



Cultural resource management on reserve lands: making positives out of negatives

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In August 2011, an interdisciplinary team consisting of anthropologists, archaeologists, communications specialists, students and First Nations community members gathered for two weeks to undertake a unique excavation at Hagwilget Village. The team was tasked with bringing closure to an event that negatively impacted the community two years earlier: In October 2006, routine maintenance by BC Hydro revealed an old burial site above the Bulkley River at Hagwilget Village. Unearthed human remains were placed in a box, stored in the nearby church basement and, in 2009, moved to Hagwilget Cemetery. The site assessment removed any further human remains and, in October 2011, the team hosted a gathering to bring closure to the community and share the results of the excavation. Recovered artifacts were shared with the community and there was a ceremony that reunited any human remains with those in the Hagwilget Cemetery.

Hagwilget Village, which is jointly a Wet'suwet'en and Gitksan village, is a unique community with a unique history. There are two designated archaeological sites in Hagwilget Canyon and dozens more in the area. Several houses were located within the canyon, situated on either side of the river, as well as on the higher terraces surrounding the canyon. The terrace above the canyon has always been a known burial area. It's rumoured that Bini, a Wet'suwet'en prophet who was influential among northwest First Nations during recent history, is buried near the site.

This project goes far beyond any standard archaeological management practices, by recognizing and managing for the intangible aspects of CRM. Its interdisciplinary and inclusive approach assisted with the community's healing process and provided an invaluable learning experience for all those involved, including BC Hydro, other industry professionals, and students from Northwest Community College and UNBC. Local residents were involved as much as possible, and several Hagwilget community members were reconnected to their culture. This project is a good example of how an apparent negative situation was turned into a positive one.