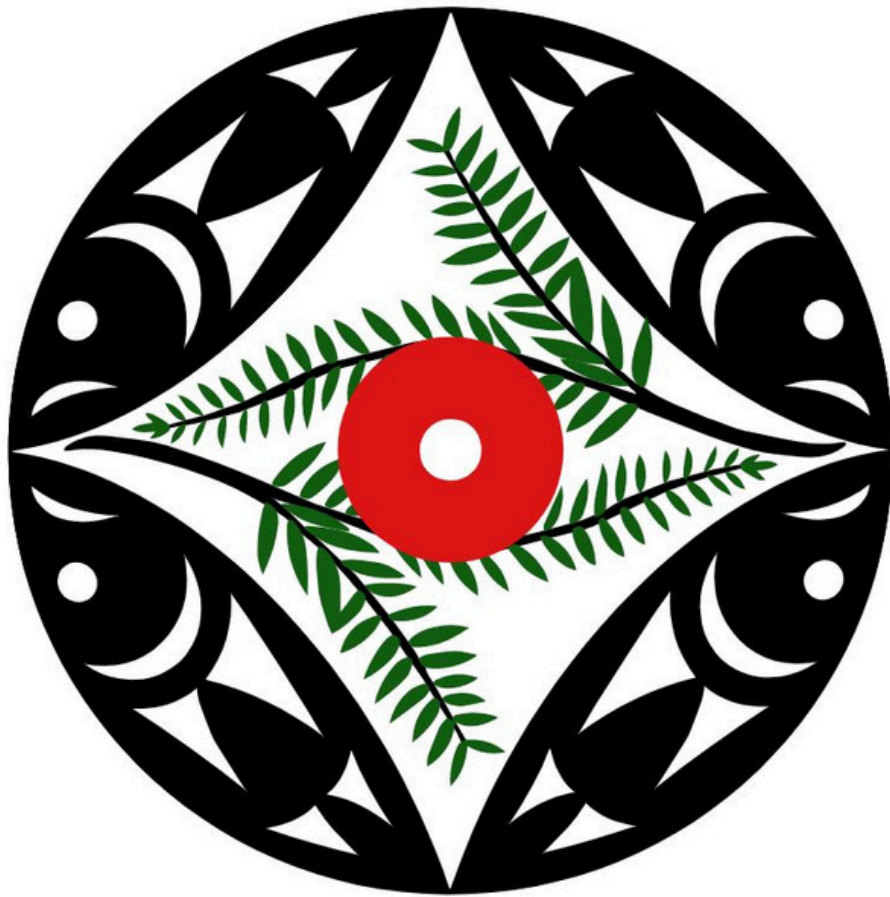


# **Xwe'etay/ Lasqueti Archaeology Project: Landowners' Perspectives Report**



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# Introduction

The Xwe'etay/Lasqueti Archaeology Project (XLAP) is a collaborative, multidisciplinary initiative focused on raising awareness, fostering care, and protecting Indigenous cultural heritage (ICH) across the Salish Sea and beyond. The XLAP team is also exploring ways to enhance archaeological heritage conservation through policy and planning, with the goal of providing recommendations for improvement.

XLAP's previous research, which engaged planners as well as residents of Xwe'etay (Lasqueti Island) and neighbouring communities, cast light on the particularly important – and often overlooked – role of landowners in ICH protection on private property. This report summarizes research that focused on the knowledge, perceptions, and preferences of landowners when it comes to ICH and the policies that protect it.





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## Background

With global population growth and development pushing planetary boundaries (Richardson et al., 2023), conserving natural and cultural heritage has become a pressing concern. Yet, governments face resistance when addressing cultural heritage on private property (Kalman & Létourneau, 202; UNESCO, 2024). Research shows that traditional top-down regulations can result in distrust, perverse incentives, and stealth development (Davenport et al., 2007; Cooke et al., 2012; Carter, 2017).

Most conservation research has focused on natural heritage, with limited understanding of how to engage private landowners in preserving cultural heritage – especially Indigenous archaeological heritage (IAH) in settler states, where residents often lack ancestral ties to the heritage in question (Wright, 2015). Identifying the particular patterns in landowner preferences, perceptions, and knowledge of IAH and associated policies is an important part of recommending effective policy change.

