Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nations

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From the very southern to the very northern tip, Vancouver Island is home to a wide array of first nation’s people. This particular climate and ecological system was, and still is, ideal for many of the outdoor and natural practices so ingrained in the culture of British Columbia’s indigenous peoples. The fruits of this land have given many wonderful bounties over the years, but things have not always been good for first nations groups on Vancouver Island. Harsh colonial practices, residential schools, intolerance and government ineptitude are just a few examples of the strife that has plagued the indigenous people of this province and country. Through injustices, these people have shown great perseverance and dedication to their heritage. This paper will look at the geographical location, history, language, spiritual traditions, schools and current state of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht first nation’s region and its people.

The Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nations people, also known as the Nootka, the ethno linguistic name for many Aboriginal communities with similar languages and culture on the west coast of Vancouver Island, are situated near the area known today as Gold River. (Dewhirst, 2012) Located in the geographical center-middle of the island, the Mowachaht/Muchalaht people were originally from [Yuquot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuquot,_British_Columbia) on [Nootka Sound](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nootka_Sound), also known as Friendly Cove. It is said that even before James Cook, the first European explorer to land at British Columbia, dropped anchor off the shores of Nootka Island, the word *Makuk*, meaning let’s trade, was the first words he heard. Those words would become prophetic for the Mowachaht/Muchalaht peoples as their region would become the center for European trade on the Northwest coast of North America from 1778 into the late 1790’s (Lutz, 2008).

The Mowachaht/Muchalaht area, which translates to “the people of the deer”, was home to several historically significant events. One of the most notorious was the Nootka Crisis, a political dispute between [Great Britain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Great_Britain) and Spain, triggered by a series of conflicts surrounding navigation and trade claims during the summer of 1789. At the height of the crisis, British ships were seized by the Spaniards at [Nootka Sound](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nootka_Sound). For a time it appeared as if war was to be waged but more peaceful heads prevailed and through negotiations came The Nootka Conventions. The final agreement stated that both Britain and Spain could use the Nootka Sound as a port, but neither would form any permanent establishment in the port or claim any right of sovereignty or territorial dominion there to the exclusion of the other (Chenette, 1987). On the side of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht people, this crisis was handled by Chief Maquinna.

Chief Maquinna, Mowachaht Chief during the 1780’s and 1790’s, achieved the high standing position of middleman between the Europeans and indigenous people pertaining to the lucrative fur trade. These responsibilities created an abundance of new issues for the Chief and his people. New wealth from the fur trade, increased encounters and cantankerous issues with the British and Spanish explorers, and an economical transition are just a few of the issues that Maquinna had to face in his time as Chief (Fisher, 1992). Maquinna became quite wealthy for the time period, with an example of his wealth and generosity taken place when “…in 1803 it is reported that he gave a potlatch in which he dispensed two hundred muskets, two hundred yards of cloth, one hundred chemises, one hundred looking glasses and seven barrels of gun powder” (Fisher, 1992).

Language holds a special place for many indigenous people and the Mowachaht/Muchalaht people are no different with regard to their derision of the Nuu-cha-nulth language. According to the 2001 Canadian census, there are roughly 500 who still speak the Nuu-cha-nulth language; however that number has been steadily dwindling as outside influences and modernization has penetrated the indigenous culture. It is difficult to estimate how many people in the Mowachaht/Muchalaht region still speak the language, but as elders continue to age, the importance of teaching newer generations the language becomes even more vital. Holding on to that piece of heritage is fundamental in continuing the respect for the past, while adopting the life of today.

