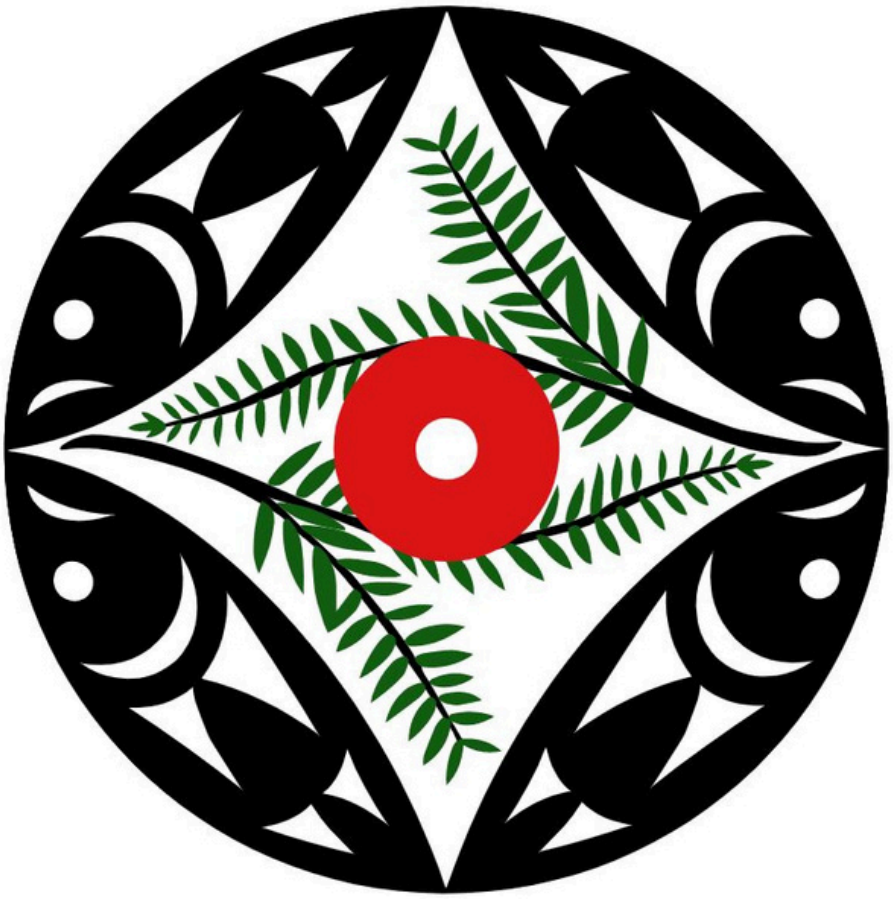
Xwe'etay/ Lasqueti Archaeology Project: Belongings Report



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Background 2

Xwe'etay/Lasqueti Island 3

Research Findings 4

Interfacing with Regulations 5

Experience with Belongings 6-7

Changing Relationships to Belongings or Place.....8-10

Fear 11

What's next for Xwe'etay Belongings?.....12-13

Conversations with Indigenous Partners.....14

Conclusion and Recommendations 15

References 16

Acknowledgements 17

Introduction

This research project is nested within the Xwe'etay/Lasqueti Archaeology Project (XLAP), a community-engaged research project based on Xwe'etay/Lasqueti since 2020. XLAP has engaged with current residents and members of the First Nations communities who have historical ties to the island, including Tla'amin, K'omoks, Qualicum, Halalt, and Wei Wai Kum First Nations. Through the project, the community has conducted two ceremonial burnings for the island's Indigenous ancestors (led by Indigenous knowledge holders), hosted presentations and workshops, organized intertidal community days, produced a traveling virtual exhibit, and sponsored a community mural project depicting the Indigenous heritage of the island. The resident community has received communication from XLAP researchers via newsletter articles, email updates, and community events.

