SGAANG GWAILI
Exploration Guide
Gwaii Haanas
National Park Reserve • Haida Heritage Site
You can help protect SGaang Gwaii by remembering the following:

- Please stay on the trails. Cultural remains such as poles and longhouses are fragile. It is easy to damage these and other cultural artifacts by wandering off the trails and stepping on them without realizing it.

- Do not enter caves. You are welcome to view them from the outside but entry is prohibited to ensure your safety and out of respect for the Haida. Many caves were used in the past for habitation and burial purposes by the Haida.

- Watch wildlife from a respectful distance.

- Burrow-nesting seabirds have colonized this isolated island to avoid disturbance. They are susceptible to human activity—particularly physical disturbance of their habitat and sensory disturbance (lights, noise) of the birds themselves. For the protection of the seabirds, overnight mooring is not permitted. You may moor your vessel while visiting SGaang Gwaii during daylight hours. Keep to the trails to avoid damaging seabird burrows.
The “watchmen” are three carved human figures wearing high hats, seeming to peer out towards the horizon from their lookout atop some Haida poles. These figures represent actual watchmen who were strategically located to be able to detect and to alert the village of an enemy or any other happenings of which he should be aware. This symbol was adopted by the Haida to represent the Haida Gwaii Watchmen Program.

The Haida people, in recognizing that the natural and cultural worlds cannot be separated and that the protection of Gwaii Haanas is essential to sustaining Haida culture, initiated the Watchmen Program as hosts to protect-culturally significant sites. The Watchmen’s presence is a critical element in protecting sensitive sites and in educating visitors. Heed their advice during your visit—their knowledge of SGaan Gwaii will add to your understanding of this place; and their direction will help you to avoid damaging its unique features. However, please remember that the Watchmen are not tour guides.
WELCOME TO SGAANG GWAI\n
SGaang Gwa\i (Wailing Island) is located off the west coast of Kung\hit Island at the southern extremity of the Haida Cwai\ archipelago. Its Haida name comes from the sound made by 30-40 foot waves as they surge through a hollow of a reef near the island—a sound like a woman wailing.

The Gangi\d Haida chose this place to live because of its sheltered bays and the richness of the surrounding lands and wa\ters. Nan Sdins—the last village on S\Gaang Cwai\ to be occupied on a full-time basis—was a winter village situated on the leeward side of the island, shielded from the ocean by a small islet. Once known as S\Gaang Gwai\ 'Unagaay (Wailing Island Town), it lost this identity when European traders called the village after its Chief. Thus, S\Gaang Cwai\ 'Unagaay became known as "Ninstints"—a mispronunciation of "Nan Sdins," the village Chief of the time. The name translates as "The One Who is Two," a name that reflected that the bearer was so great that he was equal to two men.

Nan Sdins is a site sacred to the Haida. They consider this place more than a village site—here lie the remains of their Haida ancestors; here reside their spirits. Between 1790 and 1890, several thousand Haida died on Haida Cwai\—cut down by epidemics introduced when they made contact with the Europeans and against which they had no defense. On S\Gaang Gwai\, many hundreds are buried—in caves, in mortuary poles, and in the earth. As you walk the paths of this island, remember that you are walking among these spirits and that this place is sacred ground.
PROTECTED FOR THE WORLD

Nan Sdins is the most important village site connected to the ways and culture of the southern Haida known as the Ganxiid. The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recognized the national historical significance of this place and designated it as a national historic site in 1981. In the same year, UNESCO granted the island World Heritage Site status, reflecting its importance to the global community. The village of Nan Sdins represents the only example in the world of the remains of a traditional Northwest Coast First Nations village site, complete with standing poles and the remains of massive cedar longhouses. Here, evidence of human occupation and use remains in the form of caves, middens, upright and fallen poles and a few standing longhouse posts, house pits and beams.

A CULTURE SHAPED BY NATURE

Just as the land and the sea have shaped the Haida culture as a whole, the natural features of SGaang Gwaai have shaped the lives of those who have lived here for millennia. The waters surrounding the island are rich with nutrients welling up from the deep Pacific. Large populations of plankton thrive on these nutrients.
and, in turn, become food for the shell and fin fish which are in their turn fed on by birds and mammals. The Haida are inextricably linked in this circle of life.

