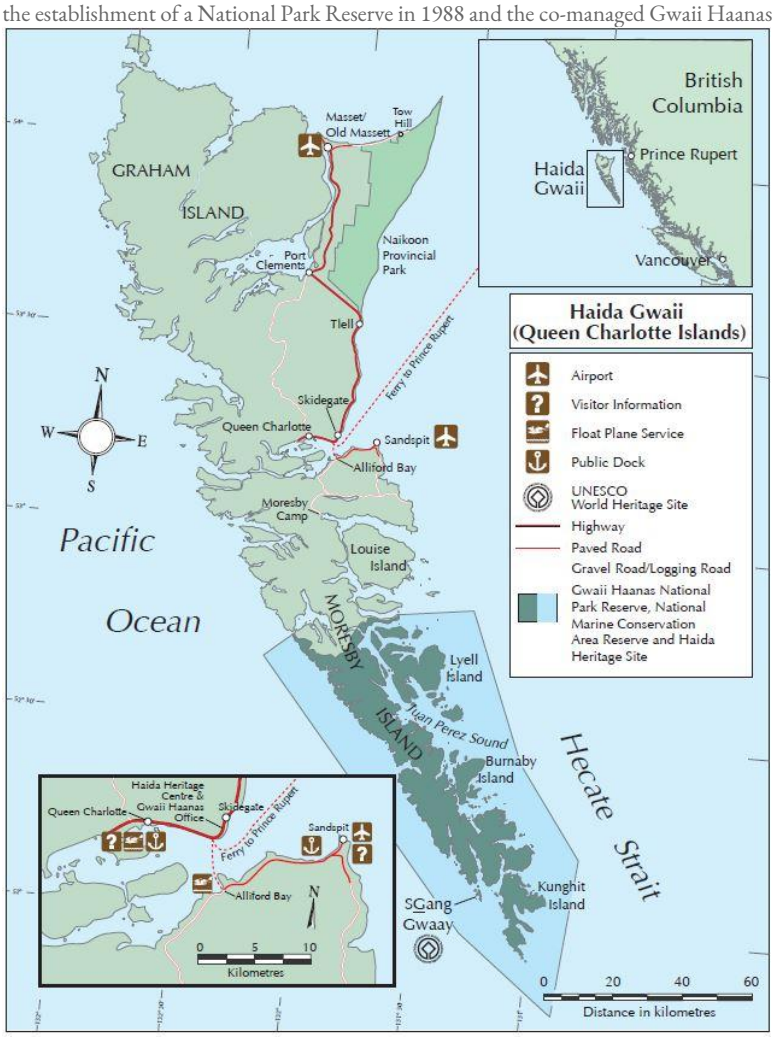
Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site

Alexandra Vlachos

Summary

A fierce land-use dispute evolved over the temperate rainforests of the Haida Gwaii Islands in British Columbia, Canada, in 1974. Indigenous and environmental protests, illegal road blockades, campaigning, negotiations, public hearings, and a fierce stand of the Haida First Nation led to the establishment of a National Park Reserve in 1988 and the co-managed Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site in 1993.



Map of Haida Gwaii (former Queen Charlotte Islands).

Click here to view Parks Canada.

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The Haida Gwaii archipelago, formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, lies off the remote edge of

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Print date: 21 November 2026 18:13:11

Canada's Pacific coast. The two main islands, Graham Island to the north and Moresby Island to the south, are surrounded by roughly 200 smaller islands. Home of the Haida First Nation and their ancestors, the sparsely populated islands are also known as "Canada's Galapagos" among nature enthusiasts, adventurers, kayakers, and ecotourists.

Haida indigenous life (and distinctive art) is based on the island's rich natural resources, especially wood (cedar, spruce), salmon, seafood, and edible plants. Western red cedar remains essential to construct longhouses able to resist the wet climate, and only the oldest trees are big enough to build large canoes. The enormous commercial interest of multinational logging companies had drastic impacts on Haida Gwaii's forests and provoked local opposition from the early 1970s on. According to Gary Edenshaw (or Guujaaw), president of the Council of the Haida Nation (CHN) from 2000 to 2013, the forest industry is responsible for the "biggest changes" in Haida lives and cultural activities.



Symbolic knots: The emblems of the Haida Nation and the Government of Canada on a boat in the harbor of Queen Charlotte City.

Photo taken by Alexandra Vlachos in Queen Charlotte City (Graham Island), Haida Gwaii, BC, Canada, in June 2011.