XLAP's previous research engaged planners as well as residents of Xwe'etay/Lasqueti, and neighbouring communities, and examined the role of landowners in Indigenous cultural heritage (ICH) protection on private property. This research considers the role of settlers as stewards of Indigenous belongings/artifacts that have been removed from archaeological sites on Xwe'etay, largely on private property, and often with good intentions. Due to many factors, such as there being many Nations with ties to Xwe'etay, and the deep connection settlers feel with the belongings and the land, management of belongings from Xwe'etay is quite complex.



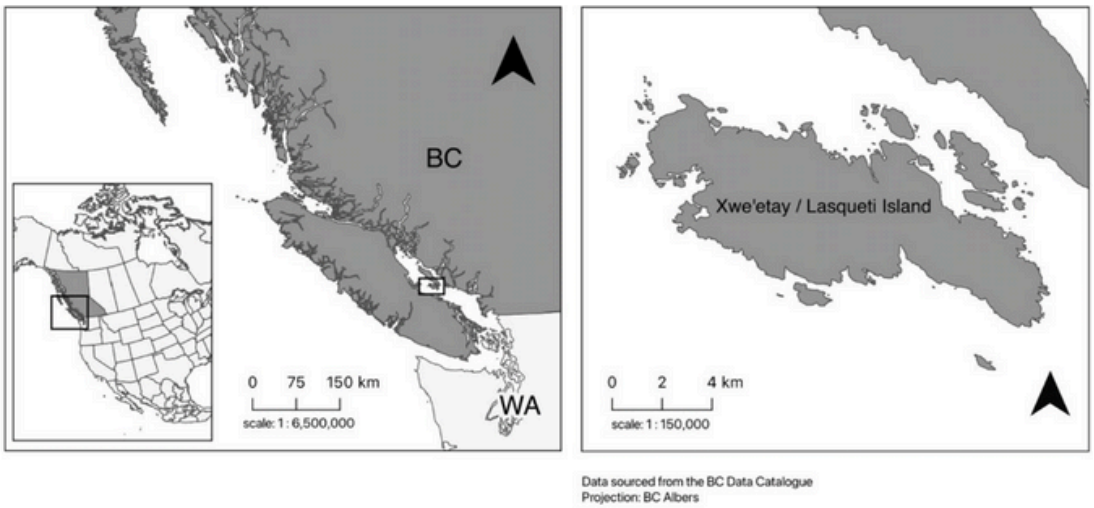
Background

Indigenous cultural heritage (ICH) should be conserved because it is foundational to Indigenous identity, well-being, and intergenerational knowledge. ICH includes not only tangible heritage such as belongings and burial sites, but also the living relationships, languages, and practices that connect people to place (Aird et al., 2020; Grey & Kuokkanen, 2020). For many Indigenous Peoples, cultural belongings are not simply historical artifacts—they are living items with ongoing meaning that foster continuity between past, present, and future (Schaepe et al., 2017). Reconnecting with these belongings, lands, and knowledge systems supports healing and cultural revitalization after the deep harms of colonialism, including the suppression of practices, loss of land, and cultural appropriation (Nightingale & Richmond, 2022; Nicholas, 2022). As Aird et al. (2020, p. 16) note, "Indigenous health and well-being is predicated on continued access to and control over those elements of tangible and living heritage that support reciprocal relationships between people and the land.

Despite this, current heritage policies in places like British Columbia (BC) often fail to reflect Indigenous perspectives or protect the full scope of ICH. The Heritage Conservation Act (HCA) centers on tangible heritage and limits protection to sites predating 1846, excluding many cultural expressions and belongings that remain significant today (Aird et al., 2020; Heritage Conservation Act, 1996). Enforcement mechanisms are weak, especially for small-scale or rural finds, and the law provides no pathway for the repatriation of belongings housed in private homes. Indigenous participation in policy design remains limited, resulting in frameworks that prioritize colonial legal definitions over Indigenous knowledge and self-determination (Grey & Kuokkanen, 2020; R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2024). While provincial efforts like the Heritage Conservation Act Transformation Project (HCATP) signal progress, First Nations continue to report that these reforms fall short in offering control or requiring Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) (Warrick, 2017). Ultimately, a shift toward Indigenous-led heritage governance—grounded in community values and sovereignty—is necessary to ensure that ICH is truly protected.