SGaang Cwaii consists of one larger island and 27 small islets. The main island is made up primarily of Triassic age volcanic rock, seen at the surface as a series of ridges and knolls. Toward the coastline of the island, the rock formations create an alternating series of bays and rocky outcrops and also surface to create small reefs and islets offshore—excellent habitat for the sea lions and seals hunted by the Ganxid Haida. Much of the remaining coastline consists of a series of undulating ridges and exposed grassy knolls with a number of small cliffs facing the sea. These cliffs and the higher 30–40 m cliffs along the southwest side of the island could be used as lookouts and were part of a natural defense of the island against enemies. As you enter the forest from the beach, there is evidence of old shorelines in the form of cliffs and surge channels—the ground you’re walking on was once below the surface of the ocean.

The isolation of this island group and the absence of mammalian predators make SGaang Cwaii an incredibly important seabird nesting area. Despite its small size, it supports amazing numbers of seabirds—over 40,000 breeding pairs of 10 different species. Seven species nest on the main island, of which the Rhinoceros Auklet (20,600 pairs) and Cassin’s Auklet (8,000 pairs) are most numerous. Their abundance and predictable behaviour during the breeding season (March-September) made them an easy source of food for the Haida. SGaang Cwaii also supports 16 species of forest songbirds as well as bald eagles, peregrine falcons, sharp-shinned hawks and saw-whet owls.

The size of the island and its isolation from other islands have had other effects. Smaller, more remote islands typically support fewer species due to the distance over which animals and seeds must travel to colonize them. SGaang Cwaii is known to support only two land mammals—the deer mouse and river otter. Two species of marine mammal—pacific harbour seals and Northern sea lions—haul out on the rocky islets.
THE **GANXIID HAIDA**

Haida oral tradition and recent studies speak of more than 10,000 years of occupation of Haida Cwaii. For millennia, these sea-going people have traveled around these islands, over to mainland, and at least as far south as California in their large, distinctive canoes.

The people of **S̱Gaan̓ Gwa’i** are of a Haida sub-group called the **Ganxiid Haida** — remembered today as some of the fiercest Haida of Haida Cwaii. The records of Europeans in the 1700s indicate that the **Ganxiid Haida** were living in at least two dozen towns in the southern part of the islands. The history of the winter village of Nan Sdins extends back in time at least 2,000 years, and possibly much longer. It once had 20 houses and a population of approximately 300. Some houses could often shelter up to 30 or more individuals. The people, poles and houses at Nan Sdins include those of the original town of **S̱Gaan̓ Gwa’i Illnaa Ḵay** and other lineages/families who gathered there for the winter, or who moved from other villages over time.

First encounters with European traders in the late 1700s were peaceful but in 1791, the massacre of about 50 Ganxiid Haida by the English sea captain John Kendrick and the crew of the ship *Lady Washington* touched off a succession of retaliatory raids and killings which continued until 1795. But by far the deadliest blow from contact with Europeans was the series of smallpox epidemics and other diseases — beginning in the 1830s and recurring periodically throughout the 19th century — that decimated the Haida population. The death of the majority of **Ganxiid Haida** from the epidemics reduced the population of Nan Sdins to the point that it was no longer viable as a permanent settlement after the 1880s. By 1884, the survivors were gradually migrating north, eventually settling in Skidegate.
HAIDA LINEAGES

Haida divide themselves into two groups or moieties: the Ravens and the Eagles. The moieties function primarily for the regulation of marriage and the succession of rights and property. All marriage partners have to be chosen from the opposite moiety: if a man is an Eagle, his wife and children are Ravens. Each moiety is in turn subdivided into numerous smaller and more localized groups or lineages. Descent is determined matrilineally — through the mother's line. Therefore, it would be a chief's sister's son (his nephew) who would be first in line to inherit his chieftainship, rather than his own son.

