

Snuneymuxw Lands Planning Project: A Journey Towards Rightful Stewardship

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in collaboration with the Snuneymuxw First Nation

Snuneymuxw First Nation (SFN) is currently developing a new Snuneymuxw Master Community Plan with the assistance of the Master of Community Planning (MCP) Program at Vancouver Island University (VIU). This plan is both a visioning exercise and a practical guide for all the lands and waters within SFN's jurisdiction and ownership, and includes detailed information on the cultural, economic, and environmental features or issues that tie to each parcel or area. The planning process is deeply rooted in SFN-guided research and the ancient wisdom of Snawayalth, the teachings that guide the Nation's laws, values, beliefs, spiritual practices, and principles that govern the relationship between the Snuneymuxw people, their territory, and each other. Importantly, this project also affirms the *Snuneymuxw Treaty* of 1854, reinforcing the Nation's ongoing commitment to preserving their rights and heritage.

*At the heart of the Salish Sea,
where the land meets the waters in
a natural harmony, are the lands
of Snuneymuxw people.*

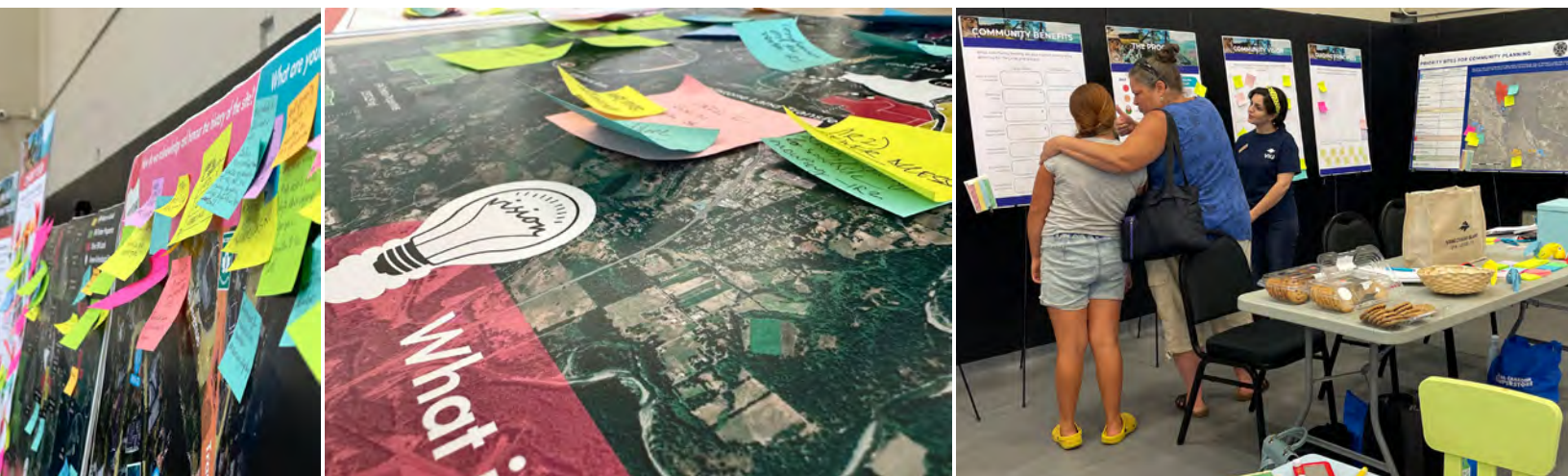
The Snuneymuxw First Nation are Coast Salish people whose territories span large areas of central Coast Salish lands on the eastern coast of what is now known as Vancouver Island, stretching over to the Fraser River across the islands and waters of the Salish Sea. Since the beginning, the Snuneymuxw People have lived in their ancestral territory, sustaining their lands, resources, and culture. At the early stages of colonial settlement, the Snuneymuxw People recognized that a treaty agreement was crucial to protect the lands and their ways of life. On December 23, 1854, the Snuneymuxw People entered into the *Snuneymuxw Treaty* of 1854, often referred to as the Trade and Commerce Treaty, to forever and always protect their villages, fields, waterways, and rights to hunting and fishing. However, despite ongoing efforts, the treaty was not honoured, leading to the wrongful displacement of the Snuneymuxw from their villages and lands. Their territory was appropriated for use by the Hudson's Bay Company, coal companies, and settlers, resulting in generations of struggle for the Snuneymuxw to date as they fought to have their rights and title recognized. Today, Snuneymuxw is one

of the largest nations in British Columbia with a population of approximately 2,000 people. However, the Nation has the smallest land base per capita due to these historical injustices. Many community members currently live off-reserve due to the limited land base. The Nation is actively working to expand the land base through reconciliation negotiations, fee simple purchases, leaseholds, partnerships, new additions to Reserve Lands, and other means with the hope that those currently living away can return home.

