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Back to the Clam Gardens

By Nancy J. Turner,
Kim Recalma-Clutesi,
and Douglas Deur

The wharf at Campbell River, Vancouver Island, British Columbia was treacherously icy in the February gray dawn, but this in no way dampened our enthusiasm as we followed behind *Kwaxsistalla*, Clan Chief Adam Dick, down the gangplank and along the walkway to the giant aluminum fishing boat tied up alongside. *Kwaxsistalla* was in high spirits, because he was on his way back to his childhood home. Film director Kim Recalma-Clutesi (*Kwaxsistalla*'s partner) and a group of us — his students in understanding the lands and waters of his territory — were thrilled to be part of this reconnaissance expedition, funded in part by a National Geographic Research Grant and by Ecotrust. We hefted boxes and coolers full of food and equipment down the ramp to the *Qualicum Producer* where skipper Chief Mark Recalma, his son Joshua, and photographer Richard Boyce were waiting, having spent the night aboard. Dr. Douglas Deur, Associate Research Professor at Portland State University Department of Anthropology, Dr. Nancy Turner, Professor in the School of Environmental Studies and Melissa Kingan Grimes, Master's Candidate in Linguistics, both of University of Victoria, made up the rest of our party. We had been planning this trip for many months — the first of a series to be undertaken over the next two years to document *Kwaxsistalla*'s unique and detailed knowledge and experiences of the food harvesting and other resource-based activities of his *Qawadiliqalla* Clan of the *Tsawataineuk* people of Kingcome Inlet.

Kim Recalma-Clutesi coined the name “Singing Through the Seasons”, because for every activity in *Kwaxsistalla*'s memory, no matter where it took place, there was a song that went with it. Over many years of working together, he had shared many of his recollections, songs and stories with us. But now, to actually travel with him over the water to the sites where he himself learned the songs — many from his grandfather — as a small child, this was the chance of a lifetime for all of us. Under a drizzling sky that soon turned to hail, our boat headed alongside Quadra Island. Although the day was overcast, our sense of adventure was high. Before long, large flakes of snow began to fall. “*Q'wistiyala!* (It's snowing)!” *Kwaxsistalla* said, and explained to us that it often snows like this at this time of year. “*Olawstyála!* (It's really snowing now)!” And, “*páqwmáxala** (big snowflakes) are coming down.” We watched along the shore, where the evergreens were drooping over the water. *Kwaxsistalla* pointed out the long line of dense boughs, cut off by the highest tide, extending all over the coast. This line, called *wáwelgamix* (high water mark), scarcely noticed by most of us, is an indicator for the people who live and work along the coast of the level above which goods can be safely stowed and will not be touched by even the highest tide.

**Kwak'wala terms are not necessarily linguistically accurate, but are approximations of the terms as they might sound to an English speaker. For example, the proper way to write the term for clam garden is: luḵ^wxiwēy.*



Kim Recalma-Clutesi and Kwaxsishtalla

Kwaxsishtalla identified and explained to us many other features of the ocean. He pointed out the *hyamaq'iyula*, the line of black water shadowing the coastline, where the sea traveler must watch carefully because “drifters” (floating logs) could be lurking in this area and hard to see. He talked about the places along the shore where eddies boiled up by the tidal currents pulled schools of migrating salmon from the deep water, and where the fishermen could be confident of making a catch. We

passed an old fishing spot they called “Pineapple Cove,” because the fisherman who used to go there in the 1940’s and 1950’s loved the canned pineapple that was popular with people in remote communities at that time. We passed through Chatham Channel, where *Kwaxsishtalla* said there were good clam beaches on both sides of the channel, and these beaches have sustained the *Kwakwaka’wakw* people for millennia.



Map by Analisa Fenix/Ecotrust

We were thrilled to spot porpoises, *hátsawiy*, frolicking in the wake of the boat, and as we traveled we listened to *Kwaxsishtalla*’s stories, at times laughing and at times near tears with their poignancy. He sang us many songs: a song about the salmon swimming along churning up the surface of the water; a song in Chinook Jargon that people used to sing when they played the classic bone gambling games; a lullaby his grandmother used to sing to him. “I can still hear the voices of the old people echoing off the mountainside,” he said.

