

THE BOARDWALK AND GRASSY BAY SITES: PATTERNS OF SEASONALITY AND SUBSISTENCE ON THE NORTHERN NORTHWEST COAST, B.C.

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Abstract

The northern Northwest coast has long been the focus of archaeological investigation, but while the material culture has been well documented, only recently has the time depth of exploitation and seasonality of coastal subsistence resources been investigated. Analysis was conducted of over 20,000 faunal specimens from the Boardwalk site, and over 2,000 specimens from the Grassy Bay site, both located on or near Prince Rupert Harbour, B.C. Analysis indicated that prehistoric subsistence patterns differ from those recorded for the Coast Tsimshian in historic times. Boardwalk was occupied back at least to 4200 BP, and was a large village with year-round occupation. Its inhabitants hunted a large variety of birds, and land and sea mammals. Grassy Bay was occupied from about 1615 to 620 BP, and was a predominantly seasonal summer camp, with inhabitants taking mainly the rhinoceros auklet, and in later levels, sea mammals. At about 1900 to 1600 BP, the appearance of the Grassy Bay site and at least two other Prince Rupert Harbour sites indicate an apparent population increase. These sites had a more seasonal subsistence focus than seen at Boardwalk. This trend towards more seasonal settlements apparently intensified, resulting in the large seasonal population movements recorded in historic times.

RÉSUMÉ

De nombreuses recherches, s'échelonnant sur une longue période, ont permis l'accumulation de connaissances sur la culture matérielle de la région septentrionale de la côte du nord-ouest. Par centre, l'étude de l'ancienneté de l'exploitation des ressources côtières ainsi que la détermination des saisons d'exploitation de ces ressources, n'est que récente. Nous avons analysé au-delà de 20,000 spécimens fauniques provenant du site Boardwalk et plus de 2000 spécimens provenant du site Grassy Bay, tous deux situés près de Prince Rupert Harbour en Colombie-ritannique. Nos études suggèrent que les schèmes de subsistance préhistorique diffèrent de ceux observés pendant la période historique chez les Tsimshians de la côte. Le site Boardwalk était un grand village habité à l'année longue et dont l'occupation monte à au moins 4200 BP. Les habitants chassaient une grande variété d'oiseaux et de mammifères terrestres et marins. Par ailleurs, le site Grassy Bay était un campement saisonnier habité surtout l'été et dont l'occupation date de 1615 à 620 BP. Les habitants y chassaient surtout le macareux rhinoceros et, d'après les couches plus récentes, les mammifères marins. L'apparition, entre 1900 et 1600 BP, du site Grassy Bay et d'au moins deux autres sites sur Prince Rupert Harbour indiquerait une croissance de la population. Contrairement au site Boardwalk, ces sites témoigneraient d'une exploitation plutôt saisonnière des ressources côtières. Cette tendance vers l'exploitation saisonnière alla en s'accroissant pour arriver aux grands mouvements saisonniers décrits pendant la période historique.

INTRODUCTION

The northern Northwest coast has long been the focus of archaeological investigations, beginning with limited surveying and excavation by Harlan I. Smith in the early 1900s, and by Philip Drucker in the 1930s (Drucker 1943, 1955). Drucker observed that the sites in the area did not

seem particularly rich. However, large-scale surveys and excavations by George F. MacDonald in the Prince Rupert Harbour area in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Inglis and MacDonald 1979, MacDonald 1969, MacDonald and Inglis 1981) contradicted Drucker's observation with the discovery of

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about 200 sites rich in artifacts and faunal remains. Over 40 shell midden sites alone are now known from the Prince Rupert Harbour area (Coupland *et al.* 1993:60). Furthermore, these investigations demonstrated that the ethnographically documented cultural and artistic wealth of historic Northwest coast aboriginal groups had considerable time depth, perhaps back to 2500 BP (MacDonald and Inglis 1981:52). MacDonald and Inglis constructed a cultural sequence divided into three periods with the oldest, Period III, from 5000 to 3500 BP; the middle Period II from 3500 to 1500 BP, and the most recent, Period I, from 1500 to 150 BP (MacDonald 1969; MacDonald and Inglis 1981:42-52). This tri-partite sequence was based primarily on the rich artifactual material recovered from the sites but also incorporated changes in house and village structure over time, including rapid midden build-up and presumed population increase in Period II. In part, because the amount of faunal specimens recovered from these sites was enormous (the Boardwalk site alone had over 20,000 specimens) and analysis was both time-consuming and expensive, the faunal material was only briefly referred to in MacDonald's sequence.

While contemporary northern Northwest Coast material culture has been documented for many years (Niblack 1890, Boas 1895), only recently has the time depth of exploitation and seasonality of coastal subsistence resources been investigated. Lack of pre-contact data has meant that historic subsistence patterns have been projected on to interpretations of past subsistence. In the areas historically occupied by the Coast Tsimshian, the traditional seasonal cycle - amalgamating in large winter villages on the coast while subsisting primarily on shellfish and stored foods, moving to the Nass River in early spring for eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) runs, and to the Skeena River in summer/fall for salmon (Mitchell and Donald 1988:310) - has been projected on to the prehistoric sites of this area, in lieu of evidence to the contrary (MacDonald 1969).

Recent excavations and reports from the

McNichol site (GcTo 6) in the Prince Rupert Harbour have allowed a more integrated interpretation of cultural and subsistence patterns for the northern Northwest Coast late in the prehistoric sequence (*circa* 1600 BP). A very low representation of avian and mammalian taxa (of the total faunal sample only 0.6% were bird and 14.6% were mammal) and large numbers of salmon remains led Coupland *et al.* (1993:71) to suggest both that McNichol did not completely fit the historical pattern, and that the prehistoric pattern may have been more variable than the historic one.

