C.J. Taylor

Ninstints Pole Conservation Project

Archaeologists Daryl Fedje and Tina Christianson excavate base of pole. Rolf Bettner photograph.

In September 1995 a joint Parks Canada/Haida team carried out urgent conservation on four standing poles at Ninstints (also known as Ninstints National Historic Site and Anthony Island World Heritage Site) in Gwaii Haanas National Park/Haida Heritage Site in the Queen Charlotte Islands. This involved excavating three mortuary poles and one memorial pole that were in danger of falling over. The three mortuary poles were moved to a vertical position while the memorial pole was supported in its leaning position with log braces.

It is usual to assume that native and institutional approaches to conservation of aboriginal heritage—sites and artifacts—would differ. In the case of Ninstints there was a surprising degree of unanimity about the approach to be taken. Indeed, there was more debate among the Parks Canada side than with the Haida. Some thought that the poles should be left alone to die gracefully. Others wondered about taking a more interventionist approach, replicating the poles for instance. But the Haida seemed wedded to a middle approach: carrying out unobtrusive mediation to keep the place "looking nice."

Part of the reason for this consensus was that a single approach to the conservation of the site had been in effect for the previous 20 years. The site had been a provincial park from 1957 until transferred to the federal government in 1988 and from the late 1970s the provincial museum had carried out a program of site conservation. This program was based on the principle that there should be as little direct intervention to the poles as possible. It was assumed that the poles could not be preserved forever, but that their life could be extended if their environment was changed to keep them dry and unencroached by roots growing into their wood. Consequently, in the 1980s the trees in the village site were removed or pruned. Salal and tree roots that were destroying the poles were removed and the ground around them was drained to keep water away from the base of the poles. Ultraviolet light from increased sunlight destroyed many of the mosses and lichens which grew on the poles, and the bleached exteriors became a hostile environment for further deterioration. As part of its conservation program, the museum began compiling data on the condition of the poles: noting the degree of soundness and taking periodic readings of their lean or inclination.

The conservation program engaged the participation of a number of Haida people from the Skidegate Reserve and elicited widespread support. Haida interested in the conservation of the site such as Captain Gold (Dick Wilson) learned about the principles behind the conservation work from close association with the museum's chief of conservation Richard Renshaw-Beauchamp. Captain Gold remained as the site watchman through the provincial park phase and into the present, continuing to carry out the work initiated by the museum: keeping the long grass away from the poles and clipping tree and salal seedlings. Meanwhile, the larger Haida community came to accept as "natural" the altered landscape of Ninstints.

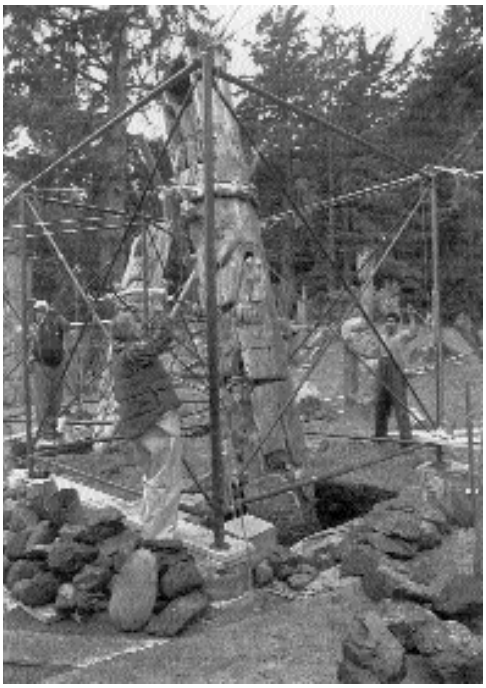
It was Captain Gold who, in the summer of 1994, alerted Gwaii Haanas to the fact that four of the standing poles were gradually increasing their lean and were in danger of falling over. Once down, the poles would deteriorate much more quickly than if they remained standing.

