

Port Alberni Maa-nulth celebrate first multi-nation self-government treaty on the Island

BY HEATHER THOMSON, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 3, 2011



B.C. Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation Mary Polak with young band members.

Photograph by: Maria Wilkie, Government of B.C.

PORT ALBERNI — Today they celebrate, but tomorrow the work will continue.

That was the message at the celebration in Port Alberni on Saturday as the Maa-nulth Treaty came into effect.

It was a historic occasion, not only because it marked the end of the Indian Act for five Maa-nulth First Nations. It was the first time a modern treaty had been signed on Vancouver Island and B.C.'s first multi-nations treaty.

“Our forefathers have been working at this for decades,” Huu-ay-aht Chief Councillor Robert Dennis Sr. said. “It is because of them that we are here today.”

He said there are many challenges still ahead, but the hardest work is done. The bands involved would work together to create a better future for their people, Dennis said.

The five communities — Huu-ay-aht, Ka:yu:'k't'h'/Che:k'tles7et'h', Uchucklesaht, Toquaht and Yuu-cluth-aht — collectively represent 2,143 band members.

In 1994, together with other Nuu-chah-nulth communities, they entered into treaty discussions with the province and the federal government. Although the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council broke off talks in 2001, the five communities of Maa-nulth continued their fight for a better future for their members.

The treaty ensures that Maa-nulth nations will receive federal capital transfers of \$73.1 million to be paid out over 10 years, revenue sharing of about \$1 million annually for 25 years and a land package of 24,498 hectares, including 22,342 hectares of former provincial Crown land, 2,064 hectares of former Indian reserve land and 92 hectares of private land purchased from willing sellers.

“Our nations have waited a long time for this historic day, and it has arrived” said Uchucklesaht Chief Councillor Charlie Cootes.

“Our exciting journey into re-introducing and exercising our inherent right to own our way of government for the people and accountability to our people is a refreshing and welcoming reality that we have strived for.”

Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Shawn Atleo told the crowd: “Today you hold your chins a little higher, your shoulders are back a little bit more.

“We are free.”

Mary Polak, Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, said it is a proud day in B.C. history, as it is only the second treaty to be signed. She hoped many more would follow, but said it would take time.

“I congratulate the members of the ... nations,” Polak said.

“Each of these nations have their own unique history and culture, yet they chose to come together to achieve this treaty. This is no small task.”

Eighty-eight-year-old Toquaht Grand Chief Bert Mack said: “It took so many people who were strong and never gave up. The things that have happened through the years is hard to believe, but we can't give up. There's lots to do yet.”

It is time for the nations to put the past behind them and work toward a better future for the youth of their communities, he said.



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