



Camas growing on Mill Hill, SPAET

Restoring Camas and Culture to Lekwungen and Victoria: An interview with Lekwungen Cheryl Bryce

By Briony Penn
FOCUS MAGAZINE
June 2006

The winds are starting to pick up and we have one of the trickiest channels of water in the Salish Sea to negotiate in a small boat, where Juan de Fuca turns the corner into Haro Strait. The water churns and swirls as it is funneled between Ten Mile Point and Discovery and Chatham Islands, the traditional territory of the two young women in the boat, Cheryl Bryce and her sister Kathy. We are on our way on a routine site visit by the sisters as part of their management responsibilities. Cheryl is the first Lands Manager for the Songhees First Nations (Kathy is one her staff) and she is making waves restoring culture and landscapes that were lost not too long after Captain Vancouver took shelter at the very place we pull up< naming what he thought was two islands after his ships well over 200 years ago.

Cheryl reminds me that the process of decolonising starts with remembering the old names. "Vancouver didn't hang around long enough at Tlchess, (the Lekwungen name for Discovery meaning 'one island'), to see that it was all one big island at low tide." Lekwungen refers to the Salish dialect that is shared by seven family groups of the Victoria region. The two women are descendants of the family group Chekonein that occupied the lands and waters between Tlchess and Ten Mile Point before, as Cheryl says with a laugh, "the first big box store of the Hudson's Bay Company halted that way of life." We pull up at Tlchess just as low tide reveals that this is indeed one big and amazingly rich island< teeming with seabirds, sea mammals and budding camas meadows.

Cheryl has made a name for herself nationally in the last six years towards restoring aspects of the Lekwungen way of life and endangered ecosystems through reintroducing traditional camas harvesting. Camas, or kwetlal in Lekwungen, is the beautiful blue lily that can still be

seen blooming in April/May in quantity in Beacon Hill Park and Uplands Park. The bulb of camas, until 150 years ago, was the main starch food and export item of the people who occupied the territory that is now filled up with the city of Victoria, municipalities of Esquimalt, Saanich, Langford, Colwood, Metchosin and View Royal. The territory stretches west to Beecher Bay and east to the San Juan Islands and was famous for its camas fields which Captain Vancouver described upon his arrival in May of 1792 as a landscape almost as enchantingly beautiful as the most elegantly finished pleasure grounds in Europe diversified with an abundance of flowers. Cheryl points out that this enchanting landscape was only there by virtue of a lot of hard work by her female ancestors who owned and managed the camas fields through seasonal burning, weeding and harvesting on a sustainable scale. The only reason, they [the company] settled here was that we had done such a good job of keeping the soil rich.

We are heading out to Tlchess to monitor some of the work she has been working on, in conjunction with researchers at UVic, into the interdependent relationships between the harvesting and burning of the camas meadows, the health of that ecosystem and the health of that culture. Monitoring rare plants and invasive plants are one indicator. Tlchess that was inhabited by Lekwungen families until 50 years ago and is part of the small amount of Songhees reserve lands. It is not open to the public (except for the south east portion that is provincial park), since it is one of the few places where the membership can gather resources for food and medicines that aren't polluted or altered by invasive plants and where people feel safe to gather. Cheryl is no stranger to hostility shown native harvesters. She grew up accompanying her grandmother to gather bark for medicines in Beacon Hill Park early in the morning when no one would harass them and move them off. The Douglas Treaties were supposed to allow traditional harvesting of resources in their territory but in practice that has never happened or been acknowledged. Look at the Indian Act, Cheryl explains, "when they passed laws that it was illegal to leave the reserve without a pass, told what you can grow on the reserve, harvest off reserve and what you can purchase it was one more aspect of cultural genocide." It was illegal to gather traditional foods outside of reserve lands and yet the practice of gathering the foods, processing and eating them, as Cheryl pointed out, "were what kept us alive both from the perspective of diet and culture."

