

## **'This is hurt'**

By Louise Dickson  
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SOUTH PENDER ISLAND -- Chief Vern Jacks looked at black earth spilling from the top of two long crane-like conveyor belts onto the ground below. He winced as a bulldozer rumbled by, snatched at the pile of dirt and dumped it elsewhere. When he sees the piles of black, shell-streaked earth, Jacks sees the spirits of his ancestors.

"This is hurt," he said.

The Tseycum First Nations chief had come to inspect the salvage operation at Poets Cove Seaside Resort and Spa. He didn't like what he saw.

The big piles of earth at the back of the resort are excavated midden material. Poets Cove is paying a crew of 10 archeologists and 15 natives to screen the earth for human remains and artifacts. The work is being done under government permit and overseen by archeological consulting firm I.R. Wilson. The natives say there are 1,500 cubic metres of excavated material that must be screened.

About 2,500 years ago, middens were common burial sites. From the fragmented remains, archeologists estimate they have found remains from at least 36 people.

Last year, the salvage operation was done by hand. Three weeks ago, the developer brought in mechanical gravel sorters similar to those used at the World Trade Centre after Sept. 11 and the Picton pig farm, where RCMP are looking for evidence of women who disappeared from Vancouver's downtown eastside.

Jacks is opposed to the mechanical method, which he sees as an attempt to hurry First Nations off the resort.

"I don't understand the desecration," said Jacks. "The workers here are so hurt at what's going on."

Out of respect for his ancestors and to avoid more damage to their remains, he wants fine mesh hand-screening tools used, instead of the noisy conveyor belts which jostle bones against rocks and dirt.

"We've been negotiating to take the machines out, but it's been falling on deaf ears," said Jacks.

Poets Cove Seaside Resort and Spa, formerly the Bedwell Harbour Resort and Marina, is facing two charges under the B.C. Heritage Conservation Act for

unlawfully damaging a burial place that has historical or archeological value. The second charge alleges that the two companies that own Poets Cove -- Poets Cove at Bedwell Harbour Ltd. Partnership and Bedwell Harbour Hotel Ltd. -- and Victoria developer Bill James "did excavate a site which contained materials or other physical evidence of human habitation or use before 1846."

The offences are alleged to have occurred in December 2002 and January 2003. The act carries fines up to \$1 million for companies and a maximum fine of \$50,000 or two years in prison for an individual.

Bill Roberts, Poets Cove project manager, said he spent a lot of time looking for the best way to do the screening to be sensitive to native concerns and to comply with the government permit.

"The archeology department has dictated what it wants me to do," said Roberts.

Jim Pike, an archeologist with the archeology and registry services branch, said the government is not dictating that a mechanical gravel sorter be used.

"The permit says that in the event conventional screening methods are impractical, the mechanical gravel sorter could be used as an alternative.

The developer may have thought hand-screening methods were not effective because the deposits are saturated and mixed with large rocks and non-midden material, said Pike.

Pike said he did not know if the mechanized sorting process caused any more damage than the hand-screening method.

Roberts would not say how much the salvage operation costs or how long it is expected to continue.

Last week, Jacks was joined at the salvage site by members of the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group. They represent First Nations groups in Cowichan, Chemainus, Ladysmith and the Gulf Islands and have a competing land claim at Bedwell Harbour.

Wearing red ochre on their cheeks as a protection against trouble with the spirits, the salvage crew stood in a circle, orange hard hats in hand, and listened to the treaty group elders.

"I know you're all hurting because of the big machines," said Cowichan elder Ruby Peter. "They're destroying the bones of our ancestors, grinding them into powder. I don't approve of that. The white man who brought the machines here is making fun of our people."

Peter is worried people on the site will be hurt because the spirits have been disturbed. "They can get sick."

On Friday, hereditary grave digger Simon Smith and the others working at the site take part in a ritual cleansing to remove all the traces of bone and dust from their bodies before leaving for the weekend.

"Our archeologists felt good after cleansing. They felt they could go home with a good feeling," said Smith.

Once all the earth has been screened, the remains will be reburied at Poets Cove.

"The reburial will be in a spot where no one will disturb the bones again," said Jacks. "Once a gravesite, always a gravesite, even when it's dust."

[Illustration]

Colour Photo: Ray Smith, TC / Simon Smith, a Tsartlip hereditary gravedigger, hand-screens midden material, a method natives believe is more respectful of the dead. ; Colour Photo: Ray Smith, Times Colonist / Workers use a controversial conveyor belt to sort through gravel from the disturbed First Nation's midden at Poets Cove Seaside Resort and Spa on South Pender Island. Map: (Poets Cove resort) ;