Early histories of SGang Gwaii say that the ruling village Chief at the time of European contact was Koyah (a mispronunciation of "Xoyah", meaning "raven"). In the last years before the Canxixid people moved north, the leadership of the village of SGang Gwaii had passed to a chief of Eagle lineage named "Nan Sdins". The population of Nan Sdins village itself comprised several lineages, including families who had moved to SGang Gwaii following the devastating impact of the epidemics.

Each lineage measured its wealth by the breadth of its access to such things as hunting lands and fishing streams, berry-picking areas or stands of fine timber. Right of access, not only to natural resources but to the supernatural as well, could be traced through a lineage’s ancestry and history. Incorporeal wealth such as dances, songs, crests and names handed down through the lineage were jealously guarded. The wealth of the individual was measured not by accumulation, but by distribution of property.

VILLAGE LIFE

Nan Sdins was primarily a winter village. From the spring into fall, families went to their various hunting, fishing and food gathering territories where they began preparing for the winter ahead. In the surrounding waters and on nearby rocks and islets, seals and sea lions were hunted. Cod, halibut and other marine life were harvested, and elaborate fish weirs provided all the salmon needed. The forest provided a bounty of food, medicine and the raw materials to build longhouses and craft the tools and housewares of everyday life.
NAN SDINS VILLAGE MAP

Legend

M  Memorial Pole
X  Mortuary Pole
MH Mortuary House
s  Shaman Mortuary
MA  Crest Figure

Houses in the Village

House 1: People Think of This House Even When They Sleep Because the Master Feeds Everyone Who Calls
House 2: Cloudy House
House 3: Thunder Rolls upon it House
House 4/5: Crease House

House 6: House 1
House 7: No nam
House 8: No nam
House 9: No nam
House 10: People
House 11: Driving
nat is Always Shaking

House 12: Mountain House
House 13: No name recorded
House 14: No name recorded
House 15: No name recorded
House 16: No name recorded
House 17: Raven House

Wish to be There House
Weasel House
In the winter months, the families would regroup at Nan Sdins. Potlatches and ceremonial feasts would be held. The potlatch tradition is one that confirms or asserts the status of the individual or commemorates important events: raising of a pole, building of a house, naming a chief's successor, marriages, and the like. Food and gifts are presented to guests in payment for witnessing the event. Songs and dances specific to each occasion were important parts of these gatherings.

In combination with the summer harvests from land and sea, SGaang Cwaii and surrounding areas provided almost all that was needed for everyday life. There was good shelter, and a water source running through the village, dammed to form a reservoir. Native crab apples — and apples from a single, introduced apple tree—added variety to the diet. Potatoes, acquired through trade routes from Southern tribes, were readily adopted as a staple food and as a trade item. The potato patch located at the south end of Nan Sdins village was quite large and productive. Today it is still visible but overgrown with grass.

The oceans and forests of SGaang Cwaii provided an abundance of plants used for food, medicinal, practical or spiritual purposes. Berries, ferns, mosses, roots, leaves, bark and stalks all were used. Berries were picked and mashed into cakes, then dried and stored in boxes or preserved in eulachon grease in watertight boxes. Roots yielded medicines or were eaten. Certain leaves were used for storing or cooking foods. Some barks were used for medicine or eaten raw. Although the forests of SGaang Cwaii provided these riches, the young age of the forest — a result of repeated blowdowns caused by the exposed nature of the site— meant that the large cedars in the quantities required for crafting houses, canoes and monumental poles would have been harvested from the more plentiful cedar stands on Moresby or Kunghit Islands.

The forests of SGaang Cwaii are a typical mix of Sitka spruce, western hemlock and western red cedar. Spruce is plentiful near the shore, especially along the more exposed
west coast. Hemlock and red cedar are more abundant inland. Behind the village of Nan Sdins, there is a large uniform stand of younger cedar and hemlock that extends almost halfway across the island. It is probably the result of tree clearing by the villagers for firewood and other uses.

Because resources were so rich and food could be stored, there was plenty of time for craft, play, and exploration. Women gathered bark to make clothing, baskets, rope and other useful items and were known to take part in trade. Men traded, carved, and painted artistic designs on their work and on the items made by women. These are just some of many activities that went on.

