

Getting to a Good Place in a Good Way: Meetings with the K'omoks First Nation

As you will know if you read this column regularly, relationship-building with First Nations has been a priority for the Islands Trust for a few years. Here's an update:

Earlier this year the Denman and Hornby Local Trust Committees (LTCs) received an invitation from the K'omoks First Nation (KFN) to a series of three intergovernmental meetings.

The invitation explained that the K'omoks are meeting with all or most local and regional governments in their core territory in order to deepen engagement, support better understanding of the treaty process, and share cultural knowledge.

The first meeting took place February 20 at the K'omoks Nation band office, a spacious, light-filled building featuring a beautiful traditional canoe in the foyer. Trustees and several Islands Trust staff members met with Chief Councillor Nicole Rempel; Councillors Melissa Quocksister and Josh Frank; Band Administrator Tina McLean; archeologist and ethnographer Dr. Jesse Moran; Assistant Treaty Negotiator Ron Frank; and Treaty Coordinator Fran Prince.

The meeting began with a ceremonial brushing—guests were brushed with cedar boughs as a welcoming ritual to help us bring our hearts and minds to the work of the day.

The goal of this meeting was “getting to know each other.” On behalf of the Islands Trust, I presented a slide show about our mandate and our work. The K'omoks representatives then took the floor to give a series of presentations.

We learned about K'omoks history, in particular the extensive use of Denman Island by First Nations, including several village sites, dating back thousands of years. Listening to the more recent history was not easy (even though the facts were not new to any of us): 50 - 90% of the population lost to smallpox, followed by residential schools, the Indian Act and the loss of territory.

Despite all this, the K'omoks people came together (the Nation is an amalgamation of various groups in the region) and survived, retaining enough traditional culture and values to support a variety of cultural revitalization initiatives, such as a language project, an environmental stewardship program, the carving and raising of totem poles throughout their territory, and more.

The K'omoks Nation today is active and organized, guided by their vision of being a prosperous and healthy community offering self-sufficiency to members, exercising their rights and title while respecting historical connections to land, resources, and one another. They are currently in the fifth stage (out of six) of treaty negotiation, a process that started over 20 years ago. KFN is hopeful that a draft treaty will be completed by late 2019. The draft would then be subject to a vote by KFN members. If it passes, it will be the 9th modern treaty in BC.

Our second meeting took place March 19. We were excited when we entered the building to see two totem poles, one intended for Denman and one for Hornby, lying in the lobby beside the canoe, in readiness for the pole-raising ceremonies which have taken place.

The goal was to have a deeper discussion of the issues that had arisen at the previous meeting. We sat in a circle instead of in rows, with no pre-set agenda. Topics included treaty lands (note that only Crown land, not private land, is involved in treaty negotiation); aquaculture; marine stewardship; jurisdiction of marine areas including the Comox Estuary; the importance of creating Islands Trust policy to guide our relationships with First Nations; and more.

The Denman and Hornby LTCs talked about our interest in hosting K'omoks members and/or Dr. Morin at public educational events on Denman, and in learning Indigenous place names related to the islands we live on. Both these suggestions were met with interest; however, the K'omoks Nation has an ambitious workload and limited capacity, which means we need to be patient.

The biggest message that I took home from this meeting was the value of meeting face-to-face and getting to know each other. This was echoed by all the people attending the meeting. This is what the title of this article, which I was told is a traditional Coast Salish saying, is meant to reflect—the value of putting time, energy, and good will towards a good process in everything we do.

The third meeting, which will span two full days and include representatives from a number of local and regional governments, is scheduled for May 10 and 11. Watch this space for the next update.