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Creeping Reconciliation

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The name “Denman” has been attached to this island for a relatively short period of time — roughly 160 years. Prior to that, its indigenous residents and their ancestors knew the island by other names in other languages over the course of the several thousand years of their inhabitation. This island was part of the home territory of the Pentlatch people. For thousands of years they occupied the land between the K'ómoks people to the north and the Halkomelem people to the south and spoke their own language.

It was the decade of the 1860's when that old order started to crumble. It began in 1862 with a small-pox epidemic which, by some reports, reduced the indigenous population of the region by as much one third and had a devastating impact on the survivors as well. Many, including a majority of the Pentlatch of Denman Island, abandoned their smaller village sites and resettled on Vancouver Island near Comox. On the heels of the epidemic, waves of settlers from far-away countries encouraged by the colonial government of Vancouver Island arrived in the Comox Valley and, believing they were on *terra nullius* — land belonging to nobody — they began building houses, barns and fences, cutting trees and living by the laws of ‘the old country’. It was early in the 1870's when similar energy was first felt on Denman Island.

A somewhat similar process had been experienced on southern Vancouver Island in the 1850's when settlers from the United Kingdom began arriving by the boat-load. At that time, however, Governor James Douglas acknowledged a responsibility on the part of the colonizers to reimburse Indigenous residents for their lands. He completed 14 agreements with Indigenous peoples in the vicinity of Victoria, Nanaimo and Port Hardy between 1850 and 1854. These agreements, however, involved a mere 3% of the land of Vancouver Island. To this date no further agreements with the Indigenous peoples of Vancouver Island have been made and, as a consequence, 97% of the land, including Denman Island, the Comox Valley

and the surrounding area, though renamed, surveyed, built upon and occupied, remains unceded.

Following more than a century of being overlooked and pushed aside, the devotion and persistence of Indigenous groups throughout the province finally resulted in an agreement with both the federal and provincial governments to resume the treaty making process in the early 1990's. Many, though not all Vancouver Island First Nation's groups agreed to the six-stage process and treaty making resumed in 1993 after 139 years of dormancy. Progress has been slow. Nevertheless the knowledge that the majority of the population of Vancouver Island lives on land that is unceded began to seep, ever so slowly, into the consciousness of "land owners" as well as local governments and a word unimaginable to previous generations — "reconciliation" — began to creep into our vocabulary.

And, as we entered a new century and five of the Indigenous groups on Vancouver Island, including the K'ómoks First Nation — some of whose Councillors are descendants of people with Pentlatch roots — reached stage 5 of the six-stage treaty process it became common to acknowledge that, when convening a meeting of the public it was important to acknowledge that the meeting was taking place in "the unceded traditional territory of" the local First Nation. It has since become common for elected officials to make a similar acknowledgement in official correspondence. Laura Busheikin, one of Denman Island's Trustees, for example writes; "I am grateful to live and work on the unceded territory of the K'omoks Nation and Pentlatch peoples." Doug Fenton, one of Thetis Island's trustees writes; "I remain grateful for the opportunity to live among them and work in the territory of the Coast Salish People."

Doug then offers, what he calls a "Disclaimer" in which he goes on to declare: "Territorial acknowledgements are just one small part of reconciliation. Please take a moment," he writes, "to think of other ways you can enact reconciliation." Challenging words, indeed. Perhaps we can take a tiny step toward reconciliation and choose to avoid using the phrase "our island" in speech and in writing until such time as the K'ómoks First Nation sees fit to approve the final stage of the treaty process. Then we can celebrate fully living on "our island".

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