The final decision to straighten the poles was taken in the summer of 1995 following consultation with the Haida hereditary chiefs. The project was scheduled for two weeks in September. In planning the procedures necessary to straighten the poles, we formed smaller task groups. Richard Renshaw-Beauchamp, now a private consultant, was engaged to provide overall direction for the conservation of the poles. Tucker Brown, a Haida on the Gwaii Haanas staff, took charge of the engineering. Daryl Fedje, Parks Canada coast archaeologist, directed the archaeology preparation. It was Richard's experience that persuaded us that the poles could be manipulated without disintegrating, everyone's worst nightmare. Tucker Brown designed a cage—12' square—to provide a supporting structure for the poles while they were being excavated and to act as a base for our pulley systems that would lift the poles to vertical. Daryl Fedje pondered the unknown—no Haida pole had ever been fully excavated—and fussed over the possibilities of finding human remains, massive boulders or ground water.

The issue of human remains was worrisome because it had caused excavation projects in the past to get stuck on the horns of institutional policy and Haida sensitivity about having their ancestors' bones dug up. In the end this caused scarcely a ripple, even though we were certain of finding some human bones. Because it was undertaken as a joint project, the Haida did not seem overly concerned that their heritage was being trampled by an alien invader. Everyone was curious to see the bottom of the poles and everyone seemed assured that excavated human remains would be treated with reverence. In this regard we were fortunate that Daryl Fedje had earned the respect of the Haida over the previous six years for the seriousness with which he approached Haida culture. When he addressed a gathering of Haida elders the month before the project was due to begin and explained that he expected to find human remains and sought their guidance, the hereditary chiefs expressed their confidence that Daryl would know what to do.

Not knowing the depth of the pole or the size of the boulders placed around its base also caused Daryl concern because he needed to predict the diameter of the hole in order to guide the design of Tucker's cage. The size of the hole would, in turn, affect the digging time. If it was too big, too much earth would have to be screened. Not big enough meant that there would be not enough room to get at the boulders, an operation made more difficult by the lack of machinery on this remote site. In the end Daryl figured on an excavation four feet by four feet.

Daryl estimated that it would take a week for a team of archaeologists to excavate each pole which meant that it would take four weeks to do the four poles. In order to reduce the amount of time in the field we agreed that it would be more efficient to have two archaeology teams working simultaneously. Three Parks Canada archaeologists plus one consulting archaeologist were brought in along with three Haida assistants. Others from the conservation and engineering teams would pitch in when needed.



Raising the poles at Ninstints. Tucker Brown, left, Richard Renshaw-Beauchamp, centre, and Tom Greene jr., right. Rolf Bettner photograph.

The earth around the first two poles began to be dug on September 13, 1995. Each pole was supported by Tucker Brown's steel scaffolding. Tripods were set up on the beach to hold the screening boxes with 1/4" wire mesh. Earth and other small material was excavated by trowel and then screened for artifacts using water pumped from the bay by a portable pump. The poles were excavated to their base, about 5' below grade.

The poles were found to have a u-shaped foundation of heavy beach rocks indicating that the poles would have been dragged base forward up from the beach and then slotted into the prepared cavity before being pushed and pulled upright. Smaller rocks and beach gravel would then have been thrown around the rest of the base. Items that were found reflected 19th-century village life: trade goods such as beads, thimbles, cooking pots, chisels and flintlock pistols as well as shells, fish and animal bones. One large stone was in the shape of a wedge, indicating that it may have been a canoe ballast before being placed at the bottom of the pole. Human remains that were encountered, or bones that were likely to be human (assessed on-site by the collective team's experience—we had no comparative collection immediately available) were placed in cedar boxes with soil and offerings, and re-buried at the base of the poles, accompanied by a solemn ceremony.

On average it took about five days to excavate each pole. The three mortuary poles were straightened according to plan. The large memorial pole was left to the last. It was judged to be the most difficult because of its size and the extent to which the base had deteriorated. The digging went extremely well despite the dense midden material on one side of the base. But when the archaeologists exposed the whole base of the pole, it was found to be less sound than we had hoped. The pole could not be raised without risking it collapsing on itself. Instead, we braced it with 20-foot poles cut from beach logs.

All in all, the Ninstints pole straightening project was a remarkable success. We accomplished the immediate objective of conserving the four poles judged to be in danger of falling over. We devised a unique method of handling the poles. The archaeologists uncovered interesting insights into 19th-century Kunghit Haida culture and we achieved an amicable working relationship between Parks Canada and the Haida people in the experiment of co-management on Gwaii Haanas.

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