The years 2023 and 2024 marked significant milestones in the Nation's history as three culturally significant land parcels were regained by Snuneymuxw, reaffirming their role as the rightful stewards of these lands. Among these was the return of 102 acres of Kwula'xw Village lands along the Nanaimo River Estuary through a historic land transfer agreement with Seaciff Properties as part of the Sandstone Development in south Nanaimo. Additionally, 25 acres were transferred to the Nation, with an option to purchase another 150 acres. A further 194.6 acres of "Camp Nanaimo" was recently returned to the Nation as an Addition-to-Reserve. These former Department of National Defense lands were acquired through a landmark agreement with Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC). Lastly, 6.6 acres of Sxwayxum Village, formerly referred to as the Howard Johnson Hotel site, were jointly purchased by the province and Snuneymuxw. These efforts show the determination and ongoing commitment of Snuneymuxw's leadership to reclaiming their lands and preserving their heritage, while also reflecting the government's efforts toward meaningful reconciliation.

The project began with a series of initial scoping meetings between the Snuneymuxw leadership, key advisors, and the Master of Community Planning Program at Vancouver Island University. These gatherings laid the foundation for a comprehensive research and engagement strategy that would unfold over the next few years. It was anticipated that students would bring innovative ideas and energy to the project, as well as skills in research and





site design. Faculty were also involved in the project, contributing both their academic and professional expertise. This opportunity has created immense benefits for students through assisting in engagement events, project planning, and contributing to the drafting of the Community Master Plan. Additionally, students have reported that the experiential learning has been life changing as they learned about colonial practices, treaty processes, the impacts of legislation and regulations on Nations, and their role as future planners within these structures.

Methodology and Student Involvement

The lands planning process officially began in 2023, with a strong emphasis on engagement with the Snuneymuxw community. Central to this effort was ensuring that the voices of the current community were heard, while listening to the wisdom of the past, and considering the needs of future generations.

The initial phase involved a deep dive into existing literature, studies, plans, and documents to gather information on the lands and waters. Along with extensive materials from the Nation, the archives in Nanaimo and Victoria were visited to review historical documents, photographs, and maps and uncover the layers of the history of Snuneymuxw lands. Since understanding the land's history is essential for guiding planning activities, this approach aligned with the Snuneymuxw belief that “when you let the land lead, she will tell you what she needs.” This belief became the guiding principle of the project, ensuring that the future visions for these lands would be rooted in their wisdom and history.

Recognizing their role as settlers on Snuneymuxw lands, the VIU team adhered

to an “open heart, open mind” approach grounded in ongoing learning and deep respect. Additionally, as future planning professionals, it was crucial for students to reflect on their role in reconciliation and the vital need to decolonize planning practices.

The VIU team collaborated closely with the Nation and the Petroglyph Development Group (the Nation's economic development corporation) to create detailed mapping layers of all lands and waters under Snuneymuxw ownership and jurisdiction. With these maps in place, the team reached out to the community through a wide variety of tailored engagement methods, including community events, pop-up sessions, one-on-one conversations, and World Café-style discussions to gather insights on their visions and priorities for the future development and preservation of all Snuneymuxw holdings.

Student involvement was key to conducting this wide-ranging engagement process, and the students benefitted from gaining practical experiences on a real-world project. The students were also integral in the development of multiple conceptual development/protection scenarios for priority sites through an intensive design process. As noted by the students, there is no better way to learn than through hands-on involvement!

What's Next

The Snuneymuxw Community Master Plan is a living document and will be regularly updated to reflect evolving needs, opportunities, and new land additions. The project will also include a comprehensive land atlas that tells the story about the history and future potential of the lands and waters. This narrative will honour and continue the

Snuneymuxw legacy of learning from, caring for, and cherishing the blessings of their territory.

The MCP Program is deeply grateful to Snuneymuxw First Nation for this opportunity and hope that their efforts contribute to the achievement of the Nation's vision, goals, plans, and actions.

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This article was written in collaboration with and approved by Snuneymuxw First Nation.

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