WE ARE THE WUIKINUXV NATION
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A collaboration with the Wuikinuxv Nation.
Written and produced by Pam Brown, MOA Curator, Pacific Northwest, 2011.
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UBC Museum of Anthropology Pacific Northwest sourcebook series

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Designed by Vanessa Kroeker

Front cover photographs, clockwise from top left:
Percy Walkus, Wuikinuxv Elder, traditional fisheries scientist and innovator. Photo: Ted Walkus.
Stringing eulachons. (Young boy at right has been identified as Norman Johnson.) Photo: C. MacKay, 1952, #2005.001.165, Archives, UBC Museum of Anthropology.

Back cover photograph: Set of four Hàmača masks, collection of Peter Chamberlain and Lila Walkus.

MOA programs are supported by visitors, volunteer associates, members, and donors; Canada Foundation for Innovation; Canada Council for the Arts; Department of Canadian Heritage Young Canada Works; BC Arts Council; Province of British Columbia; Aboriginal Career Community Employment Services Society; The Audain Foundation for the Visual Arts; Michael O’Brian Family Foundation; Vancouver Foundation; Consulat General de Vancouver; and the TD Bank Financial Group.
Acknowledgements

This sourcebook gives you a glimpse of the people of the Wuikinuxv Nation through historical Wuikinuxv artwork, archival photographs, contemporary perspectives and photographs. We gratefully acknowledge all those who have given generously of their time and knowledge for the sourcebook and labels for the Wuikinuxv case in the new Multiversity Galleries of the UBC Museum of Anthropology (MOA).

The 15 historical objects in MOA’s Wuikinuxv collection date from as early as 1890 to as recently as 1969. The Museum has been working with the Wuikinuxv on the Partnership of Peoples Project since 2008. Particular thanks are due to the Wuikinuxv Treaty Office and Wuikinuxv Council, the Elders, and community members Evelyn Windsor, Peter Johnson, George Johnson, and Terry Ivan Reid who shared their knowledge and stories for the project.

Thanks to George Johnson, Jennifer Walkus, Terri Reid, Wuikinuxv Treaty Office, MOA Archives, and Wuikinuxv Council, who provided photographs.

And for their invaluable advice, research, consultation, and assistance, thanks to Peter Johnson, Council Representative; George Johnson, Researcher, Wuikinuxv Treaty Office; Nigel Haggan; Joanne Kienholz, UBC student/researcher; and David Stevenson.

- Pam Brown, MOA Curator, Pacific Northwest, 2011.
Who We Are

Yau, we are people of the Wuikinuxv Nation. We are honoured to share with you a glimpse of our rich culture and history. Before European contact, we were one of the largest nations on the Pacific Northwest Coast. Our traditional territory extends from Koeye River to Cranston Point to the head of Wuikinuxv Lake. We have lived here for over ten thousand years.

Our lands and resources are as important to us as the air we breathe. Our ancestors have taught us that ‘this land is our responsibility.’ This responsibility is so instilled in us that it is a part of who we are and how we live today.

Giànakci.

Location and Services

Our traditional territory lies 300 miles northwest of Vancouver, and is only accessible by boat and floatplane. Our community is located on the banks of the Waanukv River, which connects Owikenno Lake to the head of Rivers Inlet.

We have an airstrip and daily service from a local airline. The nearest town is Port Hardy across the Queen Charlotte Strait. In order to access education, health care, and obtain employment, the majority of our people find it necessary to leave our community and ancestral homeland.

Language: W’uik’ala is a Northern Wakashan language spoken by the Wuikinuxv people.

Population: 300

Wuikinuxv Territory.
Photo: Terri Reid, 2009.
Wuikinuxv Traditional Territory

Wuikinuxv Nation Map courtesy of the Wuikinuxv Treaty Office; First Nations of British Columbia Map reproduced courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology.
Wuikinuxv Territory.
Photos: Terri Reid, 2009.
Responsibility to our Lands

Our strong historic sense of responsibility to our lands is evident in the following statement by Chief Joseph Chamberlain to the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs, held at Rivers Inlet, Saturday, August 16th, 1913, 2:00 pm:

We want to get the whole of Rivers Inlet, from Quay to the land—Oweekeno Lake. The white men wants to take all our land and we are in the position of men who have been pushed half way to the water off our land, and it would not take much to push us off the land into the deep water altogether. Sometimes I go round in the timber and see a post; sometimes we get inside the post. And then they come and take our logs. I think that all this is our land and we should not be afraid to take logs anywhere. In the old time the Lord put our fathers here among these mountains and trees. He also put the salmon there for their food. Sometimes they need to skin the bark off the hemlock trees and eat it for food. Wherever these Government posts are now we cannot work, and that is not good according to our mind. We are very despairing. We have heard that the Government will take land and sell it, but we don’t want to sell our land here, but we would like a yearly rental for it. All these canneries round here should pay us a rental for the use of the land. The canneries come here and we cannot understand how they came. If the Government sell this land to the canneries—did the Government sell this land to the canneries—that is what we want know? All this land is ours and we want to reserve it for our children.
Stringing eulachons. (Young boy at right has been identified as Norman Johnson.)

Chief Joseph Chamberlain, continued:

If any of the white men want any of the land we are willing to sell or lease it to them for the benefit of our children. We have a lot of little houses up and down the rivers and on the lakes, and there are timber limits posts put all over there where we used to reside.

There is a house on Moses Inlet belonging to Johnnie Carroll and I hear that white men have taken the boards off the house and broken the house. I don’t like to hear that the white men have broken the Indian’s house. If an Indian had done the same thing to a white man’s house he would have been put in jail. I don’t know who the white man is who broke Johnnie Carroll’s house open. I only hear that it was broken.

