

HISTORY AND MYSTERY CARVED IN STONE

First Nations rock carvings, known as petroglyphs, can be found at more than 500 sites throughout British Columbia.

Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands are particularly rich in these fascinating glimpses back in time. Significant sites exist on Gabriola and Quadra Islands, at Aldridge Point in Sooke, and Sproat Lake near Port Alberni, but Nanaimo's aptly named Petroglyph Provincial Park is where you'll find the highest concentration of easily accessible rock carvings in B.C.

Situated four kilometres south of downtown Nanaimo, this two-hectare park was established in 1948 and is accessible from the Trans-Canada Highway. From the south, it is clearly signposted and accessed simply by pulling off the highway into the parking lot. Visitors coming from up-island need to overshoot the park by 500 metres, then hang a left at the Haliburton Street/Old Victoria Road Junction to turn around on Haliburton and head back to the park entrance.

Once at the entrance, a gently sloping track leads up through trees, curving left into the interpretive area. Here, a series of information boards explain the extraordinary, ancient works of art that await visitors. Central to this section of the park are 12 concrete slabs set into the ground, bearing castings of the sandstone petroglyphs. Although it is understandably forbidden to use the fragile originals, visitors may take charcoal, wax, or crayon rubbings, on paper or cloth, directly from these replicas.

To fully appreciate the petroglyphs, visitors should spend time in the interpretive area before looking at the real things. Doing so illustrates



what is known about the designs, among which are human-like figures, one in particular possibly representing a shaman. Like so many petroglyph sites, the original purpose of this park is unknown, but one theory suggests it may have been a "shamanistic retreat," where the Coast Salish medicine men would attempt to contact the supernatural world. This opinion would account for the presence of the shaman image.

Other petroglyphs represent creatures both supernatural and earthbound. Of the former, the park's depictions of "sea wolves" are particularly exciting. Part wolf, part killer whale, these mythical beasts are rarely found in petroglyph form, so to encounter them so readily here is a real treat for visitors.

While other carvings remain open to interpretation, one odd creature on display is what appears to be a bird-deer hybrid. One seemingly of three intertwined heads may or may not represent a mask, but no one is sure. Others might be unfinished, as it is unclear to this day what they are. One certainty is that the mysteries surrounding these petroglyphs serve to amplify the

power of the spell they cast on all who see them.

Compounding this experience is the fact that the age of the carvings is unknown. They are thought to be at least 1,000 years old, but could be twice that — or older. The sea wolf petroglyphs may offer a clue, as similar carvings found in Prince Rupert have been radiocarbon dated at 2,000 years old. The style of carving also could provide fragments of evidence: the circular eyes, for example, draw comparisons with petroglyphs found along the Pacific Northwest coastline known to be well over 1,000 years old. Again, that this cannot be confirmed only enhances their fascination.

Exiting the interpretive area at the top of the park takes visitors to a short wooden boardwalk where the first petroglyphs are situated. A well-worn forest trail continues from the end barrier, from which visitors begin to loop back toward the parking lot. The real gems are now just metres away.

A little way along the trail, the mesmerizing image thought to be a shaman presents itself. While time, weather, and human activity have taken their toll on some of the petroglyphs, this one is very clear — and a dramatic sight



to encounter on the forest floor. That it is unprotected in any way is disconcerting — as it could so easily be willfully damaged — and thrilling, because it is right at one's feet.

The short trail down the hill to the entrance highlights the beauty and atmosphere of the setting. Though predominantly Douglas fir, the woods also contain arbutus, western red cedar, western hemlock, and bigleaf maple trees, with moss-covered boulders scattered throughout. Like most petroglyph sites, it is set near water, in this instance, close to where the Nanaimo River meets the sea at the Northumberland Channel between Vancouver Island and Gabriola Island.

When enjoying the engaging Petroglyph Provincial Park, the juxtaposition between the ancient and modern worlds is unavoidable. As one admires the carvings created so very long ago, log booms and the metal roofs of today's buildings can be seen on one side, while the constant hum of highway traffic emanates from the other. In contemplation of the passage of time, this contrast makes for quite the profound experience. ■