

Research Links

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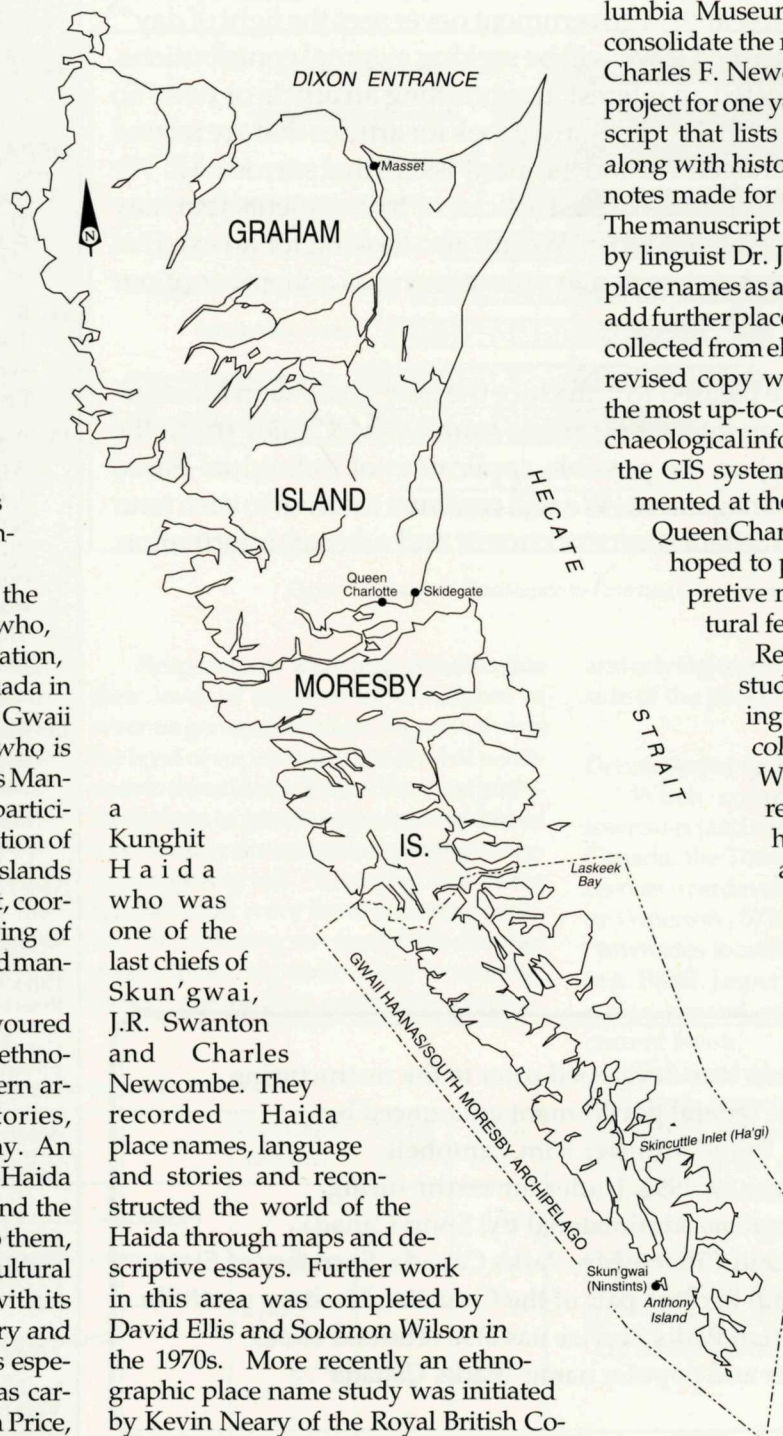
Place Names and Myths of Gwaii Haanas

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The Western Region's Gwaii Haanas Ethnography project has focused on the cultural environment of the southern Haida. Historically, two groups of Haida lived in the Gwaii Haanas area: the Kunghit, centred at Skun'gwai (Ninstints), and another group centred in the Laskeek Bay area. Although these two groups were distinguished linguistically and culturally, they merged during the latter 19th century as disease brought about the abandonment of all the southern towns and villages. Eventually the survivors coalesced with other Haida groups at Skidegate, which is now the principal town of the southern Haida.

The project has incorporated the aims and concerns of the Haida who, through the Council of the Haida Nation, are equal partners with Parks Canada in the research and conservation of Gwaii Haanas. In particular Guujaaw, who is also a member of the Gwaii Haanas Management Board, has been a major participant in the design and implementation of this project. The Queen Charlotte Islands Museum is another key participant, coordinating the retrieval and archiving of materials collected for the project and managing the research contracts.

To date the project has endeavoured to retrieve a broad spectrum of ethnographic data relating to the southern archipelago including songs, stories, genealogies and cultural geography. An important initiative has been the Haida place name study. Place names, and the traditional information attached to them, are a significant aspect of any cultural landscape, and in Gwaii Haanas, with its strong associations to Haida history and traditions, the place name study is especially critical. Important work was carried out in the 19th century by Tom Price,



a Kunghit Haida who was one of the last chiefs of Skun'gwai, J.R. Swanton and Charles Newcombe. They recorded Haida place names, language and stories and reconstructed the world of the Haida through maps and descriptive essays. Further work in this area was completed by David Ellis and Solomon Wilson in the 1970s. More recently an ethnographic place name study was initiated by Kevin Neary of the Royal British Co-

lumbia Museum. Neary attempted to consolidate the notes and maps made by Charles F. Newcombe. We assisted this project for one year and received a manuscript that lists 500 Haida place names along with historical and ethnographical notes made for each site by Newcombe. The manuscript is currently being revised by linguist Dr. John Enrico to render the place names as accurate as possible and to add further place name data, which he has collected from elders in Old Massett. This revised copy will be incorporated with the most up-to-date geographical and archaeological information and included on the GIS system currently being implemented at the Gwaii Haanas office in Queen Charlotte City. Eventually it is hoped to produce a series of interpretive maps illustrating the cultural features of the area.

Related to the place names study, John Enrico is reworking some of the Haida myths collected by James Swanton. Working from the original rendering of spoken Haida, he is translating the texts according to his own unsurpassed knowledge of the language. The republished Haida myths and texts will form an essential background for the cultural landscape of Gwaii Haanas. There are numerous story towns or mythical places throughout the islands, but some of the most important are in Gwaii Haanas. So many places relate

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