Xwe’etay / Lasqueti Island

This research takes place within the Xwe’etay/Lasqueti Archaeology Project (XLAP), a community-engaged initiative that has operated on Xwe’etay/Lasqueti Island since 2020. XLAP collaborates with local residents and members of First Nations with ancestral ties to the island—including Tla’amin, K’omoks, Qualicum, Halalt, and Wei Wai Kum—to conduct archaeology that centers Indigenous knowledge and community participation. The project has hosted ceremonies, educational events, and public art to raise awareness of the island’s deep Indigenous history, which spans over 7,000 years and connects to over fourteen First Nations (Krakov, 2024; XLAP, 2025). The island, though remote and sparsely developed, holds a rich archaeological record. Led in part by resident archaeologist Dana Lepofsky, XLAP’s ongoing outreach has helped residents reflect on their possession of Indigenous belongings and sparked wider community interest in the island’s past. The island’s recent colonial history has contributed to a false narrative that Indigenous Peoples never lived on Xwe’etay full time. This context offered a unique opportunity to study settler relationships with cultural belongings. While rooted in this specific island context, the findings may also apply to other rural areas with rich but at-risk archaeological histories and overlooked settler-held collections.



. Maps of Xwe’etay/Lasqueti Island. Credit: Finnerty Cunliffe

Findings

I conducted thirty-six interviews over the summer of 2024. The interviewees represented island residents who have or have had Indigenous belongings. In the fall and winter of 2024-2025, I interviewed three representatives from our partner First Nations: Tiy'ap thote Erik Blaney, elected Tla'amin Nation Legislator, Christine Roberts, Cultural Heritage Coordinator and archaeologist for Wei Wai Kum First Nation, and Nicole Norris, treasured member of Halalt First Nation, cultural practitioner, regalia maker, knowledge holder and long-standing leader in aquaculture.

Five broad themes, each with sub-themes, emerged from the analysis of the interviews: 1) Interfacing with regulations, 2) Experience with belongings, 3) Changing relationships to belongings or place, 4) Fear, and 5) What's next for Xwe'etay belongings?. Conversations with Indigenous partners were summarized, but not categorized thematically. Each interviewee was assigned a unique identifier code (e.g., Participant [P] 25) to indicate the source of quotes used to illustrate particular sub-themes.



Interfacing with Regulations

What is Known and Feelings Towards Regulations

Most participants had little to no knowledge of the HCA in general, and even less of how it would apply to holding belongings. About 72% (N =26) of participants stated they knew nothing about the regulations, and ~28% (N=10) said they knew some but not all of the regulations. This limited knowledge came mostly from XLAP, but in some cases neighbours, or other encounters. Participants shared their uncertainty and mixed feelings about regulations surrounding the possession and handling of Indigenous cultural belongings. Some expressed awareness that holding such items might be illegal but were unclear about the legal consequences or the appropriate actions to take when finding belongings. For example, *"I think we're technically not supposed to have them in our possession. And I don't know what the consequences are, though, and I don't know who we're supposed to give them to when we find them."* [P3]. Many participants showed distrust toward government management of these belongings, preferring a voluntary approach over compulsory regulations. There were concerns about the lack of nuance in the laws and fears of losing control over land or belongings, and general uncertainty about how the law works in practice. *"I know there are regulations and I'm sure I really didn't really pay very much attention to them. [...] I know that they can find things and order people to shut down whatever they're doing, and I don't think anybody's gonna come and tell me I can't garden."* [P14]. Overall, participants expressed a preference for Indigenous involvement in decisions regarding cultural heritage and a strong skepticism toward government capacity to manage these items effectively.



