

Aboriginal cultures of mid-Pacific coast

ECOLOGICAL EXPLORER

by John Henigman

Humans have lived in the west coast marine forest ecosystem for at least the last 10,000 years. Before this time, glaciers covered most of the landscape from about Olympia, WA, north to Alaska.

Aboriginal people relied heavily on marine life and on the flora and fauna of the forests. Native peoples living on the coast still fish, and still gather food from forests and wetlands. Over the many thousands of years, the use of plants and animals by aboriginal peoples must have changed as the ecosystem itself changed. For example, western redcedar, so central to the native cultures, has been common on the coast for only the last 4,000 years.

Aboriginal cultures were, and are, well represented in the ecosystem around Vancouver. Unlike Native peoples of other parts of North America, they did not have a dramatic effect on the forest. Selected trees were utilized for building materials, boats or totem poles. Some of the drier areas, such as oak savannas, were regularly burned to perpetuate the growth of food items, such as acorns, berries and bulbs.

Native peoples numbered about 188,000 in the area of the west coast marine forest in 1774, the time of contact with Europeans. One hundred years later, their numbers were reduced to about 37,000. Diseases, especially smallpox, took many lives. Many Native cultures no longer exist. Populations of remaining cultures have rebounded well in recent years, and today the number of Native peoples residing in the Vancouver area is about what it was in 1774.

The Native cultural group in the Vancouver area is called the Central Coast Salish. It is made up of the Squamish, Halkomelem and Nooksack peoples around Vancouver and in Washington State. Other groups of the Central Coast Salish live on southern Vancouver Island, on the Gulf and San Juan Islands and in the Port Angeles area of Washington State.

If you would like to know more about local ecosystems get the Vancouver Ecological Explorer: A Walker's Guide to the Ecosystems (\$6.95) available in most book, outdoors and nature stores in Vancouver. More information is available at www.ecoexplorer.ca Contact us at guidebook@ecoexplorer.ca and tell us about your visits to natural places.



Aboriginal peoples of BC and Washington

- 1 Haida
- 2 Tlingit
- 3 Tsimshian
- 4 Haisla
- 5 Haihais
- 6 Bella Bella
- 7 Bella Coola
- 8 Oowekeeno
- 9 Kwakwa'ka'wakw
- 10 North Coast Salish
- 11 Nuu-chah-nulth
- 12 Central Coast Salish
- 13 Ditidaht
- 14 Makah
- 15 Quileute
- 16 Chemakum
- 17 Southern Coast Salish
- 18 Southwest Coast Salish
- 19 Kwalhioqua
- 20 Chinookans
- 21 Clatskanie
- 22 Kalapuyans
- 23 Tillamook
- 24 Alseans