As we came closer to the little island and the small harbor where *Kwaxsistalla* spent much of his early childhood he became more quiet and reflective, remembering his grandfather and grandmother who stayed there with him. He talked about how the police used to come into the village at Kingcome, rounding up the children to take them away to Residential School. *Kwaxsistalla's* family, because of his special position as hereditary clan chief and because he had been chosen from birth for special training as a potlatch speaker and knowledge holder, was hidden from the police and as a consequence, never went to western school. Instead, his grandparents took him to the little island, to live for months at a time in isolation, even during the bitter cold winter months. He remembered the times in January when a fine, fine snow called *widúlamxw* came on the northeast wind, filtered in through the cracks of the little cabin where they stayed, and settled on the bearskin blanket he was covered with at night. His grandmother would brush off the snow in the morning before he got up.

After 10 hours of traveling, and as the dark closed in we finally arrived at our destination and Mark and Josh anchored the boat in the small channel between the islands, right in front of the cove where *Kwaxsistalla* lived as a child. He had been back to this spot in the past, but this would be the first night in about 75 years ago that he had spent in the vicinity. That evening, in anticipation of going ashore the next day, he recounted some of the stories his grandfather told him. He remembered lying there under his bearskin blanket and the old man — they called him “*Gogi*” — would tell him one story after another until he fell asleep: funny stories about Raven and his comical efforts to imitate *Waxwaxwalis*, Swainson’s



The harbor where *Kwaxsistalla* grew up.

thrush, the bird who had the supernatural ability to cause salmonberry bushes to blossom and bear fruit within a few hours by his songs; and Squirrel, whose magical powers allowed him to provide mountain-goat fat for feasting, and the dipper bird, who could produce huge quantities of salmon eggs — enough to feed 10,000 people — simply by hitting his anklebone with a stone hammer. Raven tried all of these feats but only ended up hurting and ridiculing himself. *Kwaxsistalla* also told the story about how all the birds and animals before the beginning of time prepared Deer to capture fire from the

Wolf people, and how Raven’s magical canoe could skim by itself along the water. Then he recounted how the wily Raven managed to trick the *Qwisqwis*, Steller’s Jay, into giving him water from the well *Qwisqwis* was guarding that held the only water in the world at that time. Raven drank all the water, then flew away; with this water he created the springs and rivers that flow from the mountains all along the coast. *Kwaxsistalla* went out on the deck in the stern of the boat to check the sky: “The moon’s out. It’s going to be nice weather tomorrow,” he pronounced. With visions of Raven, and of that small boy and his grandparents living in this little place long ago, we slept.

When we awoke, there was a soft mist surrounding the islands and forests, which slowly rose and dissipated as the dawn brightened. Two eagles soared overhead and a kingfisher sped by along the shore as the trees revealed themselves. Gulls floated nearby, ever watchful for any small tidbit on the surface. Drooping cedars and feathery hemlocks, bearded with long festoons of old man’s beard lichens, lined the shorelines everywhere, masking the dark interior of the islands as they had for generations past. In the distance,

however, the bare, scalped clearcuts left by industrial logging belied the peace and solitude of the place; the roar of chainsaws and heavy equipment was a part of this scene not long ago.



[Kwaxsishtalla in the clam gardens.](#)

One of the main features we wanted to learn more about was the *loqiweys* — the clam gardens — that *Kwaxsishtalla's* ancestors had built, possibly 2,000 years ago or more. These gardens were created to enhance the production of clams, a keystone food for coastal peoples. As *Kwaxsishtalla* said, “When you see clam shells up and down the coast, that’s where people lived.” Thousands of people lived in villages all around the Broughton Archipelago, Vancouver Island and the opposite mainland, and the chiefs needed predictable food supplies for all the people and to keep their sophisticated and intricate economies moving. The clams also served as an assured backup food for times when the salmon or other food resources were in short supply. For many years, the clam gardens were not recognized outside the *Kwakwaka’wakw* world, even by archaeologists. It was assumed that these exceptionally productive clam beaches were naturally formed, and that the line of boulders accumulated just above the lowest tide line through natural forces. Yet, once *Kwaxsishtalla* was consulted by researchers, the clam gardens as human-built features became clear. These were engineered beaches, created by rolling the rocks from the middle part of the beach down to the edge, freeing up more space for clams to live and grow. There were four different kinds of clams: large, smooth, bluish gray butter clams, giant horse clams, small littleneck clams and the prized, plump striated cockles with their large, pointed foot. The last two types people sometimes ate raw, right on the beach. The others had to be cooked.