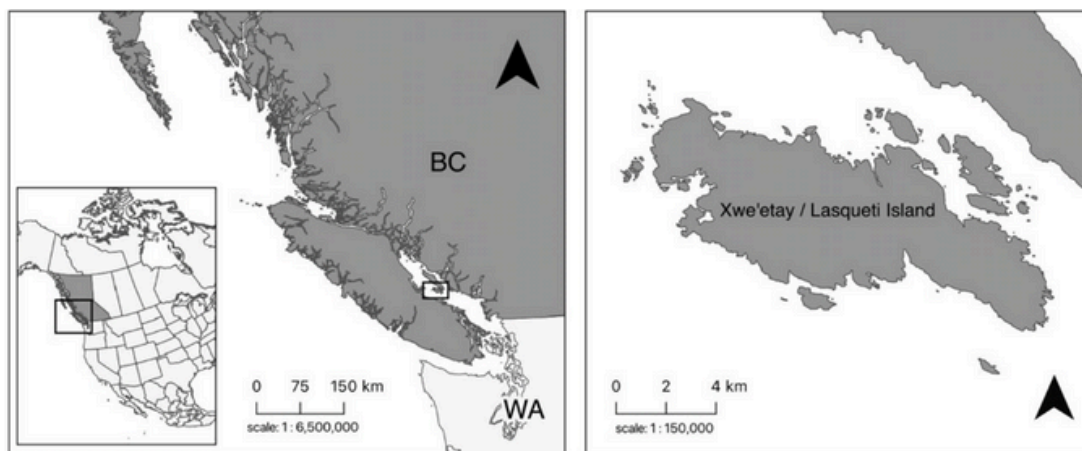


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# Xwe'etay / Lasqueti Island

The diversity of the current island population together with its deep Indigenous history make Xwe'etay well-suited to study landowner perspectives on Indigenous archaeological conservation on private property. The island community is composed of just under 500 residents (Government of Canada, 2022); approximately 40% of dwellings are seasonally occupied (Lasqueti Island Nature Conservancy, 2024). Approximately 71% of the island's land is privately owned, 17.6% is Crown land, and 11.4% is protected.

The remote island, accessible only by boat, fosters a strong, cohesive community culture with deep resident connections to the island and its history. At least 16 First Nations have historical ties to Xwe'etay, and it lies within the Tla'amin Nation's treaty territory. However, colonial processes previously contributed to beliefs among residents that the historical Indigenous presence on the island was limited and seasonal. In reality, archaeological evidence reveals a long history of permanent Indigenous settlements, camps, belongings, and modified landscapes dating back over 7000 years (XLAP, 2024). Land use planning is managed by the Lasqueti Island Local Trust Committee. While the Committee can advocate for archaeological protections, enforcement is limited; preservation of Indigenous archaeological heritage relies largely on local interest and voluntary action (MacLean et al., 2022; Government of British Columbia, 2022).



Data sourced from the BC Data Catalogue  
Projection: BC Albers

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

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## Findings

Thirty-three interviews were conducted over the summer of 2023. The interviewees represented part-time residents (n = 18) and full-time residents (n = 15). Based on previous requests by the XLAP team to conduct archaeological work on private property, we knew that about two-thirds (n = 22) of the respondents were supportive and allowed such work, while the remainder (n = 11) were reticent or strongly opposed.

Four broad themes, each with sub-themes, emerged from the analysis of the interviews: knowledge and connections; implications for private property; perceptions of government regulations; and, policy preferences.

Each interviewee is assigned a unique identifier codes (e.g., Landowner [LO] 35; or, e.g., LO 29a, where more than one individual was recorded in a single interview) to indicate the source of quotes used to illustrate particular sub-themes.



# Knowledge and Connections

## Variable Knowledge of ICH

More landowners were interested and aware of archaeology on Xwe'etay (n = 10) than of archaeology in general (n = 5); this knowledge was typically identified as something that had grown (n = 7), specifically through participation in XLAP's community engagement (n = 3). Most landowners had some knowledge of archaeological sites on their property. Twelve had come across the sites themselves, although eight only learned of sites after they were contacted by XLAP. Many landowners felt that their understanding of the sites on their property had grown through XLAP's work (n = 10).

