

Kyuquot: a Clear Mind

Mama bear cuffed one of her two cubs. Happy that I wasn't the target of her discipline, I lowered my 8x32 waterproof eyes to refocus on the rest of our group, who were equally entranced by the intertidal foraging of this young black bear family. I bobbed in the low swell, grateful for the hundred metres of rebounding waves that separated our kayaks from the bears' barnacle- and mussel-filled banqueting room.

We were returning from a week of kayaking in the Kyuquot Sound area on Vancouver Island's remote northwest coast. We'd been served the usual mix of serene seas, sudden gale-force winds, roller-coaster traverses and weather-enforced shore time on unnamed island paradises. The liquid sunshine did little to dampen our excitement at each "discovery" among kelp-laden rocks — a patchwork of purple and orange-ochre stars, bold green anemones, and delicate red tube worms.

When camped, our evening conversations frequently raised the themes of envy and awe: envy that the Ka:'yu:'t'h' (Kyuquot) and Che:k'tles7et'h' (Checleset) First Nations know this rugged marinescape as home; and awe that they had thrived here for centuries without the synthetic luxuries that cocoon us "hardy" outdoor adventurers today. With advance permission from the Kyuquot Band Office, we visited several heritage sites where evidence of previous settlements was mostly swallowed by the lush temperate rainforest. One rainy afternoon, we were invited for coffee to the home of a Checleset family who've recently returned to an ancient village site at Chekaklis Island — a renewed connection with traditional territory.

Most of our paddling had been within Checleset Bay Marine Ecological Reserve, a sanctuary established in 1984 for the sea otter population re-introduced between 1969-71. At night, when a distinctive rat-a-tat-tat occasionally broke the dark silence, we knew that an elusive sea otter was hard at work cracking shells using a rock cradled on its chest. Extremely low morning tides also

exposed intertidal potholes — evidence of the otters' dog-like digging for midnight snacks. With otters eating sea urchins, this marine ecosystem is slowly recovering and now boasts prolific forests of giant perennial kelp as nurseries for many marine critters. These kelp beds also calmed rougher waters and offered good rafting-up anchors as we fed our chocolate-addicted engines.

I looked back to where we'd witnessed the bears' buffet: above was the looming scar of logging-at-its-worst on the face of Mt. Paxton's 730-m-high, 3-km-long ridge. This steep slope has been slow to recover since its buzz cut, burn and blow down in the early '80s. Nonetheless, greenery seems to be finally taking hold at a faster pace than erosion and slides. The exposed and rocky shoreline under Mt. Paxton had offered few refuges during the traverse between the Bunsby Islands — a favourite among experienced paddlers — and the more southerly haven of the Mission Group. Everyone was satisfied to have squeezed through the weather window and we made smooth morning progress on our return paddle.

During the week, every kayaker we'd encountered — except one group that wasn't prepared to smile through a rain storm — had a satisfied, peaceful grin from ear to ear. Some had come to knock off miles and "get to the Brooks," a spectacular peninsula beyond the Bunsbys that offers surf-pounded stretches of sandy beaches and a forest ecology that escaped the last glaciation. The Brooks Peninsula dominates the viewscape to the northwest, and together with adjacent fjord-like Nasparti Inlet, forms the Brooks-Nasparti Provincial Park. Others had come to enjoy jagged volcanic foreshores, fossil-packed rock beds, and paw-printed beaches in areas such as Rugged Point Provincial Marine Park toward the southern extreme of the Sound area.

For us, sharing habitat with the sea otters and bears, scoping for marine birds, meandering up estuaries to freshwater pools, contemplating days gone by at abandoned village sites and visiting with people from Walters Cove had



made for a rewarding week. A perfect finale included a halibut burger, fresh salad and pie at Miss Charlie's Restaurant (named after a resident seal in the cove), then re-stocking on snacks and finding local souvenirs at the General Store and nearby gift shop. We debated the merits of a four- to six-hour paddle back up Tahsish Inlet to our vehicles at Fair Harbour, but chose a water-taxi exodus instead of slogging against the building outflow winds.

Though very hospitable and welcoming of new faces, some locals are still a tad leery of kayakers. And rightly so. Most in this struggling village have tales



Top: Launching from Lookout Island on the outer edge of the Mission Group, south of Kyuquot.

Right: Sea otters, almost driven to extinction by over-hunting, are now protected within the Checleset Bay Marine Ecological Reserve.