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Situated on the southern tip of Haida Gwaii, South Moresby—or Gwaii Haanas in Haida—covers an area of 1,495 km^2 and features old-growth stands of temperate rainforest and intertidal zones that are rich in marine life. An estimated 1.5 million seabirds nest along the shorelines and a variety of rare plants and endemic animal subspecies provide living evidence that at least some sections of Haida Gwaii remained ice-free during the last ice age and were thus part of the North Pacific refugium. Of particular historical importance are the cultural sites and remains of nineteenth-century Haida villages, which were abandoned during the devastating outbreaks of smallpox and tuberculosis that claimed the lives of an estimated ninety percent of the Haida people by the turn of the nineteenth century. The village of SGang Gwaay on Anthony Island, also known under its colonial name Ninstints, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981.

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The ruins of ten houses and 32 mortuary poles carved from western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) remain on the site of SGang Gwaay in Gwaii Haanas. In the 1930s and 1950s, fifteen poles were taken from the site and moved to museums on the mainland.

Photo taken by Alexandra Vlachos in SGang Gwaay Llnagaay (Anthony Island), Haida Gwaii, BC, Canada, in July 2011.

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The entire area of Gwaii Haanas is currently formally protected as the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve, and Haida Heritage Site. This detailed name hints at the preceding history of conflict over the area and mirrors political compromises, current joint management, and ongoing title claims.

In 1974, Guujaaw, then in his early twenties, drew a line on a Haida Gwaii map, calling for no more industrial logging south of this line, which was just north of Lyell Island on South Moresby Island. The message of the charismatic Haida leader gained quick support from other members of the Haida Nation, visiting wilderness enthusiasts, and environmental groups. In 1987, after 13 years of controversy, road blockades, negotiation, public hearings, and campaigns, logging finally ended with the federal-provincial (Canada-BC) agreement, which paved the way for protecting South Moresby under the Federal National Park Act in 1988.

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During the summer months Haida guides and guardians known as Watchmen live on five old Haida village sites inside and near the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve, and Haida Heritage Site. The Watchmen care for and protect the sensitive sites by welcoming all arriving boats and educating visitors.

Photo taken by Alexandra Vlachos in Gwaii Haanas (South Moresby) Haida Gwaii, BC, Canada, in July 2011.

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While park supporters celebrated a victory, the Haida, who had led and dominated the fight for Gwaii Haanas, and had seen many of their people arrested for blocking the logging road on Lyell Island during the 1985 peak of the conflict, saw the park as an exercise of yet another form of postcolonial state power: "We didn't stand on the line on Lyell Island to have a national park shoved down our throats," declared CHN president Miles Richardson: "Our objective—preservation—has been won. In the meantime, it's our responsibility to manage South Moresby. Anything they [Parks Canada officials] do, they do with our consent. It's that simple." (Miles Richardson cited Gill 2009, 156.)

It was not that simple, but the Haidas' rhetoric, power, and permanent engagement proved effective: In 1993, Canada and the CHN signed the Gwaii Haanas Agreement, turning South Moresby into the first National Park Reserve and Heritage Site, leaving open the legal question of land ownership while setting the seal on mutual goals and government-to-government joint management.

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In an isolated location, the fundamental sense of place, community, and collective identity carried significant weight. Even vehement opponents to the park eventually came to terms with Gwaii Haanas, and most stood together in the subsequent protest against logging on Graham Island in 2005 and against the proposed Enbridge pipeline today. Compared to similar forestry conflicts in British Columbia, Gwaii Haanas is exceptional for the indigenous presence and leading role of the Haida. From the start the Haida used negotiation, blockading, and strategic alliances with environmentalists and politicians, without being subordinated by Western values and colonial bureaucratic structures. Using versatile and creative forms of expression, the Haida continuously declared their strong cultural connection and legal claim to the land and waters of Haida Gwaii.

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Related links:

- Parks Canada - Gwaii Haanas
  http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/bc/gwaiihaanas/natcul.aspx

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Alexandra Vlachos is an environmental historian focusing on natural resource conflicts, aboriginal land claims, indigenous knowledge, and co-management of protected sites and national parks. She holds a degree in contemporary history from the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), and a Ph.D. in history from the University of Bern (Switzerland). In her PhD-thesis (manuscript in preparation) she examined the South Moresby Controversy from 1974 to 1993 that lead to the establishment of the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. Her approach was one of narrative networks, exploring the stories, arguments, and perceptions of the involved actors. Her current postdoc project focuses on a comparative environmental history of jointly-managed protected areas with indigenous involvement in the settler societies of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.
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