

SENĆOFEN VOICES

by Morgan Yates

On the afternoon and evening of November 19, Saturna Islanders were treated to a unique knowledge-sharing event organized and sponsored by the Islands Trust at the Community Hall.

Shortly after the 4:30 pm start the Hall was filled to near capacity. More than 70 Islanders were in attendance to listen to information that was generously shared by our First Nations neighbours.

Fiona MacRaidl provided opening remarks on behalf of the Islands Trust, noting that the purview of the Trust is limited to land-related planning and development matters. Fiona emphasized that for the SENĆOFEN-speaking WSÁNEĆ (Saanich) People, including the Tsawout people, the concept of land and the history of land is inextricably woven into the SENĆOFEN (pronounced sen-chaw-then) language and place names. She then introduced the presenters.

Elder Belinda Claxton gave an opening prayer in SENĆOFEN, helping to establish a warm atmosphere for the subsequent presentations and Q&A. She later demurred at the notion of being referred to as an “elder”, citing that for her, an important characteristic for that honorific is depth and breadth of traditional knowledge. Her modesty notwithstanding, as her stories were shared the term “elder” seemed to be well-earned.

Prior to hearing from the presenters, the audience listened to an audiotope of the late Elsie Claxton. Most of the audio was in SENĆOFEN, accompanied by a hand-out with an English translation. Elsie was born circa 1907 and the audiotope was made in the 1970s. The transcript provided insights into pre-colonial history and practices in the region, citing a strong distinction between the language and lands of the Hul’qumi’num speaking Coast Salish People and the SENĆOFEN speaking Coast Salish People. Also noted were the strong links between the Lummi People of Washington State and the WSÁNEĆ People, including the Tsawout people of Saanich and the Southern Gulf Islands. Elsie also spoke about the traditional views of land stewardship, of belonging to land and of family lineage and links to specific sites.

Elder and SENĆOFEN language teacher Helen Jack radiated warmth as she shared stories of harvesting clams, fish and cedar from Saturna with her grandparents and when she shared her knowledge and experience of traditional practices for showing respect to the land, to community

and to one's self. Helen emphasized the tradition of showing respect in the practice of harvesting. Her gentle narrative of respect carried into her musing about a future, wherein young families from Tsawout may be able to take up residence on the IR7 lands, joining the Saturna Community. When she asked, "Wouldn't you like that?" the answer from the Hall was enthusiastic applause.



Elder Belinda Claxton, Elder Helen Jack, Dr Nick Claxton

Belinda Claxton was the next speaker. She shared stories of harvesting Dungeness crab near Taylor Point in her youth. She also shared stories of mistrust and discrimination that occurred in years past, when Saturna Islanders' response to visits by Tsawout First Nation members included calls to the RCMP.

In a wide-ranging presentation, Belinda spoke of the distinction between the Saltwater People of WSÁNEĆ and the River People in Cowichan and beyond. She conveyed the central importance of ocean-based reef net fishing to the Tsawout and other WSÁNEĆ People and of the hereditary family ties to specific geographic sites and specific reef net fishing sites with Tsawout territory. Belinda spoke about the 13 moons of the WSÁNEĆ year, noting that each moon was associated with distinct weather patterns, economic activities and cultural activities. The current moon – the shaker of leaves – signaled the time for community members to leave autumn harvesting sites and to return

to the shelter of winter villages. Belinda described several written texts including *The WSÁNEĆ Year* and *Saltwater People*, noting that copies of these reference texts could be obtained by contacting Tsawout Lands Manager Gwen Underwood.

Belinda also put the elephant on the table, so to speak. In respect of a future involving mutual understanding and shared use of land, she noted, “We can’t get rid of you and you can’t get rid of us” and when she continued, saying, “Let’s build a healthy relationship and make this a healthy place for all of us,” she received warm and sustained applause.

UVic Professor Dr Nick Claxton was the final speaker. Nick described how, for WSÁNEĆ people, the SENĆOFEN language is the voice of the land itself and how the SENĆOFEN name for “lands” can be translated to mean “relatives”. Within the WSÁNEĆ belief system, the Creator XALS created the Islands to take care of the people who lived in the region and there was an understanding of reciprocal obligation – that the people would take care of the Islands. Nick reviewed the marine reef net fishing tradition and the system of hereditary/family responsibility for maintaining reef net sites in the region. He also touched upon the history of the 1850s Douglas Treaties, noting the fundamentally different concepts of land “ownership” that were understood by the treaty counterparts.

A lively Q&A session was then co-hosted by Nick and Belinda, wrapping up when Nick’s nephew provided a reminder that stomachs were rumbling and snacks were being served. Hubertus and a crew of helpers did our community proud, offering fine Saturna hospitality for all participants.

Thanks are due to our Local Trust Committe Paul Brent, Lee Middleton and George Grams for their shared vision in initiating this workshop and through it, the start of a better relationship with our First Nations neighbours.

HÍSWƷE – George, Lee and Paul. Δ