding that the accord sets up a mechanism to recognize each nation's mutual rights and to resolve disputes.

Huu-ay-aht Chief Councillor Robert Dennis said the accord aims to restore the type of government-to-government protocols that existed prior to contact with Europeans.

"It reflects, for one thing, the traditional practices of First Nations to share our natural resources," Dennis said. "In the past, our practice was to share our resources in times of shortage, rather than fighting over boundaries."

Dennis credited Tseshahat with putting the accord into progress, first by proposing meetings between the six nations and with the B.C. Treaty Commission.

"We held a number of meetings and worked out an agreement in principle on what a protocol would look like," Dennis said.

Tseshahat chief operating officer Cindy Stern said under the accord, the Maa-nulth Nations recognize Tseshahat traditional territory and ownership (ha'houlthee) by its hereditary chiefs.

"That's important to Tseshahat, because in the text of the Maa-nulth Treaty, there is no mention of Tseshahat First Nation," Stern said.

Sam said once an agreement in principle was reached with Maa-nulth, it required full consultation and approval from his membership. On the weekend, members voted to approve the accord, and it is scheduled to be signed on Wednesday at 6 p.m. at the Tseshahat administrative office.

At the Huu-ay-aht Treaty office, lands and natural resources director Larry Johnson said he is excited about the agreement.

"This is turning out to be quite a week," Johnson said. "We're moving some of our administration to our new office in Anacla, we have our treaty coming on April 1, and a new agreement with Tseshahat. That's going to help us both."

"We would hope that the government recognizes the significance of this accord, and that they consider it carefully as Maa-nulth moves into the implementation process," Sam said.

The Maa-nulth Treaty comes into effect at midnight on April 1. On April 2, the five Maa-nulth Nations: Huu-ay-aht, Ucluelet, Uchucklesaht, Toqaht and Kyuquot-Checklesahat, will hold an

invitation-only celebration at Alberni District Secondary School, featuring ceremonies and cultural presentations by each nation.

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