## Expression of Reconciliation

Nine landowners expressed feeling a sense of connection to the sites on their property. Six interviewees specifically identified the conservation of IAH as *"an act or step of the [reconciliation] process"* (LO 25). This was often attributed to what they had learned from XLAP about the history of Xwe'etay, and tied to their role as a landowner today:

*"I think it's a beautiful thing to acknowledge and know that people were there, living beautiful lives, like I am now in that space [...] I have more reverence in a way for the landscape, and especially those particular places. [...] They're on property that we now caretake. And I feel a sense of responsibility for those stories that existed there."* (LO 16)

## Doubts and Persistent Myths

Six landowners expressed their doubts about the archaeological significance of sites on their property, and four expressed doubts about the Indigenous history of Xwe'etay overall. Several of these landowners pointed out that extensive modification had occurred on their property prior to their purchase, leaving sites significantly disturbed. One questioned the feasibility of *"full year-round residents [living] here [...] maybe just a summer fishing camp or something?"* (LO 23). Others expressed the erroneous belief that shell middens (archaeological sites produced by generations of past Indigenous inhabitants building village sites and settlements) could have been formed from natural, animal, or settler inhabitant processes, instead.

# Implications for Private Property

## **Regulatory and Legal Uncertainty**

The majority of landowners (n = 20) expressed concerns around the legal uncertainty they felt was associated with the HCA and having archaeological sites on their property. Eight interviewees noted the concerns they and other landowners felt about simply not knowing what would happen if an archaeological investigation took place. As LO 11 summarized, *“The default is, ‘I don’t know what that thing is, so I’m not going to touch it. I don’t know what the repercussions are’.”* Nine landowners expressed more specific concerns about the potential implications of IAH sites to limit future land use.

## **Concern for Property Rights**

Relatedly, nine landowners were concerned specifically about IAH sites leading to their property rights being limited or even taken away by the descendant Indigenous Nations. The changing jurisprudence around Indigenous rights and title was reflected on extensively, and the uncertainty around this was cited as the main reason that many of these landowners did not want to participate in XLAP’s archaeological investigations.

## **Cost Uncertainty**

The other major grouping of concerns revolved around costs and financial impacts of IAH sites on private property. About a third (n=11) of the landowners identified the direct costs of archaeological investigations as a significant barrier to conservation on private property. The costs, along with other administrative burdens of archaeological investigations, were construed as *“incentivizing [landowners] to cheat”* (LO 9). Beyond the immediate administrative costs of archaeological investigations, six interviewees shared their concerns that having an archaeological site identified on private property would diminish that property’s value.



# Perceptions of Government and Regulations

Landowners were divided as to whether they generally supported restricting development to protect IAH sites on private property. Seven interviewees characterized the laws restricting development around archaeological sites as one of many restrictions and responsibilities associated with land ownership. However, nine landowners felt that there was no value added in investigating or preserving every archaeological site.

## **Doubts about Government Capacity**

Landowners spoke broadly about their doubts in the provincial government's ability to effectively regulate Xwe'etay and similar communities. Seven landowners doubted the government's abilities in general; one noted that *"the Province doesn't seem to have the political power to do anything. Or the manpower"* [sic] (LO 29a). However, most landowners (n = 19) focused on the difficulties of enforcing regulations on Xwe'etay and similar rural communities, which were consistently characterized as remote, with high support for private property rights and little support for regulations.

## **First Nation Regulatory Roles**

Six landowners expressed wariness of First Nations being involved in the IAH conservation process. This wariness was strongly connected to concerns of legal uncertainty and the changing jurisprudence around Indigenous rights. Their wariness of First Nation involvement was also associated with landowners' desire to maintain control over their land: *"Regulations don't really worry me because I want it to be done right. But taking control away from the owners bothers me"* (LO 18a).



# Policy Preferences

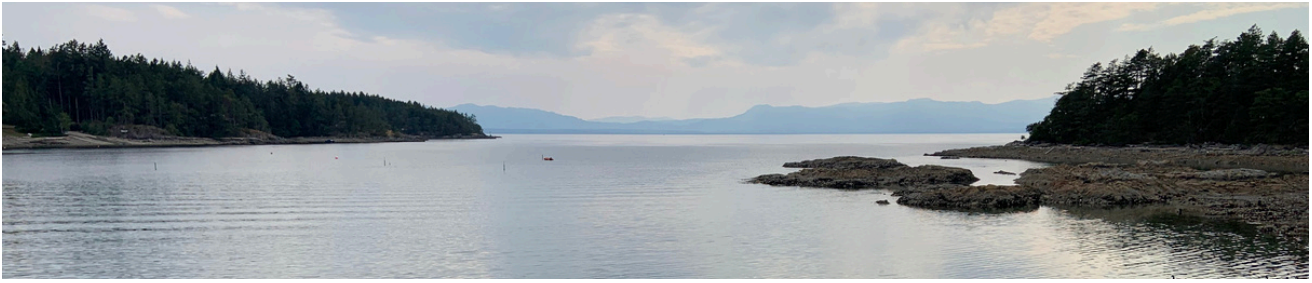
## Access to Information

The interviewees were asked specifically about who should have access to information about IAH on private property. Almost all landowners (n = 26) supported information about recorded archaeological sites being provided automatically to landowners, with many explicitly noting that this should be required on title, as *“part of the ownership transfer process”* (LO 29b).