In this paper we publish the findings from analysis of the vertebrate fauna from the Boardwalk (GbTo 31) and Grassy Bay (GbTn 1) sites, located in the Prince Rupert Harbour area. With an extremely diversified fauna of over 22,000 remains, our analysis adds considerably to the database for Northwest Coast subsistence. Our findings support Coupland *et al.*'s (1993) suggestion that the prehistoric pattern is more variable than the reported historic one. We suggest that subsistence strategies have changed through time, and that the shifting subsistence patterns recorded during the historic period cannot be projected *in toto* on to all of the prehistoric record.

THE BOARDWALK AND GRASSY BAY SITES

Both the Boardwalk and Grassy Bay sites were excavated in the late 1960s as part of the National Museum of Man's (now Canadian Museum of Civilization [CMC]) North Coast Archaeological Research Project, directed by Dr. George F. MacDonald. The Boardwalk site was described by MacDonald as a winter village, due mainly to its large size and density of remains, while Grassy Bay was described as a seasonal camp (MacDonald and Inglis 1981). The Boardwalk site is located on Dodge Cove, on the northeastern shore of Digby Island, in Prince Rupert Harbour, while the Grassy Bay site is located on the northeast shore of Kaien Island, on Grassy Bay, facing Fern Passage, which connects to Prince Rupert Harbour (Figure 1). The

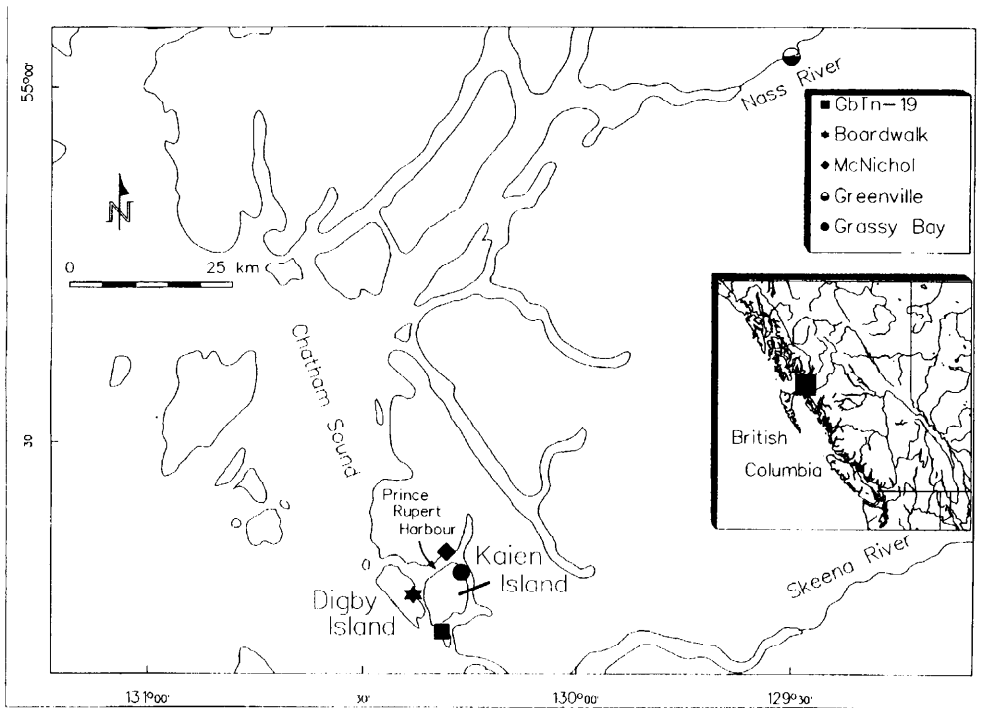


Figure 1. Map of Boardwalk and Grassy Bay sites on the northern Northwest Coast of British Columbia.

Prince Rupert Harbour area lies between the Skeena and Nass Rivers, both important waterways for the historic Tsimshian for fishing, for hunting and as trading routes. These rivers cut through the Coast Range Mountains, which extend down to the Prince Rupert Harbour area. Digby and Kaien Islands are part of the Coast Littoral Biotic Area (Guiguet 1965:25). The vegetation of the coastal area is lush, with the climax forest dominated by western hemlock, western red cedar, Sitka spruce, mountain hemlock, yellow cypress and grand fir. A wide variety of serial forests also occurs. The animal life of the Coast Littoral Biotic Area and adjoining Coast Forest Biotic Area is extremely diversified, with several distinctive subspecies (Cowan and Guiguet 1965:26). Thus, people living on this coast have access to marine animals as well as intertidal, riverine, and terrestrial animals. These will be discussed in the context of the fauna from the Boardwalk and Grassy Bay sites.

The Boardwalk site can be described as a

large shell midden containing house floor features and at least 94 human graves for 120 individuals (Cybulski 1992:224). There was an extensive beach in front of the site. A row of houses paralleled the shoreline and behind these was a shell midden in which humans were interred, occasionally accompanied by dog burials (Cybulski 1992, MacDonald and Inglis 1981). The overall site dimensions were 182.4 m by 60.8 m; deposits reached a maximum depth of 6.1 m (Inglis and MacDonald 1979) and in total approximately 1,041 cubic meters were excavated (Cybulski 1992:42). The excavation units were grouped into six areas, with Areas A and C on the back ridge, and the remaining four areas (B,D, [and E,F]) along the front (Figure 2). The back ridge was a shell-dump of up to two meters of whole and crushed shells with no evidence of house floors in the midden deposits, whereas the front row of compressed layers of shells or mixed shells and soil contained many house features (Cybulski 1992:43, MacDonald and