The reason we want to get this land from Quay to Smith’s Inlet is to make our food supplies secure, and so that we will be able to keep the fish for ourselves. No one has ever stopped us yet but we are afraid someone may do so in the future and we would lose this means of our subsistence. There may be encroachments on the land. This is what we are afraid of. Next month half of my people will be up the lake and half down here to hunt furs and fish for salmon.

If I now lose all this land how are we going to get the money for the furs, which we otherwise would have if the land belonged to us? There are thirty-eight places where we get salmon and furs from. That is all we have to say just now.
Left: Interior of a traditional Big House at the Island of Kitit. This house is believed to belong to Maggie Nagiazi.

Right: House post in the house of Thomas Háilhamas on Kitit Island.
The Wuikinuxv are rich in territory, culture, and history

Our people have lived in Wuikinuxv Territory in the Central Coast region of British Columbia for over ten thousand years. Before the arrival of the Europeans, our people thrived, surrounded by an abundance of rich natural resources. On this foundation we built a complex and well-organized society.
The Wuikinuxv have been widely recognized on the coast for the spread of their winter ceremonial dances. They consisted of two main series of dances, the ‘Caiga and the Dhwelàxa series. The highest dance of the ‘Caiga series is the renowned Cannibal-Spirit or Hàmaça dance.

This Hàmaça mask (A1745) was collected by the Reverend George Henry Raley in Bella Bella between 1893 and 1934, and incorrectly identified as Heiltsuk. Consultation with Wuikinuxv community members and other First Nations experts recently confirmed its Wuikinuxv origin. The style is very similar to the Hàmaça masks from Kîtit Island shown in the previous photo.

According to Wuikinuxv Elder Evelyn Windsor (personal correspondence with Terry Ivan Reid, 2009), “Masks like this were from the Owikeno Lake area and tended to use less colour due to their isolation.”
The great forests of the area provided the Wuikinuxv with the Western Red Cedar. Our ancestors carved ocean-going and river canoes, totem poles, and built Big Houses and boardwalks from cedar. The bark was set aside and used to make clothing, baskets and other household items.

A canoe bailer (Nb3.1455) like this was used for both river- and ocean-going red-cedar canoes that travelled the creeks, rivers, and oceans near and beyond Wuikinuxv Territory.
Left: Canoe Bailer (Nb3.1455), Collection, UBC Museum of Anthropology. Photo: Derek Tan, UBC Museum of Anthropology.
Historically, the Wuikinuxv survived primarily on the millions of salmon that swam upriver to spawn. To a great extent, Wuikinuxv culture revolved around fishing, which was a great source of wealth for the community.

White settlers were quick to exploit the immense quantities of fish, building sixteen canneries around Rivers Inlet during the late 1800s. The lives of the Wuikinuxv were significantly marked by cannery life. Many Wuikinuxv Elders remember working in the canneries with Chinese, Japanese and European immigrants. Since that time, the salmon population has dropped so dramatically that commercial fishing is now nearly non-existent among the Wuikinuxv.

Each family was responsible for the health and well being of their area. Today we still hold this responsibility high. We realize that we have a relationship with the resources and our land. Our Territory needs us to look after it in order to thrive as much as we need it to survive.
Percy Walkus

Percy Walkus founded the Wuikinuxv Salmon Enhancement Program. His memory continues to inspire young people to cherish and protect the fisheries.

Hereditary Chief, Yàxzi Jack Johnson

Hereditary Chief, Yàxzi Jack Johnson, was a cultural historian, artist, composer, storyteller, logger, and fisherman of the Wuikinuxv Nation. He was born March 15, 1900 in Zawias, Eulachon Town, one of our old reserve sites on the Waanukv River. He descends from the House of the Whale’s Tale at Kitit (Smoke House Island), one of the original Wuikinuxv villages.
Wuikinuxv Elder Nuwagawa (Evelyn Windsor) shares some of the history of the Raven House-Front Pole (A50006), which once belonged to her father (personal correspondence with Terry Ivan Reid, 2009):

This pole [A50006] belonged to my late father, Simon Walkus, Sr. (1900–1969), a hereditary chief. His name, ‘Xvùsemdaas Waakas, means ‘First to drink at the head of the Great River.’

The name of the pole is not remembered; it was only known as the Raven Pole. It stood in front of my father’s house at Kitit, an island located at the head of the Waanukv River. The house was called Galuthudala, which means “protruding above the rest.” There were at least seven other Big Houses there; his was at the centre.
Photo: Bill McLennan, UBC Museum of Anthropology.
The House of Nuakawa: completed in the fall of 2006, the first Big House in many years, this is one example of the focus on rebuilding Wuikinuxv society.
Left: House posts under construction, 2006. This page: Big House opening.

Photos: George Johnson.
Wuikinuxv - Our Future

Our ancestors have been living here for thousands of years. Our ancestors have taught us that ‘this land is our responsibility.’ We see the effects of over-harvesting, global warming and neglect first hand. We’ve seen the fish stocks collapse, had to shoot the bears we’ve seen grow from cubs because they are starving. We’ve had to explain to our children that shooting that bear they’ve seen since it was a cub was kinder than letting it starve to death.

“No fish” doesn’t just mean that we don’t get a fish to eat or sell; it means our land is hurting. We hurt because it does. We want a say in how the resources are managed in our territory to remind those who seek to benefit from them that they aren’t a commodity to be sold. Every resource is a part of the system. Each part that is taken out, or over-harvested, affects everything that depends on it. If we don’t take care of it today, it won’t be there in the future. Those who are just after the commodity will move on. We’ve seen it happen with the Canneries. But those of us who will be left here because we are tied to our land by ties of blood and history will have to work harder to survive.

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