Experience with Belongings

Connection to the Past

Around 67% (N=24) of participants mentioned the belonging(s) evoked feelings of connection to the past. Responses often suggested that finding belongings or becoming aware of the archaeology of the island deepened connections to the past and expanded the mental timeline of Lasqueti to before colonization. As one participant noted, "*seeing the artifacts just sort of gives you a longer view of things. The world is not 150 years old, or whenever we got here.*" [P30]. For some, the belongings were the first and most important window into the past. As one participant stated, "*[Belongings are] another dimension, another kind of a time window of time and culture [...] the artifacts were always the first evidence we had that there was other civilizations here long before us.*" [P3].

Connection to Xwe'etay/Lasqueti

Fifty percent (N=18) of participants mentioned feeling a connection to Xwe'etay/Lasqueti through their belonging(s). For some this connection to the island was deepened after finding a belonging, and for others their existing deep ties to Xwe'etay/Lasqueti made them feel more connected to belongings. For example, "*these [artifacts] are connected to me because I'm so connected to this land right here [...] it's because of my connection to this spot I feel a connection to any of its history*" [P4]. On the other hand, "*[finding a belonging] it's like more roots*" [P28].





Experience with Belongings (cont.)

Excitement; Curiosity; Thrill of the Find

Just over half (56%; N = 20) of participants discussed the excitement of finding a belonging. For many, the act of finding the belonging is a highly memorable and significant event, stating "*it's also the finding that's important*" [P5] and is even compared to "*digging for buried treasure*" [P4].

Finding a belonging increases curiosity of how it got there, what it was used for, and who made it. Some explain the fated feeling they had when finding them. For example, "*I would say it had quite an impact... I had never found anything personally before like that. ...there weren't quite sunbeams beaming off it, but it was right there where the bow of my rowboat was, right there, saying, 'Here I am. I've been waiting 4000 years for someone to come and get me'. It was a profound feeling, yeah, because I thought I could envision people working there, living there.*" [P17].

Attachment/Ownership

When asked if they felt ownership, many participants actively questioned their relationship to the belongings, and whether it constituted as ownership or stewardship. Some experienced cognitive dissonance between the feeling of ownership, and the knowledge belongings are not property. "*I know they're not mine, but I do have this feeling that because I found them, I have some sort of ownership. But like I said... ...if the Indigenous people themselves wanted them and were collecting them, for sure, they're theirs. I know they're not mine, but it feels like they're mine.*" [P33]. When discussing what it meant to steward these belongings, the discussion led to hopes for belongings in the future, whether that be short term, or beyond the participant's lifetime. Few (3%; N = 1) participants were completely unwilling to part ways with their belonging(s), but 42% had stipulations or conditions for parting ways, stating things like, "*depends on where they're gonna go, because I feel like I'm a safekeeper of them, and they just have to go to the right place, if you know what I mean*" [P6]. This concept of the "right place" came up, but differed between participants. The conditions and reasonings were personal to each individual, but most (~72%; N=26) thought First Nations should be the ones to receive the belongings if they were to give them up.

Changing Relationships to Belongings or Place

Ownership to Stewardship

More than half (58%, N = 21) of participants mentioned their thinking about Indigenous heritage or heritage management changed in some way over time. Many participants talk about the way the project has changed their view on ownership of belongings. *"I think a couple of decades ago, I would have had a completely 100% western view, finders keepers sort of thing, and now with the archeological project, and Dana putting out lots of information about it, and the two cultural burnings we've had, and the meetings at the hall, and just the books I've been reading, anything that counts as personal education / reconciliation, I think, loosens my western grip."* [P19]. Some people also began thinking about the long-term fate of the belongings in their care for the first time because of the project. *"Well, it's changing in this conversation, you know, and it's changing with my awareness of like, definitely when I was 20, [...] It was just the hunt and the treasure kind of aspect of it, and as I become more aware of the history of this place of Lasqueti, and know that I'm finding some reference to it that has actually been broken, it's been lost. I feel like it's shifting. I feel like I would actually probably feel lighter if there was a way [to return them]. Like, what am I going to do with these beyond me, beyond my life?"* [P5].



