

George McLean: *The Living Landscape*



Snowy Owl and Fence Post, 1991, Private Collection

**Tom Thomson
Art Gallery**

September 17, 2010
to
January 9, 2011

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Owen Sound, ON Canada

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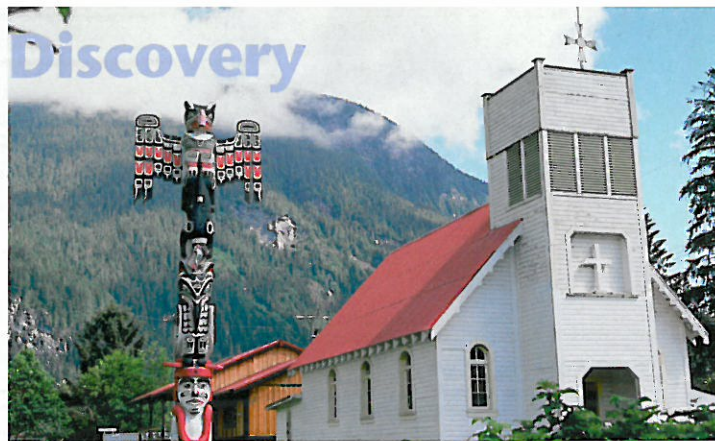
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CARTOGRAPHY

THE 10,000-YEAR DIET

Thousands of years ago, shifting glaciers in British Columbia's Coast Mountains carved out the fiords and coves of Kingcome Inlet, and for centuries, members of the Tsawataineuk First Nation carved out a living out from their traditional territory. The lands and waters surrounding the remote inlet, about 300 kilometres northwest of Vancouver, sustained them for generations. Now they live in a "diesel community" accessible only via plane or boat, which means that fresh food is priced at a premium and processed foods are the norm.

Like many aboriginal communities, the Tsawataineuk First Nation faces most of the health issues that arise from a European diet high in sugar and fat — obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Its approach to rectifying these challenges, however, goes beyond a healthy-eating campaign. The community, which has just over 100 residents, has started a geographic information system (GIS) mapping project to determine which, if any, of its traditional foods are still available and safe to eat.

Community members began by viewing images of more than 100 plant and animal species and discussing traditional names and uses, as well as their recollections of how, when and why each species was harvested and stored. The knowledge shared by elders and others about foods such as eulachon (a small fish) and Pacific silverweed (a perennial flower) was fused with current data on plant and animal populations to draft maps that illustrate the state of the band's food supplies past and present. These maps not only reveal the whereabouts of traditional foods but also express the concept of bioregionalism, the spatial representation of people in

B.C.'s Tsawataineuk First Nation is mapping a path to its culinary past.

place over time. Unlike maps that plot only physical features, bioregional maps are living documents — they provide an evolving assessment of the state of a community and its resources.

Gathering together to discuss traditional foods helped connect the community to the map-making process, says Tanis Dagert, formerly of the BC Healthy Living Alliance, which assisted in the project with the University of Victoria. "But it was difficult at times for people to remember how and why things were used," she adds, "because it had been so long since they were a part of everyday life."

The GIS maps created so far will be used to help determine whether certain traditional foods are free enough of contaminants to be safely eaten. But the project is part of a larger Tsawataineuk movement toward sharing traditional ecological knowledge with younger generations. For the first time since many of the oldest elders were small children, community members are cultivating root gardens of edible indigenous plants, such as springbank clover, Nootka lupine and northern rice-root in new plots or plots that have lain fallow for years. And Clan Chief Adam Dick is teaching young people to make eulachon nets out of nettles. "The young need to learn from elders," he says, "while we are still here."

In September, Kingcome was hit by heavy rains and flooding, which damaged or destroyed many buildings. Most of the village was evacuated. Locals are no strangers to flooding, but the damage this time was severe. In the face of such devastation, the link between retaining traditional knowledge and sustaining a community becomes that much more tangible.

AnnMarie MacKinnon