## Who Pays?

Interviewees were also all specifically asked about who should pay for the costs of archaeological investigations. Almost all landowners (n = 26) felt that the Province should cover the cost of archaeological investigations. Many of the interviewees believed that this would reduce incentives for landowner to illegally develop their land, and some also expressed the view that public funding would be morally just. As LO 3 put it, *“If it’s preservation we’re after [...] the provincial government should put its money where its mouth is [...] if a service is being imposed, then that service should be covered.”*





## Policy Preferences - Continued

### Education and Engagement

Landowners broadly agreed that education and engagement on the importance of IAH, and how to conserve it on private property, would be more effective than further enforcement of regulations. Twelve interviewees supported education, noting that learning about the value of IAH was *“deeply attitude changing,”* (LO 4). Nine landowners similarly supported XLAP’s community engagement work, identifying the interactions with the descendant communities as particularly important. This was not unanimous; three landowners felt that education was just *“preaching to the converted”* (LO 9). Seven landowners shared the opinion that enforcement would not work on Xwe’etay or would be counterproductive. Two interviewees captured this view succinctly: *“People come up with their own workarounds”* (LO 7); and *“enforcement makes people do it quieter.”* (LO 35).

### Local Governance

Finally, landowners expressed a range of opinions on the importance of local governance. Four landowners felt that local governments should be responsible for the conservation of IAH. Beyond the level of government responsible, many landowners (n = 12) identified various components of social capital as being more influential than top-down regulations on Xwe’etay. One landowner addressed this phenomenon most clearly, saying: *“You have to put the fear to rest...Maybe the best way is to talk to the people who have allowed you to come on their property and have them talk to the people. Explain why they allowed you to do it. What they got out of it [...] So you have a similar network going to people who are yaysayers, rather than naysayers.”* (LO 27).



# Conclusion and Recommendations

Understanding landowner knowledge, perceptions, and preferences are important for designing policy that is both effective and equitable, especially when addressing private land conservation. Our interviews demonstrate that landowners have clear policy preferences, which sometimes align with, and other times stand apart from standards for other kinds of conservation. These preferences may not comport with the desires of descendent communities. The information gleaned from landowners, combined with the views of the descendent communities about their own heritage, provide the foundation for meaningful, place-based rethinking of heritage policy.

## **Education is Key**

A primary finding of this research that is transferable across conservation contexts is that education is an important tool to increase landowner knowledge and influence conservation behaviour. Though education is unlikely to be sufficient in itself (Lindell & Dayer, 2022), the variable, often limited knowledge of landowners around IAH and corresponding policies (e.g., the HCA) has fuelled concerns and uncertainty, with the potential consequences of investigations seen as unclear, but largely negative. A less fearful general public is one that is not only more likely to comply with regulations but is also more likely to be receptive to the value of preserving the Indigenous past as reflected in the archaeological record.

## **Place-based Approach that Supports Indigenous Self-determination**

The results of this research resoundingly demonstrate that there is a clear need for meaningful integration of archaeological conservation policies with the local level. The gap between local governments, responsible for development planning, and the provincial government, responsible for archaeological protection, has been consistently identified as a barrier to archaeological conservation on private land (Kelly et al., 2024). Integrating archaeological protection into local zoning and development permitting – and supporting Indigenous-led heritage policy – is an obvious path to preserving IAH.



## **Extending Existing Planning Tools**

Understanding landowner knowledge, perceptions, and preferences is very important for designing policy that is both effective and equitable, especially when addressing private land conservation. A proactive conservation system must meet the problem when and where it occurs – on private property. Instead of reinventing the wheel, archaeology can be protected through the extension of existing planning tools, along with increased education and engagement to enhance landowner knowledge.



Private landowners are critical actors in conservation of IAH on private property but have largely been neglected by researchers and policy makers. For conservation to succeed on private property, landowners need to be considered, informed, and proactively addressed. A more integrated and place-based system may lead to better outcomes for landowners, Indigenous peoples, and archaeological conservation alike.

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## Contact

**web.**     <https://www.sfu.ca/rem/lasqueti.html>