Changing Relationships to Belongings or Place (cont.)

XLAP Led to Change in Thinking

About 83% (N=30) of participants mentioned being educated by the XLAP or by Dana Lepofsky, whether that be at a cultural burning, a table at an island fall fair, or community-engaged archaeology fieldwork. As one participant noted, community archaeology brought about a greater understanding of the island's history. "*We didn't know before that these were settlements, and that certainly has changed how I look at that. I went to one of Dana's digs, and it was the same thing, there's all these clamshells in the midden, and she handed one up to me, and I said, 'You mean each of these was held?' And she said, 'Yes', I said 'wow', and everyone around me went, 'wow'. And it's just a clamshell. It's not even an artifact. It's just a clamshell, but to know it was handled by someone in the past that we can only imagine and learn from those who have studied it, the rest of us, pretty much can imagine, and that makes it special, too. It's funny. The energy wouldn't have been there until you're told, though. It's just a clamshell.*" [P4].

The value of XLAP is greater than education, as people talk about the project in life-changing terms. "*I could probably partition my life into before Dana and after Dana, right? ...you can't help but change how you feel about things when your understanding is deepened.*" [P32a]. Some people are more inspired and emboldened to take what they've learned and spread awareness. As one participant stated, "*I really don't have anything more forthcoming to tell you about it, except that my life has been changed by the archeology project here. My attitudes have changed, and I'm quite happy to gently correct people now, whereas I wouldn't before.*" [P17].



Changing Relationships to Belongings or Place (cont.)

Broader Reconciliation

Some participants feel changes in their personal views have coincided with the wider culture of reconciliation. "*I think there's been a sea change culturally. I think we've had our eyes open in the last, I don't know how long, but definitely different than when I moved out to this coast when I was 20, or in my late teens. The whole attitude towards the Indigenous history has changed, and we've all had our eyes open or are becoming more aware. So I think that that is changing, something that, you know, just felt like a treasure hunt that was just about me, to being, oh, this is someone's history.*" [P5]. Similarly, another participant noted, "*Well, I'm more sensitive to, I guess, to the living Natives now, like about, you know, the difficult time that they've been put through, and how they're being disenfranchised, if that's the right word, and how, you know, like how the settlers took ownership over their artifacts as well as their land and their identity.*" [P26].

Changing the Colonial Narrative

The majority (72%, N = 26) of participants talked about the colonial narrative that Indigenous Peoples never lived on Xwe'etay full time, and the role of the project in counteracting that narrative. Everyone I interviewed acknowledged that the colonial myth is false, though some folks on Xwe'etay/Lasqueti still believe it. Some talked about how the gatherings brought about from XLAP allow Xwe'etay residents to question the colonial narrative together and come to public realizations about the island's history. "*I was at the Community Hall in one of these artifact days, and some people were showing Dana this beautiful jade adze head that they had found, and while we were looking at it, somebody said to Dana, 'did they really live here, Dana? Didn't they just come and pick berries and dig clams?' And Dana said, 'Look at this adze head. If you were going to pick berries, would you take this with you? If you were going to dig clams, would you take this with you?' and I thought that was a very clear illustration, and that conversation wouldn't have happened, and that realization wouldn't have happened with just a website or a photograph of the artifact. Having that artifact obviously meant that people lived here, whether this was used as an adze, or whether it was a ceremonial or prestige wealth piece, I don't know, but that that kind of thing is very real, and having artifacts, belongings, in the public realm is really important for those kinds of reasons.*" [P29].

