



Cave Calamity

By Briony Penn
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Better consultation process needed for first nation sites

If you blow it up, then you can study it. This seems to be the thinking that led to the destruction of a first nations sacred cave on land owned by Bear Mountain Resort last week.

Cheryl Bryce, land manager of the Songhees First Nation-the group spearheading the attempts to save the sacred cave and other cultural sites of significance on Spaet Mountain (also known as Skirt Mountain, part of the Bear Mountain Resort)-has doubts as to whether the two-week truce and attempts to negotiate differences with developers will be productive until the consultation process improves between all parties, especially government.

Bryce had been previously banned by Les Bjola, Bear Mountain Resort project developer, from walking on the mountain to monitor and identify cultural sites of significance. "Part of this ban I think was because of my feedback [on the Archaeological Impact Assessment process]," says Bryce. "I have always had concerns from day one. When I did receive any information I would give comments and shortly afterwards the information dwindled."

Requests to meet with the consulting archaeologists-hired by the developer and Langford mayor Stew Young-were refused. They wanted an agenda that would be given to Bjola first to approve. A critical November 3 on-site meeting, which laid out a methodology that would essentially destroy the cave while looking for archaeological evidence, had no first nation representative present.

Bryce had previously made recommendations to the provincial government's Archaeology Branch and consulting archaeologists to use Best Management Practices (BMPs) when it came to sampling in caves-including using an experienced caving expert to assist sample collection without damaging the cave. These BMPs were not taken up and no explanation given as to why not.

This, Bryce says, may well have avoided the removing of the cave roof or at least redirected the discussion towards mechanisms for protecting this culturally significant site. When both Bryce and Wendy Edwards, Tsartlip lands manager with the Archaeology Branch, raised questions, Bryce states that, "it took a long time to meet and we had to provide a justified reason for meeting with them." But when the Archaeology Branch confirmed the destruction of the cave was going ahead, Bryce led a protest to block the blasting of the cave roof.

During the protest, Bryce says she experienced aggressive behaviour and racist remarks from the developer's staff. "Our field assistants safety could be at risk when going back to finish the archaeological impact assessments (AIA)," she says.

Bryce highlighted a number of issues, including better enforcement of the B.C. Heritage Act by the Branch, the need for a policy review since development rights are put before those of the first nations, and the ethics that are used by the Branch and consulting archaeologists. Finally, Bryce raises the point as to why these lands-which were once crown lands-were sold to the developer with no archaeological review and consultation. "A lot of issues were raised in our meeting at the Tsartlip longhouse, but most importantly is the underlying racism which needs to be dealt with now."

Government staff were unable to comment on the process as all communication on this issue is now being handled by Michael de Jong, the Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, who was unavailable for comment.