

More Conflicts over Native Sites are Inevitable, But Provincial Policy is Lacking

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Last week I wrote about a Greater Victoria dust-up over development threatening some ancient sites considered culturally important by the Songhees and Tsartlip first nations.

Emotions flared dangerously when the province ordered Bear Mountain, a popular local golf course, resort and residential complex, to do an archeological site evaluation, but then subsequently approved survey methods that required a sacred cave to be destroyed in the process of seeing whether it deserved to be saved.

That confrontation escalated when protesters converged on the site to find themselves facing massed construction workers. However, as Vaughn Palmer pointed out, intelligent crisis management by Mike de Jong, minister for aboriginal relations and reconciliation, defused matters, at least for the time being.

Nevertheless, the clash is symptomatic of a larger problem. There are many more of these sites. The Hul'qmi'num, a band centred around Chemainus between Victoria and Nanaimo, has identified more than 1,000 it deems of cultural significance. Eighty per cent of them are on private land.

The potential conflicts are obvious, yet there doesn't seem to be a clear provincial policy for addressing them.

Everyone should remember that the flashpoint for recent major confrontations between first nations and other interests -- Oka, Ipperwash, Gustafsen Lake -- has involved the imposition of other uses on sites deemed culturally important to first nations.

And there are bound to be more conflicts as development pressure grows. De Jong should be pressuring his cabinet colleagues to address the need for a clear policy for consultation. If things continue to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis we are in for massive headaches for provincial and municipal governments, business investors, property owners and first nations leaders.

The province already has the powers necessary for mediating these conflicts through the Heritage Conservation Act, but so far it has evaded grasping the nettle.

Behind all this is one central reality. British Columbia's landscape was not barren when settler societies arrived. B.C. was densely populated by sophisticated societies which had rich and complex histories of their own.

As settler communities annexed land and resources from the original inhabitants, there was an attempt, sometimes deliberate, sometimes unconscious, to erase evidence of previous occupation.

Indigenous place names were changed. Even indigenous people were renamed, forced to take the nomenclatures imposed by those who displaced them.

There was ethnic cleansing. Inhabitants were cleared from traditional territories, alienated from resources and bundled off to concentration camps -- euphemistically called reserves -- with rights to participate in mainstream society severely restricted.

Attempts were made to eradicate native languages, an aggressive re-education campaign sought to disconnect children from their cultures, religions and traditions. Rituals and ceremonies were banned. Cultural symbols were either destroyed or looted for display in museums, much like the trophies brought back to Imperial Rome to demonstrate the irresistible power of the conquerors.

Yet first nations did not disappear, convenient as that might have been for the consciences of those who usurped political, social and economic control. Thank heavens they didn't, because if they had there would be no opportunity to make amends, as we must, since justice demands it and we all want to live together as equals in this place.

Those who lived here for millennia before the newcomers have an inalienable right to their ancient sacred places. That is the nub of this looming problem.

Some places are charged with spiritual powers essential for ceremonies that are of profound importance to cultures far older than most of us can imagine. Some are important because of what they symbolize -- burial sites, ancestral communities, places where great events occurred. Some sites demand protection, all deserve respect.

Nobody, least of all first nations, wants an obsession with the past to wreck our collective futures. First nations know better than anyone that the well-being of their own communities is wedded to our general prosperity. But we do need to talk about how to accommodate both preserving the sacred and permitting development.

We now need decisive leadership from the provincial government, starting with an assertive policy that provides clear directions on how first nations, property holders and businesses can engage in timely discussions so that everybody's needs can be addressed fairly.