Fear

Cultural Divide and Fear on Xwe'etay

About half of the participants (53%, N= 19) mentioned the prevalence of fear on the island. There are concerns about land claims and the potential loss of property due to the presence of archaeological findings. While the participants of this study did not personally feel this fear, they observed a divide within the community, with some individuals expressing anxiety about the implications of land claims and the discovery of belongings on their property. This participant suggested some people worry they may lose their rights to the land entirely: "*People might be more fearful about that, but I do think people feel afraid that the more information that people discover about Lasqueti, and the project has been unearthing literally a lot, the more we might lose our right to be here. I don't think that's... it's not a reasonable thing to me, but I think it's there in the community*" [P5].

31% (N=11) of participants found the regulations to be unreasonable or impractical. For example, there was concern that if regulations are too strict, people will be afraid to come forward with belongings, and they could be lost. "*I feel like it's better for them to come forward and for people to know and keep track so that these things can be honored and be recognized and honored for how, for, like, the sacredness and just the, you know, again, it's thousands of years of history. I don't think, again, if you have a law and a policy and you can't regulate it, you can't monitor it, sort of it just puts fear into people. Then I don't really, I don't see what the point of it is*" [P28].



What's Next for Xwe'etay Belongings?

Stay on Xwe'etay/Lasqueti

Many participants (~47%, N = 17), were concerned about the idea of belongings leaving the island, and thought they should stay on Xwe'etay, perhaps in a local repository or museum. For example, "*No, I would not like for them to leave Lasqueti, and there is no entity in existence right now that I would feel comfortable donating them to on Lasqueti, if there were a secure museum of sorts, I would consider it*." [P34]. Many participants (~56%; N=20) expressed concern that the belongings be honored and respected. For example, "*My thinking is that they should be honored, that's a good word. And they should be preserved close to where I discovered them, because the whole property is a place where First Nations people were and the whole property is a natural museum.*" [P20]. One participant imagined a community-run revolving exhibit on the island. "*...I could imagine, you know, over at the Community Hall being either a room or a separate building that's not a museum, but just sort of, you know, something to celebrate the Indigenous culture of Xwe'etay. And I could imagine everybody on the island who has artifacts loaning them, you know, like a revolving exhibition. Okay, so here's stuff from the north end now, here's stuff from the south end. Here's stuff in the center of the island, and you know, to share like that*" [P19].

The Community Should Decide

Several participants said the community should decide what should be done with belongings. This view is illustrated by one participant who stated, "*I think it's a good idea to have a community hall, because, for all the reasons that it sort of works as a way to share knowledge and make decisions on the island. It sort of works, right?*" [P20]. Some people think this decision should be made not only with the residents of Xwe'etay, but with the descendant communities as well, as one participant says, "*We're all family. And I believe that all these issues need to be approached collaboratively with this is where I'm coming from. This is the values and culture that I was brought up with, and this is where I'm coming from, over here, and this is the value of cultures that I've you know, and what's important to me, what's important to you, where is our common ground, you know. Can we go forward in a way that will meet both of our needs? So I think that's the approach*." [P19].

What’s Next for Xwe’etay Belongings?(cont.)

First Nations Should Lead

When asked what should happen with belongings, some participants felt they did not have the right to answer that question. For example, “*I would think the First Nations people would be the ones to consult on that. How would they like to see it play out? They might not want to be inundated with hundreds, thousands of pieces of rock, as meaningful as they are, or they might. I really don't know. I think it's up to them*” [P3]. Similarly, these participants feel they do not have a say, as that should be the decision of First Nations; “*Well, I think that they, if they have to, you know, leave my hands. They have to either be obtained by, you know, the First Nations traditions, or First Nations people that have a history here or tribes have a history here, and they want them back or want them in their lives for whatever display or showing. Yeah, I don't feel like I have a say in the matter of something like that.*” [P6]. Participant 16 had a more specific idea of having a committee from the First Nations interested in managing belongings from Xwe’etay. “*I feel like it would be more useful if it was Indigenous led. If, you know, for example, the 14 Nations in question had some kind of committee. And I know through the kind of research that Dana is doing, there's inter-Nation communication going on, and so maybe that is emerging, which is really cool, but I feel like if it was Indigenous led, that would make the most sense.*” [P16].





