

## **Fighting to Save Sacred Ground**

By Stephen Hume  
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Unbelievably, the B.C. government has approved plans to use a burial site for sewage disposal

PENELAKUT - On a clear summer day with sunshine burnishing the water, Myrus James can stroll the beach outside his Kuper Island home, look down Trincomali Channel and see all the way to Saltspring Island and the village site where his ancestors sleep.

On the day of my visit to Myrus, however, the ancestors' final resting place is hidden from the sight of our world. This particular afternoon is a bleak one, sliding into a dirty winter night. There is sleet on the uplands and the coast rain hammers straight down, leaving muddy rivulets in the dirt roads, bedraggled dogs and a dense fog draped on everything like some cosmic shroud.

Maybe it's the right kind of day for Yuhw Yehw Aluq's spirits -- that's the traditional name Myrus inherited from his own grandfather -- because when the Penelakut elder looks down the channel now, he has reason to feel as downcast as the weather is dismal.

Down there on Walker Hook, he told me, our provincial government has granted a permit to use the old Penelakut burial ground for sewage disposal.

I thought I'd misheard. Myrus was pouring us a strong black coffee in his snug kitchen while the rain drummed on his roof. But no, I hadn't misheard.

It turns out that this place, potentially one of the richest archaeological sites in the southern Gulf Islands and of indisputable spiritual importance to the Penelakut, was approved last spring for use as a dispersal field for effluent from a commercial fish hatchery.

Then-sustainable resources minister Stan Hagen's department approved the alteration of the archaeological site and then-water, land and air protection minister Joyce Murray's waste management branch approved the daily discharge of up to 619 cubic metres of "effluent" with a maximum of 10 milligrams per litre of "suspended solids" into the burial grounds.

Unless my math is wrong, that means the province has approved the flushing of more than 200 million litres of liquid and more than a tonne of "suspended solids" per year through the bones of Myrus James' ancestors.

Nobody knows how many graves there are -- some estimate there could be more than 700. But everybody knows they were intended to rest for all eternity in the place that's been home to them for who knows how long -- 20 centuries? Thirty?

Marine charts have called the place Walker Hook since 1859, the blink of an eye in Penelakut history. To the archaeologists it is DfRu-002, a large village site and midden the size of four football fields laid end-to-end. Geologists call it a tombolo, a tide and current-carved spit of sand and rock.

But in the lilting language of Myrus and the Penelakut -- the "Buried Edge" people -- it will always be Syuhe'mun, "the Place to Catch Up," a site that resonates in the stories, songs and ceremonies by which traditional knowledge is passed from one generation to the next.

Some of those memories are personal and immediate. Myrus would go hunting there with his brothers and uncles in that far-off childhood where every day is remembered as a sunny one.

When they went to race canoes against the Lummi, they wouldn't even take any supplies, just harvest food at the rich ancestral sites along the route. That's why Coast Salish reserves were so small, he said, because they were located in the midst of abundance.

"We'd get a couple of deer, just enough for the two households. My uncle would get his salmon or cod. Clams. Crabs. Prawns. We've used that place for a long, long time," he said.

Knowing that something of the grandfathers and grandmothers and their collective wisdom is still there to embrace him in this world of trouble and tumult is reassuring. Although Myrus is at pains to point out the place is important not just to the Penelakut but to all the Hul'qumi'num -- the Cowichans, the Chemainus, the Halalt and the Lyackson.

"We have a lot of relatives all over," he insists. "We are all related by marriage. Even the Tsawwassen have an interest in that site."

It's a place, points out fellow elder August Sylvester, that is governed by special rules. Fires can't be lit there. Visitors are not even permitted to spit on the ground.

I confess that I gasped when I heard what the province had agreed was an acceptable use for the site.

The notion has appalling implications. It offers an underlying assumption about the value of aboriginal people, even dead ones, that it's almost unbelievable for a so-called enlightened civil society in the 21st century.

"Using this sacred site as a sewage filtration system is the ultimate dishonour to the Coast Salish history, traditions and beliefs," says an affidavit sworn by August in late November.

Yet permits for alterations to archaeological site DfRu-002 and for waste water discharges there were authorized April 24, 2003.

During preliminary trenching and well-digging conducted under the permit, the remains of 13 people were uncovered. On May 7, 2003, the province was informed by an archaeologist that "the exposed remains are visible and already appear to have been subject to vandalism."

The bones of one woman were covered in red ochre, a sign of her great importance, Myrus said. In fairness, steps were quickly taken to have the remains turned over to the Penelakut, who undertook to re-inter them, some on the spit and some on Kuper Island.

Nevertheless, Myrus said, the process has created great pain for his community. Offerings of food had to be burned to appease the disturbed spirits.

"It hurts all the people. I went there with some of the other elders," he told me. "One old lady, she was crying. She said, 'Why are the white people digging up my ancestors?'"

"That's a major grave site for our people," he said. "The thing that really troubled me was that when the elders visited, one of them said, 'There's lots of people here.' He could feel them."

"We are very concerned about disturbing our ancestors where they rest," Myrus said. "Some of our people believe the white people think 'those are only dead Indians, they don't really matter' -- then something like this happens and it pretty well proves it for them."

He's got that right. How could they assume otherwise?

Alternatively, how would the province react to a proposal that we site a septic field among the historic graves of former premiers and famous persons?

We don't even have to ask what the response would be. But somehow, if it's the first citizens of this benighted place, the answer seems to be dig 'em up, move 'em out, so what if they feel bad about it?

On Feb. 9, the Penelakut, joined by other Saltspring citizens with concerns about the impact upon the sensitive ecologies at Walker Hook, will ask the Environmental Appeal Board to reconsider the permits.

"The approval desecrates Syuhe'mun, a Penelakut spiritual place," their notice of appeal says.

"The Penelakut elders . . . believe that the effluent released will pollute the shellfish and fish they harvest for sustenance. And equally important, the effluent will flow over their ancestors' bodies."

Indeed. What more needs to be said?

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[Illustration]

Photo: Courtesy of Donna Martin / Walker Hook on Saltspring, one of the richest archaeological sites in the southern Gulf Islands and of indisputable spiritual importance to the Penelakut