In general, Haida children began learning their life skills at an early age. Babies were dipped into the ocean before their eyes could open after birth, to keep the Haida people strong. As they grew older, they played games that taught them skills and allowed the elders to watch and observe which child excelled at what. Some children were born into hereditary positions, such as that of a chief. A child was raised from birth to be a chief when that was his destiny. A “historian” began at a very young age having to repeat word-for-word the histories of his people: the Haida had no written language; history was passed orally from generation to generation.
Frontal, memorial, and mortuary poles are the three main types of poles carved by the Haida. Each pole, with its representations of human and animal figures, tells a story associated with an individual or family lineage. Some of the Nan Sdins poles were removed from Sgäang Gwaíi to locations in Prince Rupert (1938), and Victoria and Vancouver (1957). At the time of their removal, it was believed that it was the right thing to do to help conserve the remnants of what was perceived as a dying culture. But the Haida culture is a dynamic and living culture and efforts are now underway to repatriate these poles as well as other cultural objects. Those poles, along with those remaining on the island, provide the most complete documentation of the historic sculptural traditions of the Haida.

**House Frontal Poles**

The most obvious and detailed of the three types of poles, each tells a story of a family’s history. Placed at the front of a house, a hole in its base served as the house entrance. There are no standing frontal poles left at Sgäang Gwaíi. They have either fallen over and returned to the earth, or were removed to museums. Frontal poles fell sooner than the other types of poles as the base was weakened by the hole cut through its base.

**Memorial Poles**

These poles were erected in memory of a deceased whose remains were deposited elsewhere or whose body was lost at sea. A single crest figure was carved at the base; at its top might be the figure of a raven or an eagle. In between these two figures, the pole might be left blank or be filled by potlatch cylinders. The number of potlatches hosted by the deceased during his lifetime were indicated by potlatch rings carved into the pole.
Mortuary Poles

A mortuary pole was the grave of a high status person. The pole, carved with the crests of the deceased, had a cavity at the top where the body of the deceased would be placed, inside a bentwood box. A plaque, usually with a painted or carved design on it, was placed in front of this cavity to cover it from view. A board would be placed on top to keep rain out, and rocks placed on top of the board to stop the winds from blowing it away. Mortuary poles are considerably shorter than house frontal poles or memorial poles. They are carved with the stump of the tree serving as the top of the pole — inverted.

Top of mortuary pole.

Pole Conservation Project

The poles of Nan Sdins village will eventually return to the earth as part of the natural cycle of things. This is the way it should be. Haida elders have agreed, however, that the surviving poles of SGaan Gwaii may be stabilized to delay this inevitable fate. This is a formidable challenge. Conservation actions are guided by the principles that the least intrusive measures will be used to extend the life of the poles, and no action will be taken that is not reversible. The objective of conservation measures is to keep the poles standing as long as possible; once down on the ground, they deteriorate quickly.

The poles make ideal hosts for tree seedlings as well as salal bushes and other vegetation. Much of the damage suffered by the surviving poles was caused by this vegetation. The environment itself has been enlisted as a primary and self-sustaining agent for effective conservation. Damaging trees
were removed from the immediate vicinity but enough were left surrounding the site to provide an adequate wind break. Ultraviolet rays from the increased sunlight reaching the poles destroyed many of the mosses and lichens which grew on them, and their bleached exteriors then became a hostile environment against further deterioration. The area was ditched to drain wet areas. Soil and organic material from around the bases were removed and replaced with inert beach gravel.

In 1995, following consultation with hereditary leaders, a decision was made to straighten several of the poles. No project like this had ever been attempted before. Three poles were straightened using a unique cage and cable system. A fourth pole, not strong enough to handle the stress of being straightened, was braced instead. Photographic records are being kept of all the poles to monitor their condition over time.

**HOUSE REMAINS**

The Haida built two types of houses. In one, the basic support structure consisted of two parallel round beams set across two interior pairs of uprights. The second type had six beams on the roof and used more elaborate joinery in its construction. This latter type of construction is unique to the Haida.