Cheryl, together with students and faculty in the Restoration of Natural Systems program, spearheaded an historic event to reverse this trend on lands outside the reserve when they invited Lekwungen families to harvest camas on UVic campus lands culminating in a pit roast and feast. On a glorious sunny day last July, elders and academics were building and tending the fire together, discussing the finer details for how to cook camas while students and the youth of Songhees were out digging for camas including Kathy's son Joshua. "The UVic harvest was amazing in that it was more than just restoring the ecosystem, but the effect it had on reviving cultural roles. I know from my own experience, how deeply you connect with the land but also with your family and friends that you are harvesting with." All of us that were there that day felt the deep reconnection between traditions and the land as we shared in the harvest and food that hadn't been gathered or eaten in this area in 150 years.

Cheryl is quick to point out that one of the big motivators behind the camas restoration

amongst her people has been a health one. With diabetes crippling around 60% of the membership on reserve, the need to find alternatives is mounting. The Songhees award-winning documentary that she produced along with a small crew in 2003, *Diabetes: Then and Now*, Cheryl raised awareness about the link of health to camas by looking at the nutritional aspects of this starchy crop. Camas is a wonderful form of starch because as you cook it the inulin breaks down so it is much easier on the body to digest than the potato. (Inulin is a starchy carbohydrate that breaks down into sucrose or fructose when cooked.) Cheryl spends a lot of time giving talks to both first nations and non-native school groups about the links between eating, ecosystems and culture. As we are walking across the island to inspect a new site, she casually happens to mention that all her educational work on restoration of camas is volunteer. She fits it in during evenings and weekends. Her daytime job, as Lands Manager, is much too busy to take on the educational work as well. "It seems strange to say that because it is was our ancestors role, now I spend more time at a desk and meetings as my role as a Lands Manager. Some how that needs to be redefined."

The Songhees Reserve is one of many first nations that are adopting the Land Code which is a long and complicated federal process, whereby the first nation takes back the authority, management and responsibility of reserve lands from Indian Affairs. By the time the process is finished, which has occupied all three of Cheryl's years on the job so far, Songhees will once again be able to make their own laws and policies and land use plans surrounding heritage, environment and marital issues. She was delegated the task of overseeing the process of drafting the agreements and communicating concerns back and forth between the federal agents, Chief and Council and the membership both on and off reserve. A full time job in itself. She is also learning how to use computer mapping technology to record and map traditional uses of the land. A new plotter has just arrived to her office at the edge of the Songhees reserve before our journey to the Islands. "Now I have to find time to learn how to use it!" she exclaims.

Another major chunk of her time goes to dealing with current issues concerning development of land both on reserve and in her Nation's territory. This means she has to respond to increasing queries about development around archaeological sites, species at risk, protected areas and destruction of traditional harvesting areas, etc. She has only her sister as staff and funding based contractor workers, but is hoping to build up more capacity as the Songhees take on responsibility of the lands. I ask her about some of the recent issues she is dealing with and she groans and says Bear Mountain, or what used to be called Skirt Mountain. Cheryl says, "It is horrible to see how much they have destroyed and trees they have taken down. They haven't consulted with us. They haven't done much to protect the species at risk or even an archaeology impact assessment. Lots of big arbutus trees, and possibly culturally modified trees have been destroyed. It just amazes me what they want to eliminate, such as that beautiful canyon, and the wildlife there will be totally displaced. I don't think there is any respect or values for any of this by the developer. He just walked away and said that to protect them is going to cost too much money."

Cheryl is passionate about the increasing role that a raised awareness about native food systems could play in protecting these landscapes and revitalising culture, not just her own