The Mowachaht/Muchalaht First nations are like most first nation groups in their ties to spirituality. Known as a whaling group, before the Mowachaht/Muchalaht went out whaling, they would conduct a ceremony and pray before they went out. This was a very important process which displayed the respect given towards the whales themselves and to the spirits, in hopes of ensuring a successful and safe hunt for all those partaking. Other ceremonies and festival to show respect to their heritage and to offer a tourist attraction, are still held throughout the year including Wolf dances, potlatches and feastings which take place during the winter months (<http://www.yuquot.ca/cultureAugustMurphy.html>). These ceremonies and festivals are not the only forms of tourism that the Mowachaht/Muchalaht region offers; Friendly Cove was deemed a national historic site in 1923, and offers travelers a place where people can witness a very historic area and hopefully appreciate all that has occurred there. In addition, there are many hiking trails that can be used by people who enjoy being outdoors, various smaller islands to explore around the cove and plenty of hotels, B&B`s and resorts that are available for people to rent or stay at.

When it comes to schooling in the area, there are five different schools that the Mowachaht/Muchalaht people can go to. Unfortunately, these schools can entail a lengthy commute to get to for some people depending on their location and the transportation they have access to. There are elementary schools, such as Ray Watkins Elementary whichranges from kindergarten to grade 7 as well as secondary schools, such as Gold River Secondary which ranges from grade 7 to grade 12. The most pressing issue with the education of indigenous people, and all people for that matter, is to ensure a proper education for everyone and to ensure that each child is given the tools to succeed and be awarded their high school diploma. Difficulties at home, behavioural issues, truancy and transportation complications are just a few examples of the realities for the teachers at these schools, but what is imperative is that the children are offered a proper foundation of education that helps them to develop critical skills that will help them succeed in life.

With regards to secondary school, simple attendance can be the most pressing concern. For many of the students, the education system is viewed as a biased program set in the tone of misbeliefs and misunderstandings. First nation’s students regularly question the curriculum and how it relates to their lives. As well, in some areas, indigenous students are often the target of bullying and disrespect by other students, and with that comes a perception of negativity and withdrawal when the true goal is to offer a positive and stimulating environment. To help alleviate some of these concerns, a teacher must offer an interesting, well-planned and functional lesson plan. Providing students with relevant information and assignments that will help to illuminate their minds, rather than the alternative of repetitive lectures centered on barking orders as that style will frequently be received as irrelevant and thus unimportant.

Continuing adult education is also offered in the Mowachaht/Muchalaht area and I believe this to be a great service. Offering adults the opportunity to continue or supplement their education is a fantastic way of displaying intellectual support for all, not just the youth. Programs such as these also act as an opportunity to set good examples for the youth. The reality is, in order to adequately support yourself and family, you need some level of education or training and by not limiting the avenues for further education to just the youth, the Mowachaht/Muchalaht region can reach more people and have a lasting and positive affect on its community.

If I found myself teaching in a classroom within the Mowachaht/Muchalaht first nations area, the first thing I would do is take a good look at the curriculum and Prescribed Learning Outcomes for my classes and look for opportunities to connect those lessons to the Mowachaht/Muchalaht heritage and way of life, both historically and present day. While recognizing that not all students will have a first nation’s background, I would attempt to balance my lessons and assignment in order to appeal to all my students. Together as a class, we would create a set of rules that must be adhered to within my class that would eliminate any stereotyping, gender, ethnic or socioeconomic prejudice as well as any other form of bullying. Students would be made clear of my expectations of them: to respect their classmate’s opinions and feelings, be engaged and attentive in class and to know that my door was always open if they ever needed help or advice. Understanding the area, meeting the people and discovering the history of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht region would be a great way to help formulate relatable lesson plans, as well aid in recognizing potential areas to conduct field trips that would link heritage, history, wilderness and the subject de jour.

I consider myself a West coast person right down to my rain soaked socks and would personally relish the opportunity to work in a region that offered so much history as well the challenge to facilitate the learning of students that are too often looked over in our provincial school system. Education is key that can open countless doors and I would happily work with the people of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht first nation to facilitate that learning and hopefully offer them as many opportunities as they were willing to work for.

# Works Cited

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*Appendix 1.*

Nootka Sound and surrounding Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation`s regional map