Here in this spot as a child, *Kwaxsishtalla* himself helped to create and maintain a small *loqiwey*, where he and his family had dug clams as part of their food system. Right there on the beach, *Kwaxsishtalla* recalled, his grandfather would build a hot fire against a big rounded rock, which still endures at the far end of the small cove. His grandfather placed a log on the lower side of the rock, to keep the clams from rolling down on the beach. He piled black

volcanic rocks right beside the big rock and lit a hot fire overtop, letting it burn until the rocks were glowing red hot. Then he cleared off the unburned wood and emptied two or three open-work *lexéy*-baskets full of clams — about 10 to 15 liters — onto the rocks, covering the clams with kelp fronds, hemlock boughs and other plant materials until no rising steam could be seen. Sometimes he would place a cedarbark blanket or a piece of canvas sail overtop. Soon the clams were cooked, steamed in their own delicious juices, and the three of them — *Kwaxistalla* and his grandparents — would enjoy a nutritious and filling meal. His grandfather sometimes would skewer the cooked clams in a figure-eight onto three sticks and smoke the clams for later use or for trading.



The age-old cooking rock.

As a small boy of four or five, *Kwaxistalla* played all by himself on their little island; the squirrels and the birds were his friends. Even the clams were his playmates. His grandfather made him a small dugout canoe, about two feet (60 cm) long, attached to a long pole by a string. It had three little seats across it, and *Kwaxistalla* played with it for hours on the beach, loading it up with clams and pulling it around the shallow waters. They called this *hánikya* (playing with a canoe on the beach).

All through the fall, and into mid-February they harvested the clams from the *loqiwey* at the island, which was called *K'yuk'yugwisnuxw* (“rocks are slanting upright”). Then, around this time, his grandfather would watch the stars every night. When two of the stars — called *qwa'ma* and *alujoy* — came together, they would pack up and move up to Kingcome to prepare for the *oulachen* run — the runs of bountiful little smelts that came up the Kingcome and other coastal rivers by the hundreds of thousands. After they had spawned along the upper reaches of the rivers, people would trap them with fences and nets and render them into a nutritious oil that was — and still is — a dietary staple. When the time was ready, *Kwaxistalla's* grandparents loaded their canoe with clams and other provisions, and set out at first light. *Kwaxistalla* sat in the center of the canoe with his own small paddle, keeping time with his grandparents' strokes, paddling away from their little refuge back to the main village.

Kwaxistalla filled our imaginations with the memories of his childhood, and it was so amazing to be able to walk along the beach, and scramble around the same rocks that he climbed over as a little boy, 75 years ago. There, the *loqiwey* is still in evidence, with a vast expanse of beach still cleared of the large boulders, all still piled up by the thousands along the lower tide line. At low tide, the clams were all squirting out streams of water in a seeming choreographed visual symphony. While we watched, *Kwaxistalla* selected a good spot to dig. He took a clam fork and pushed it down into the soft sand, working it back and forth to make it go deeper, then pried it up, bringing a large mass of sand and mud. From

this, he picked out half a dozen large, slate-gray butter clams and striated cockles. The smaller ones went back into the hole, and the large ones into the basket. It was only a matter of minutes before the basket was half full — enough for a feast for all of us. Some of the cockles never made it from the beach; *Kwaxsistalla* cracked them open and ate them raw from the shell, right on the spot. The rest we washed off by swishing the basket in the clear tidewater and took them up to the fire. *Kwaxsistalla* also harvested some of the large barnacles clinging to the rocks — yet another of the plentiful foods that have fed the *Kwakwaka'wakw* people since time immemorial.

