

COAST SALISH TRIBES OF THE SAN JUAN ISLANDS

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The San Juan Islands were used by the Coast Salish tribes mainly during the summer months and when large numbers of salmon were migrating. Many different tribes shared the bounty of the area during these harvests and used traditional summer encampments but maintained more permanent villages outside of the islands. These include the Saanich, Songish, and Sooke, whose main populations resided on nearby Vancouver Island. The Semiahmoo came from their permanent settlements on mainland British Columbia. Lummi, Swinomish, and Samish all had their strongholds on the mainland of Washington.

These tribes each spoke their own unique dialect but they were mutually intelligible and this is likely why they were able to peaceably share the San Juan Islands. When more distant tribes were encountered a sign language or pidgin vocabulary was used. Some visiting tribes, such as the Haida, came not to talk or trade but rather to steal goods and food, take local residents as slaves, and to kill for social status. The first military garrisons in the islands were established as a deterrent to these hostile northern tribes. Euro-American settlers encouraged the development of a widespread pidgin language for trading and negotiating marriages, treaties, etc. Most of the earliest pioneers owed their survival to the native wives they typically married.

In 1855, the Treaty of Point Elliott was signed to establish the reservation system. The Lummi believed the San Juan Islands to be their point of origin and knew Eastsound as Tsuhl-whee'k-seeng, a village with three longhouses, the largest of which was 200 by 60 feet. At least 10 other Lummi villages were occupied in the San Juans at the time, including P'kweekh-eel-wuhlh on San Juan Island, believed to be the original home of the Lummi and Songish through Sweh-tuhn, the first man.

Today, the Lummi, Samish, and Swinomish have fishing rights in the San Juan Islands, and all three maintain cultural and/or environmental resource programs on the islands. Lummi own Madrona Point on Orcas Island. Samish operate a salmon stream restoration program in the islands and have conducted archeological work on Lopez Island.



Bill James, retired coordinator of the Lummi language program at Northwest Indian College, once said, "(Our culture) is still alive. Our people do exist. We no longer physically occupy the islands, but our ancestry is there, the spirits of our ancestors are there. We relate to that area and the spirit of the place. People need to take the time to learn where the tribes and peoples are today and learn the real history of why we are where we are." Sharon Kinley, director of the Coast Salish Institute at Northwest Indian College, added, "We still remember the old people. We still hold ceremonies and rituals that honor our old people."

With such a long history of human habitation, it's not surprising that human remains are found about once a year in the San Juan Islands. Remains are left where they are if found in an area not frequented by people. Burial and cultural sites are protected by state and federal law.