but redefining ours as well. Her own awakening came as the result of a dream she had over 11 years ago. She envisioned fields of these blue flowers and didn't know what it all meant. "I feel funny saying that part dream," laughs Cheryl as she is a consummate professional. It was only as a student and contract employee of her nation in doing research she came across work by ethnobotanist, Dr. Nancy Turner of UVic, that she began to discover the relationship Songhees women had forged with the plant for thousands of years. Nancy Turner connected her with, graduate student at the time, Brenda Beckwith who was studying the relationship between ecosystem health and the role of digging and burning camas. Cheryl and Brenda combined their efforts and work together on their projects. As we crawl around the camas meadows on hands and knees looking for rare plants on Tlchess, Cheryl points to the places where she and Brenda harvested with Songhees members and where the monitoring plots were placed to determine impacts to plant diversity and vigour. Cheryl remarks, "Brenda and I realized that we were working towards very similar goals. I wanted to bring harvesting sites and traditional food such as camas back to what it used to be like as well as getting members out to take part. It was our ancestors that managed this landscapes and we need to take that role back." Beckwith's thesis examined the ecological effects of those social relationships.

One of the reasons we are out looking for species at risk and invasives is that this is another responsibility of hers as land manager. Because reserve lands are deemed federal lands and the federal Species at Risk Act only applies to federal lands, a legal onus falls on first nations to protect these species on their reserve lands. "The Species at Risk Act is a double-edged sword," explains Cheryl as we observe species that have long been wiped out of Victoria from urbanization and now only exist on Tlchess and Trial Islands. "On the one hand, the Act provides for some financial assistance in research and monitoring for species at risk, but on the other hand, the Act imposes an unfair burden of conservation on lands that are already too small for the growing populations. There are huge demands for housing and other land uses and not enough reserve land to accommodate all our members," explains Cheryl. "Reserves are becoming the de facto greenbelts for urban areas, Five percent of Canada lands are reserve and approx 3% are parks which clearly isn't fair because neither the province nor the municipalities do anything to protect species at risk. I believe that the Act should apply across the board to all levels of government and that this could become a way of protecting both harvesting sites and showing the relationship between harvesting food sustainably and maintaining species at risk habitat. Garry oak and camas meadows are one of the most endangered ecosystems in Canada, full of species at risk, ironic since it is a landscape that is dependent on the traditional work of Songhees women. Nobody looked twice at us women weeding away in meadows until we started burning or they wanted the land. Two hundred years after Vancouver, there is still a group of women crawling around on hands and knees in the lush green coastal meadows pointing out certain plants and weeding others. The challenges to manage these ecosystems are as great as ever."

Understanding complex ecological relationships is an onerous responsibility for someone whose training is in cultural anthropology not in ecology. One of Cheryl's long-term projects is to get her diploma in the Restoration of Natural Systems Program at UVic, which provides a means for busy practitioners in the field to update their credentials in restoration work. Her story of bringing together cultural and ecological aspects of restoration is featured in a new

cutting-edge book on ecosystem restoration called *Nature by Design*, by UVic professor, Dr. Eric Higgs. Eric was one of the professors on that hot summer day at the UVic harvest, revelling in the renaissance of culture and ecosystems learning as it really should be.

In the Past

The Lekwungen people have gathered, harvested, and prepared camas for thousands of years. The Lekwungen territory was known for their camas meadows. They were large areas that covered most of what is know today as Victoria. Camas is a versatile plant that can grow in many different terrains. However, the naturally flat landscape in various areas in Lekwungen territory was excellent for harvesting. In the past, the camas meadows were owned by certain families, women. Lekwungen Women sculptured the camas meadow landscape with traditional management. This included weeding, seeding, harvesting and burning.

At Present

At present, Cheryl has been regenerating traditional harvests and pit cooks with her community for over 6 years. She has been involving the youth in harvesting camas and preparing the traditional pit cooks. Youth from various nations and all ages have shown great interest in camas harvests and pit cooks. The camas meadows can be found in various areas in Victoria. It doesn't compare to historical landscape the Lekwungen managed. Today they are in great decline due to urbanization, pollution and lack of traditional management.

Future

"The Lekwungen people will continue to harvest and prepare the camas for many years to come. Its importance is vital to our history, traditions and future roles and responsibilities. There is still so much work that needs to be done with regards to camas and cultural restoration. There is a growing need to have access to traditional food in Lekwungen Territory. Even more so to environmentally safe food to consume. Cultural roles and practices need to be included in the restoration of these ecosystems."