When a high-ranking chief had accumulated the wealth required to raise a house, he contracted people of the opposite moiety to assemble the materials required for construction. The Chief would oversee the entire building of his house. The scale of construction accomplished in a short time was seen as a direct reflection of the workforce the chief could muster—an indication of his prestige.

The plank walls on each house were moveable and could be used for other structures during the
summer camp months. The entrance into the house was usually through the frontal pole but there was often a back door for quick escapes or for removing the dead. A deep pit, descending in platformed stages from the outer walls towards the centre of a house, served as the ceremonial centre of a village. Usually the only house with this feature in a village was that of the village chief.

Today at Nan Sdins you can still see two obvious house pits, house-posts interlocked with gables, beams that once supported a roof but are now resting on the ground, and slight imprints in the ground from other long-houses.

RESTORING NATURE'S BALANCE

The thick understory of grasses, wildflowers and shrubs typical in coastal areas is mostly absent on SGang Gwaii. The forest floor is mostly bare soil or moss while the coastal bluffs are covered in hardy grasses and sedges. There are a few areas of thick salal and salmonberry, particularly along cliff edges on the east and west coasts. Huckleberry is scattered throughout the interior of the island.

However, much of the forest understory is virtually absent on SGang Gwaii as a result of the grazing and browsing of the Sitka blacktail deer population — a species introduced to Haida Gwaii in the 20th century. With no predators, the deer population ex-
ploded throughout the islands. Birds and other small animals which live in the understory were being affected. The deer were also damaging the cultural features of Nan Sdins by browsing on vegetation growing on the poles and by walking on downed or leaning poles to get at the vegetation. As part of an islands-wide research program into their impact on forest ecosystems in Haida Cwaii, deer have been eliminated from SGaang Cwaii.

Prior to their removal in 1998, a monitoring program was put in place to find out to what extent forest and shoreline vegetation would recover from decades of browsing by the deer. Shoreline communities are believed to have been particularly hard hit and to have lost many of the flowering plants and shrubs one would expect to find on SGaang Gwaii. Vegetation plots were established and detailed measurements are showing that there is a tremendous variety of plants on the islands in addition to the mossy cover common on the forest floor, although they are restricted to inaccessible cliffs or to the protection afforded by fallen trees or other obstacles. After only a short recovery time, it is becoming obvious that if deer are controlled, many species, both plant and animal, will return and thrive.
Checklist of Wildlife found on SGaang Cwaii

**Burrow Nesting Birds**
- Fork-tailed Storm-petrel
- Leach’s Storm-petrel
- Horned Puffin
- Ancient Murrelet
- Cassin’s Auklet
- Rhinoceros Auklet
- Tufted Puffin

**Surface Nesting Birds**
- Pelagic Cormorant
- Glaucous-winged Cull
- Pigeon Guillemot
- Oystercatcher

**Other Types of Birds**
- Bald Eagle
- Raven
- Chestnut-backed Chickadee
- Swainson’s Thrush
- Oranged-crowned Warbler
- Fox Sparrow
- Red Crossbill
- Pine Siskin
- Red breasted Sapsucker
- Northwestern Crow
- Varied Thrush
- Great Blue Heron
- Marbled Murrelet
- Winter Wren
- Hermit Thrush
- Townsend’s Warbler
- Saw Whet Owl
- Kingfisher
- Sharp-shinned Hawk
- Pacific Slope Flycatcher
- Brown Creeper

**Mammals**
- Sitka Deer
- River Otter
- Harbour Seal
- Northern Sealion
- Deer Mouse
“Humanity has a need for places to expand beyond the dimensions of the day-to-day grind and to fortify the body, mind and spirit — places for our ancestors and those that follow us. Cwaii Haanas provides people with such a touchstone....”

— excerpt from the Cwaii Haanas Strategic Management Plan

Cwaii Haanas is cooperatively managed by representatives of the Council of the Haida Nation and the Government of Canada sitting on the Archipelago Management Board (AMB). Together in consultation with local community and public interests, the AMB is working toward a management strategy which spells out common goals to protect the ecosystems and cultural heritage values of Cwaii Haanas for future generations.