

Cave worth restoring: scientist

By Edward Hill
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It was damp, dark and had crickets, but to speleologist Paul Griffiths the now-infamous cave on Skirt Mountain is a thing of beauty. The limestone cavern held short stalactites, was coated in calcite "moon milk" and held lots of water, a textbook karst formation. "Independent of scale and at all levels one can find beauty in caves," says Griffiths, a major force in B.C. cave science over the past four decades. In May, Griffiths became one of the few non-aboriginal people invited to inspect the cave, at the time kept secret from Bear Mountain developers. It has since been revealed to the public and is now a pivot point around two diverging world views. Songhees and Tsartlip First Nations say the cave is sacred and ancient, and holds deep spiritual resonance for their people. The developers, now five years into their billion-dollar project, say they are following provincial heritage conservation laws — laws that doesn't recognize concepts as ethereal as 'sacredness.'

In early November, the provincial archeology branch had decided to remove the roof of the cave to complete a survey for signs of aboriginal past-use. It got as far as draining the water, and laying out geotextile matting and tires to preserve evidence, should the cave collapse. That triggered First Nations outrage — first for weak or nonexistent consultation and second for plotting to destroy a cave deemed sacred. After the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations stepped in, the developer and First Nations agreed to a two-week truce and negotiation period, due to end Friday. Both sides also agreed to not speak to the media until the cooling-off period is over. Bear Mountain developer Les Bjola previously told the News Gazette the cave area will eventually be developed with housing, as planned.

Griffiths says the Skirt Mountain cave, as an ecological formation and a First Nations sacred site, is a worthy candidate for preservation. "Most caves around the world are candidates for protection," he said. "In this case the compelling argument is the cave is described as a sacred site. On that count alone it would be a candidate for protection." On the ecological end, he said caves are living laboratories. Microbial life adapted to cold, dark habitats draws the interest of evolutionary biologists. Calcite formations can be used for geological dating.

Griffiths further noted that caves are intertwined with surface conditions, dependent on plants and trees that regulate water flow. "I was very impressed the way First Nations people embraced the concept of ecological integrity as a desirable objective," Griffiths said from his Campbell River home. Certainly, that a non-aboriginal person was allowed to see the cave signals the Songhees and Tsartlip were keen to explore all possible avenues for saving the cave from almost-certain destruction.

To reveal a cave to anyone is extremely unusual, says Eric McLay, president of the Archeological Society of B.C. and a First Nations cultural expert. McLay said sacred places are often held tight to only a few members within a family. For the Coast Salish, sacred caves and pools are places of spiritual retreat, supernatural wonder and traditional locations to find medicinal plants. "Such places are not spoken about. It is personal, family knowledge," McLay said. "It is very difficult to release the location. It diminishes the spiritual potency." Griffiths said in his experience, discussing caves is "taboo" in native culture. "They are not enthusiastic about the general public or experienced cavers entering such places," he said.

That shroud of secrecy has been a difficult cultural quirk for the Bear Mountain to reconcile with its development plans. Bjola said last week that if the cave had been flagged as a sacred site five years ago, construction routes could have been changed. Equimalt-Metchosin NDP MLA Maurine Karagianis tried to introduce legislation to better adapt archeological standards with First Nations sacred sites. That didn't make it far in the brief sitting at the legislature last week.

“The legislature would have been debating these very issues if Gordon Campbell hadn’t cancelled the full fall sitting of the legislature,” Karagianis said. John Horgan, NDP MLA for Malahat-Juan de Fuca, and who has been involved in the dispute, said Bear Mountain has largely been following provincial law, but the archeology branch needs updated protocols. “For First Nations, the mountain, these sites go back a thousand generations, and we are talking about five years,” Horgan said. “It is tough to square.”

Meanwhile, Griffiths says he is ready to volunteer his expertise to preserve the site. He has helped write cave protection protocols in B.C. and internationally, although the province doesn’t have any laws protecting caves. Griffiths, the former long-time president of the B.C. Speleological Society, helped draft cave protection legislation that was nearly passed in 1994. It has since sat dormant. He pointed out many U.S. states, countries in Europe, Central and South America have cave preservation laws. “It is a widely held principle that caves are significant geological features and should be subject to protection strategies,” Griffiths said.

Griffiths also noted the cave issue on Skirt Mountain is causing a buzz among cavers around the world. At speleological conferences in Slovenia, Australia and Austria this year, he said Bear Mountain’s cave was water-cooler talk. He says it will become the topic of academic papers at future speleological conferences. “The issue of the cave on Bear Mountain was brought up from time to time,” he said “There was nothing formally presented, but there certainly is an awareness of it.” On the Internet, the caving community and indigenous rights advocates are finding common cause, with the Bear Mountain cave popping up on chatroom threads. Griffiths said if the cave is destroyed, he would expect a strong reaction from conservation groups, cavers and the general public. “People have latched onto this. There is a lot of interest internationally,” he said. “There is enormous interest in the way this is treated.”