



# Mowachaht / Muchalaht

100 Ouwatin Rd., Box 459, Gold River, B.C. V0P 1G0  
Phone: (250) 283-2015, Fax: (250) 283-2335

## News Release:

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### **Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation Announces New Guardianship for Tsu'xiit**

Tsu'xiit (Luna, L-98) the solitary orca of Nootka Sound, will be guarded full-time by the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation, starting immediately, the First Nation announced today. The announcement came shortly after the band received several days of advice and counsel on stewardship from whale and dolphin experts from both Canada and the United States.

"The busy fishing season is beginning and we're concerned that human activities may endanger Tsu'xiit," said Mike Maquinna, the First Nation's chief, using the tribe's chosen name for the whale. "To us, his safety is so important that we must do this immediately."

The First Nation will call the operation the "Kakawin Guardians." "Kakawin" is the word for orca in the Nuu-Chah-Nulth language, which the Mowachaht/Muchalaht share with 13 other First Nations on Vancouver Island and the Makah. The program will consist of extensive patrols on the water and education outreach to boaters. The First Nation has requested funds from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to conduct the program, but so far no government money has been committed. "We cannot wait for DFO to decide on funding," Maquinna said. "We need to start helping Tsu'xiit today."

The First Nation will pay for the start up of the four-month-long program from its own fishery management budget, and will request funding from DFO and other sources as the year goes on.

Maquinna said that the DFO has pledged in the past to support efforts to protect the whale from harm at the hands of humans.

"Whether or not DFO provides funding," Maquinna said, "we hope it will at least support our work with enforcement and other resources."

Earlier this week the First Nation received several days of consultation from two world-known experts on the stewardship of friendly dolphins and beluga whales. The experts were Cathy Kinsman, head of the Whale Stewardship Project, a non-governmental organization that helps communities on the East Coast manage several friendly beluga whales; and Dr. Toni Frohoff, of Washington State, a scientist who works world-wide on whales and dolphins that are alone and seek human companionship, which are known as "solitary sociables."

"Research has shown that there appear to be fewer injuries and mortalities when carefully designed stewardship programs are in place," Frohoff told the members.

"Although no absolute guarantees can be made, a specially designed stewardship program for Luna is the very least that can be done to try to protect him," Kinsman said. "We have found that pro-active, consistent stewardship programs help prevent injury and can minimize inappropriate human behaviour that put the whale and people at risk."

Frohoff and Kinsman were taken by boat to the areas of Nootka Sound where Luna spends most of his time. After studying him there and watching video of his past interactions with people at the Gold River dock, they said they found his behaviour to be similar to that of other solitary, sociable whales and dolphins.

"The video footage I have seen and my personal experience with Luna has led me to believe that the media and some people have greatly exaggerated Luna's 'aggressive' behaviour," Frohoff said. "However, if irresponsible human behaviour continues, there is a real potential for dangerous interactions as Luna matures. Luna seems to be largely boisterous and exploratory but some people may interpret these behaviours as aggressive."

The consultation was followed by a day-long workshop for First Nations members that included presentations by the renowned orca scientists Dr. Paul Spong of Canada and Ken Balcomb of the United States. Both are among the leaders in a 30-year long scientific effort to study the orcas that spend much of their time in the waters near Vancouver Island. Also providing information and advice were Kari Koski, director of the Soundwatch program, which is sponsored by San Juan Island's Whale Museum, and Keith Wood, head of Act Now for Ocean Natives, an NGO. Wood announced that when permission was granted from Chief Maquinna, a hydrophone system was installed that will allow researchers to study Luna's calls over the Internet in real time. The live monitoring will only be available to scientists, via a password.

"We are glad that so many members of the scientific community have shown Tsu'xiit the respect to come from so far to learn about him and to help us in our efforts to let him know that he is not alone," Maquinna said. "This preparation gives us the confidence to move forward." Mowachaht/Muchalaht members at the meeting included several of the paddlers who stood by Luna's side last year.

"We have always said 'Let nature take its course,' " Maquinna said. "It is clear that Tsu'xiit needs help from too much human attention so he can be free to make his own choices. We intend to give him that choice."

The Kakawin Guardian program will consist of daily patrols by the band's fisheries management boats to deter boating interaction with Luna, and an education outreach program for boaters to alert them that they are in the kakawin's territory. Maquinna said that the guardianship program would also seek to help Luna expand his territory to areas where he could potentially hear the calls of L-pod, which scientists have identified as his family, should any of its members pass in the vicinity.

"We have never opposed a natural reunion," Maquinna said. "But our culture views the kakawin with great respect, and the way DFO was trying to move him last year was not respectful."

Many members of the First Nation believe Tsu'xiit embodies the spirit of their former chief, Ambrose Maquinna, who was Mike Maquinna's father. Ambrose Maquinna died in July, 2001, a few days before Luna's first appearance in Nootka Sound.

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**Contact Mowachaht/Muchalaht Administrator Reuben Blackwater for interview appointment with Chief Maquinna by calling (250) 283-2015.**