Interviews with Indigenous Partners

I interviewed three Indigenous Partners with diverse backgrounds: Tiy'ap thote Erik Blaney, elected Tla'amin Nation Legislator, Christine Roberts, Cultural Heritage Coordinator and archaeologist for Wei Wai Kum First Nation, and Nicole Norris, treasured member of Halalt First Nation, cultural practitioner, regalia maker, knowledge holder and long-standing leader in aquaculture.

They talked about the importance of developing a protocol for chance finds on Xwe'etay including a "safe place for disclosure", "without shame or blame". Though they believe belongings should be returned to First Nations, they acknowledge the complexity of this for somewhere like Xwe'etay. The shared history on Xwe'etay underscores the need for Indigenous-led stewardship and management of cultural belongings, as well as a renewed understanding of the land's significance. Erik noted that building relationships would be important for settlers as well, as they need to "realize the country is built on the bones of our ancestors", and there is a rich history that needs to be told. Erik said settlers need to situate themselves in the timeline of the land, and understand their time is only a "tiny sliver", and that "a lot of reconciliation could be done just by understanding the history beneath their feet". Two of the Indigenous partners were supportive of a repository or cultural centre located on Xwe'etay, for example Christine said belongings should stay on the island, and the Xwe'etay museum could be run by anyone, as long as they "get the culture", but she trusts that the "majority of people there will make the right choices". On the other hand, it is vital that this effort be led by the Nations, which could be difficult if located on Xwe'etay. Nicole stated if a central location for belongings is established, Nations can come together to "witness and mourn". More discussions between First Nations need to occur first to establish financial resources, policy development, protocols, and an agreed upon central location for the safe stewardship of belongings

Conclusion and Recommendations

Rethinking Heritage Policy Through Local, Community-Led Action

Current provincial heritage laws, like the HCA, fail to meet the diverse needs of Indigenous Nations, especially when applied at the broad provincial scale. Interviews with Xwe'etay/Lasqueti residents and Indigenous partners show strong support for Nation-led heritage policy, rather than one-size-fits-all legislation. Participants consistently expressed a desire to return belongings to Indigenous communities without shame or fear. Many residents also preferred community-driven approaches over government regulation, aligning with the island's culture of self-reliance and wariness of top-down oversight. This confirms Wilson's (2024) findings that excessive regulation can backfire, encouraging quiet destruction of heritage. While legal ownership of these items technically lies with the province, in practice, decisions about their future rest with the settlers who hold them. Supporting Nations to create their own policies—while the province steps back—may offer a more respectful and realistic path forward.

Transforming Relationships to the Past Through Education and Connection

Xwe'etay/Lasqueti residents showed a growing shift in how they view the belongings in their care—not as personal artifacts, but as ancestral belongings with deep meaning for Indigenous Peoples. Many participants reported that their values changed after learning more about the true history of the island and engaging with descendant communities through the XLAP project. Education played a central role in this transformation, reframing the belongings as links to a longer, richer Indigenous history. As Maller (2021) notes, behaviors can shape values just as values shape behavior, and this dynamic was visible throughout the interviews. The emotional connection settlers felt to these belongings did not conflict with their belief that the belongings ultimately belong to Indigenous Peoples. This study challenges assumptions that private collections are insignificant or unmanageable. It shows that, with education and Indigenous-led engagement, even small collections in private hands can become the basis for reconciliation, shared stewardship, and a reshaping of collective memory.

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Contact

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