

## Kwakwaka'wakw carvings bring traditional art back to Tyee Spit in Campbell River



[Marc Kitteringham](#)

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9 / 10 The three carvers (from left) Ernest Puglas, Karver Everson, and Junior Henderson stand next to their creation. Photo by Marc Kitteringham/Campbell River Mirror

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For the first time in years, a set of Kwakwaka'wakw carvings were erected on the lands now called Tyee Spit on Friday, with hundreds of people in attendance to bear witness.

“There should be poles all the way down here,” said Bill Henderson, a mentor to the carvers who created the new poles said during the event on May 31. “The government ... put a line on (them) and tore them down. Imagine how that felt.”

Though there is only the new arch, made of three pieces carved by Junior Henderson, Karver Everson, and Ernest Puglas as part of the Shoreline Arts event last year, it is the start of something bigger for the We Wai Kum, We Wai Kai and Campbell River communities. It's the return to thousands of years of tradition, and a significant step towards reconciliation in the area.

Tyee Spit is traditionally known as ʔuxstalis, meaning "beach at the back" or "where the land ends." It was a site of conflict between the Liḡwíłdaǰw and Salish-speaking people. The area was full of fortified villages on cliffs, strategic fortifications, all stemming from territorial disputes. However, by the late 1830s, the Liḡwíłdaǰw were victorious, and expanded their territory north, including the mouth of the Campbell River. ʔuxstalis from there became known as a home community, and housed traditional bighouses and, eventually, modern-style homes. The waters and lands around it were full of food sources, from plants and wildlife to salmon.

In 1888, the reserve was surveyed and completed, securing the spit as part of the We Wai Kum reserve. However, in the early 1900s the International Timber Company, the RCMP and the Indian Agent bought 160 acres, including the Tyee Spit from the We Wai Kum people.

According to a release from the Nation, "In the opinion of Wei Wai Kum this transaction is not as the terms of sale and its permanence were foreign concepts. Additionally, this agreement was made under immense pressure from the Indian Agent.

One has to remember that during this period, First Nations were being jailed for leaving their Reserve without a permit, and for practicing outlawed traditions like the Potlatch. This transaction then, occurring under much pressure and questionable circumstances, marked a significant change for the Wei Wai Kum people, as they were forced to move their southward and away from ʔuxstalis. The sawmill was never built."

The spit is currently municipal property, and the We Wai Kum still question the legitimacy of the transaction.

"In a world of reconciliation, it is important for us to understand our local history and in this case, the story of ʔuxstalis. It serves as a reminder of our colonial past, but presents opportunities for reconciliation," the release says. "The Wei Wai Kum people envision a future where ʔuxstalis is returned to them, allowing them to reclaim their heritage and rebuild the connection to their lands. It is hoped that the broader Campbell River community will embrace this, as an act of reconciliation in which everyone's lives past injustices and building a community that makes reconciliation real."

The erection of the arch on ʔuxstalis is one of the first steps towards that.

"The culture will only get stronger," said Ernie Puglas, one of the carvers of the arch.

Shawn Decaire, who spoke during the event quoted Junior Henderson, another of the carvers. He said Henderson told him that "we have to stop putting barriers amongst our Peoples, we have to stop creating the separation between Coast Salish, Nuuchahnulth and Kwakwaka'wakw people. It's us that matters. We need to come together, because ... beautiful things happen."

“You get a block of wood and look at it, but when you bring it to life and it dances in front of you ... what a feeling that is,” Bill Henderson said. “I’m looking forward to seeing more of this artwork going in all along the shore ... it can happen.”

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