Meanwhile, on the beach, next to a large rock, Josh and Richard had kindled a fire, using the special pitch-saturated limbs of the spruce tree called *baxuud*. *Kwaxsistalla* explained, that's what the old people looked for during the winter when they needed to light a fire out in the woods. They also sought dry snags of cedar or alder, still standing, that they could fell as firewood, because these would have the driest wood, even in a rainforest. To barbecue salmon properly or to heat rocks red-hot for cooking clams, the fire had to be intensely hot and needed good, dry fuel. That evening, we feasted right there on the beach. Some of the clams were roasted over the coals of the fire; the rest were cooked in a large cedar bentwood box made by *Kwaxsistalla* earlier and brought along for the purpose. The box was half-filled with water, which was then heated to super-boiling with the glowing hot rocks lifted from the fire with tongs. The clams cooked until the shells started to open, then we extracted the flesh and ate them steaming hot.



Digging for clams in the garden.



Clams cooking in a cedar box.

The whole clam is edible except the black tip of the siphon. Each part has its own flavour and texture; the “buttons” or muscles are firm and chewy, the “zipper” edge parts somewhat elastic, and the plump centre part soft and tender. Eaten with golden-brown barbecued salmon and potatoes and onions cooked in the hot coals, the clams were truly delectable. As we sat around the glowing fire, replete with good food and the warmth of each other's company, we watched the moonrise through the dark silhouetted cedars.

It would be hard to find any experience more exhilarating.

The next morning dawned bright and orange, with the dark green forest along the shore still spotted with snow from the day before and the higher areas clothed more heavily in a white blanket. A small flock of puffins bobbed in the water nearby as we prepared for the day's activities, and the gulls and crows found the best rocks along the shore to sun themselves in the morning rays. Far to the east near Blackfish Sound, the clear, white peaks of the mountains above Wakeman Sound stood out in strong relief against the deep turquoise sky. Again, many more stories and more songs flooded *Kwaxsistalla's* memory, and he enjoyed sharing them with us. He entertained us with some string games and tricks. In one of them, he had Melissa cut a piece of string he tied in a loop, using a pair of scissors. Then, he placed the cut ends in his mouth, chewed them a little bit and while we watched, amazed, he got Melissa to pull the string out of his mouth, fully mended, converted into one solid piece

again. Then, using both hands and a loop of string, he created a little string bear cub that moved along the upper and lower strings held taut. Singing a little song, and moving his hands up and down in rhythm, *Kwaxistalla* made the little bear run along the strings and “jump over the bank into the river.”



Leaving the clam gardens, through the Broughton Archipelago.

Kwaxistalla told us sad stories of times when people drowned in a lake nearby, and funny stories, such as the time when as a young man at Kingcome he was scared by what he thought was a giant frog in the fading light of the evening, but which turned out, when his father went out to check it, to be a large *lexéy* basket turned upside down and moving slightly in the wind. He sang a song that accompanied a Thunderbird dance in the Big House. Then he sang a beautiful love song that

he remembered his grandfather singing quietly, lying on the bed after it got dark, with his legs crossed and his eyes closed, there in the little house overlooking the beach. “Lots of memories on this little place,” *Kwaxistalla* said. “When I think what I did here, it comes back alive.” What a special privilege it was for all of us to be there with him in this spectacular place steeped in history and beauty.

After three days at *K'yuk'yugwisnuxw*, it was time for us to leave and return to our regular lives. Under a full moon, Mark and Josh got the boat underway early in the morning, before even a hint of daylight touched the sky. The rising sun caught us already threading through the narrow channels and along the dark shores, heading back to Campbell River and home. The porpoises swam alongside us for a long time, as if escorting us out of this enchanted region, and, as a final rite of passage, we forced our way through the boiling waters, rip tides and whirlpools of Seymour Narrows, with *Kwaxistalla* pointing out and naming all the features of the lands and waters we passed. We will never actually stop this learning journey we are on, but this particular segment of it, more than many others, will be etched forever in our memories.