
Sacred Cedar

A REPORT OF THE PACIFIC SALMON FORESTS PROJECT

The Cultural and Archaeological Significance of Culturally Modified Trees

by Arnoud H. Stryd, Ph.D.
Vicki Feddema, M.A.

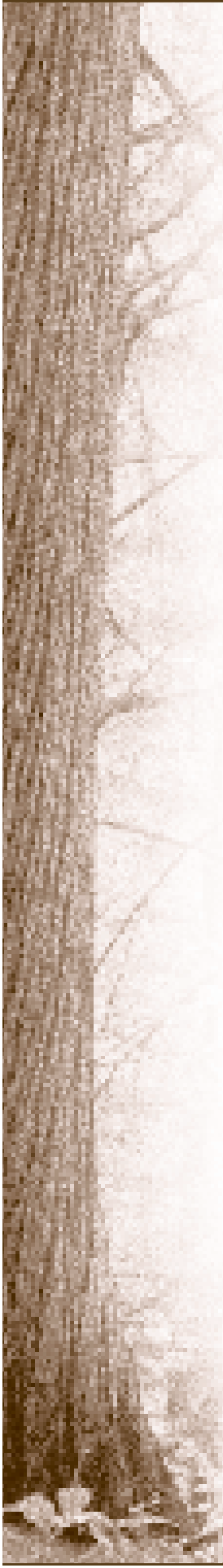
Executive Summary

Thousands of years before Europeans first glimpsed the rainforests of British Columbia's coast, Aboriginal Peoples were cutting and using the land's giant trees for shelter, transportation and ceremony. Today, some of these trees still bear the scars of aboriginal forestry practices. They are known as culturally modified trees (CMTs).

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Found largely in old growth cedar stands, CMTs are of great cultural and spiritual importance and provide anthropologists and archaeologists with valuable insight on traditional forest use. At one time these trees could be found all along the coast. Unfortunately, logging and human encroachment have destroyed most sites, making those that remain even more valuable.

The majority of CMTs are western red or yellow cedar, which are highly-prized for their limbs, bark, and wood that can be made into a wide variety of items, including canoes, housing materials, clothing, blankets, rope and many other goods. In fact, the cedar plays such a vital role in the lives and cultures of various Aboriginal Peoples that it became known as the “tree of life”. Other trees such as hemlock, fir, yew, alder and pine are also used, and modified, for a variety of purposes.

One of the most common types of CMTs are bark-stripped trees, which have had some of their bark removed, either in tapered strips or horizontal rings. The bark is then used for clothing, blankets, ropes and various goods. Another type of CMT is known as “aboriginally logged trees,” although not all have been cut down. Those that have been felled often consist of a stump or a log that bear distinctive marks of aboriginal logging techniques. Some of those that still stand may show signs of the initial stages of felling, but at some point have been abandoned. Others have had large planks removed for constructing housing and canoes.

These trees are of special importance to the descendants of those who created them. For many peoples, CMTs have spiritual significance, providing a link to their ancestry and a connection to the land. CMTs also constitute legal evidence in establishing Aboriginal Rights and Title. Using tree-ring dating, CMTs in BC have been dated back as far as 1137 AD.

In addition, CMTs are valuable to archaeologists, anthropologists and British Columbians. Studying CMTs can be done in a much less destructive and costly manner than traditional archaeological excavation, and their ability to be precisely dated allows researchers to link dates with technological innovations and establish when specific lands were occupied and used. Their visual nature also gives them high interpretive value and makes them ideal for teaching purposes. In addition, CMTs provide an important source for traditional woodworking techniques – often the only source for certain techniques.

For all of these reasons, CMTs in remaining old growth cedar forests need to be located and managed appropriately. They are a true archaeological treasure of the northwest coast rainforest – one that without protection could be lost forever.

The Authors

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Arnoud H. Stryd, Ph.D

Arnoud H. Stryd is the president of Arcas Consulting Archeologists Ltd. He directed the pioneering CMT studies on Meares Island in 1984 and 1985, and has been involved in CMT studies in Haida Gwaii and elsewhere on the British Columbia coast.

Vicki Feddema, M.A.

Vicki Feddema is a senior archaeologist with Arcas Consulting Archeologists Ltd.

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The David Suzuki Foundation 2211 West Fourth Ave., Suite 219
Vancouver, BC Canada V6K 4S2 E-mail: coast@davidsuzuki.org
Web: www.davidsuzuki.org T: (604) 732-4228 F: (604) 732-0752

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