

# Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve (Pronounced “Gwy - Hah - nas”) and Haida Heritage Site

## Location

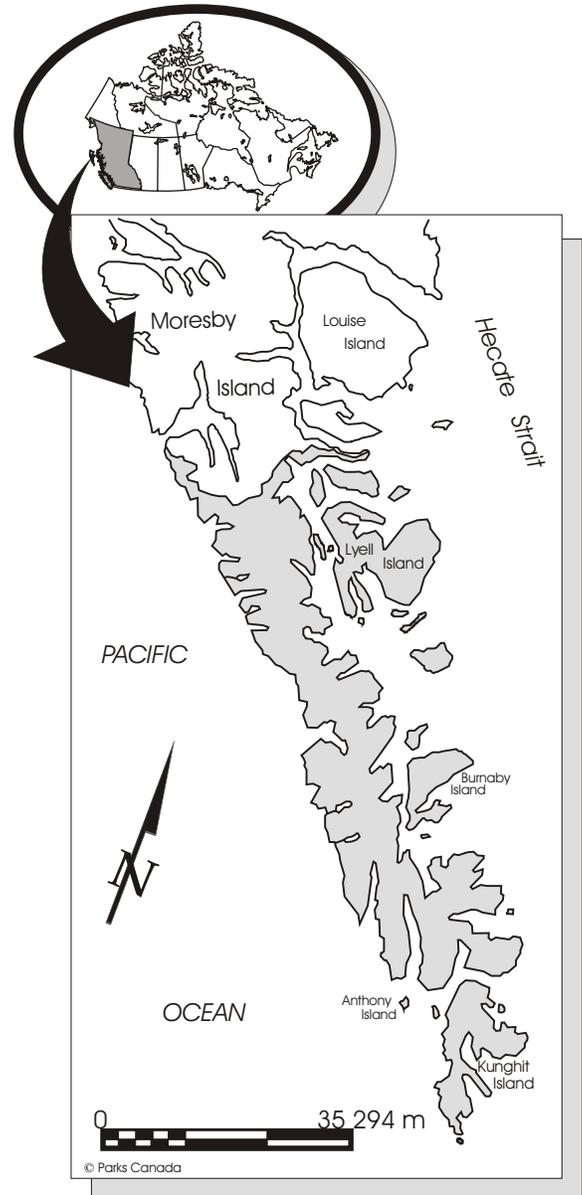
Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site is located on Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte Islands. The islands are located off the west coast of British Columbia, about 640 km north of Vancouver and 130 km west of Prince Rupert. The 1 470 km<sup>2</sup> park reserve, established in 1988, includes the southern end of Moresby Island and over 200 smaller islands and islets. The protected area represents the Pacific Coast Mountains Terrestrial Region and the Hecate Strait and West Queen Charlotte Islands Marine Regions. Gwaii Haanas is located in the Pacific Maritime Ecozone.

## Climate

The climate of Gwaii Haanas is characteristic of the coastal mountainous area - wet and mild. Most of the precipitation comes from storms carried in from the Pacific Ocean. Haida Gwaii has the wettest climate in Canada; the west coast has received 4 200 mm of rain during the year, however, the east coast receives several times less rain. The winds on Haida Gwaii can reach up to 200 km/hr. Gwaii Haanas suffers few extremes in temperature, with an annual average of 7°C. This is mainly because of the island's proximity to the ocean which, like all larger bodies of water, tends to moderate the climate of the surrounding mainlands. The climate is also influenced by the Alaska and the warm Japanese currents, as well as the coastal mountains to the east, the islands rugged topography, and prevailing westerly winds.

## Geology

The Queen Charlotte Islands are part of the chain of mountains that run along Canada's west coast. The San Christoval Mountains are the backbone of Moresby, rising to more than 1 000 m at Mount de la Touche. The islands are on the western edge of the North American continental plate, where it is colliding with the Pacific Plate. Haida Gwaii is the most tectonically active area in Canada. The eastern side of Moresby descends gently to the sea, producing many inlets, bays, and islets. Moresby was glaciated, leaving characteristic U-shaped valleys. Both sedimentary and volcanic rocks are visible in the park.



## Vegetation

One of several reasons for the park reserve's establishment includes the magnificent stands of Sitka spruce, Western red cedar, and Western hemlock. Conifer swamps, as well as coastal muskeg, can be found in lowland areas. Hemlock and yellow cedar occur on the mountain slopes, while higher altitudes yield mountain hemlock forests, parkland, alpine meadows and heaths. Some of the plant species located on Haida Gwaii are not found anywhere else in the world, or very disjunctly (on Haida Gwaii and often only in one or two places on earth).

## Wildlife

Eleven species of mammals are native to Haida Gwaii, these include: black bear, pine marten, river otter, Haida ermine, dusky shrew, silver haired bat, California myotis, Keen's myotis, little brown bat, and deer mouse. The eleventh species, the Dawson caribou, has become extinct. Fifteen mammal species have been introduced to Haida Gwaii, some of which include: Sitka black-tailed deer, rocky mountain elk, European red deer, raccoon, red squirrel, muskrat, beaver, and two species of rats. A wide variety of birds either live in or migrate throughout the Islands. These include almost a million seabirds, including half of the world's population of Ancient Murrelets. One can also find distinctive subspecies of Saw-Whet Owl, Hairy Woodpecker and Steller's Jay, and raptors like bald eagles and the Peale's Peregrine Falcon. The seas around the park reserve teem with life, including salmon, herring, and octopus. Twenty-three species of marine mammals inhabit the surrounding waters, including whales, dolphins, and the largest colony of Steller's sea lions on Canada's west coast. The sea otter was once plentiful but has been hunted to extinction here.

## The History of Gwaii Haanas

In 1974, the dispute over the future of South Moresby Island began with the advent of logging plans and a public proposal to protect the "South Moresby Wilderness Area". In 1985, the Haida Nation designated the area a "Haida Heritage Site". Logging continued in the area in the face of legal and political controversy until July, 1987, when Canada and British Columbia signed the *South Moresby Memorandum of Understanding*. One year later, the *South Moresby Agreement* was signed, providing Canada's designation of a "National Park Reserve".

While negotiations between Canada and the Haida Nation progressed, temporary measures were put in place to facilitate co-operative management. In January, 1993, the *Gwaii Haanas Agreement* was signed. The agreement expresses respect for both Canadian and Haida interests and designations, and includes a mutual commitment to the protection of Gwaii Haanas.

The history of Gwaii Haanas provides a model of a respectful relationship between human beings and the earth, a place where people can now learn about a way of life where humans are a part of nature, and where they can experience Haida culture and respect sacred and spiritual values. Traditional activities continue to take place there as part of the living and evolving culture of the Haida.

## Activities

People visit Gwaii Haanas to learn about themselves and the Haida Culture, to experience solitude, challenge, and spiritual connection with the land and sea. Gwaii Haanas is a wilderness area only accessible by boat or seaplane.

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