



MEDIA RELEASE
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WSÁNEĆ LEADERSHIP COUNCIL CONDEMNS BURNING OF TOTEM POLE ON YOS, A SACRED WSÁNEĆ MOUNTAIN

The WSÁNEĆ Leadership Council was extremely disappointed to learn of the acts of racist retribution that occurred yesterday on our sacred mountain, YOS. During the "Honouring Our Children" vigil held at the Legislative Assembly Building on July 1, 2021, the nearby statue of James Cook was removed by some of those in attendance. In response, a totem pole at the top of YOS (Malahat Ridge) was burned, and a message was left: "One Totem - One Statue."

The "Honouring Our Children" vigil was intended to pay respect to the thousands of Indigenous lives that were lost as a result of colonial genocide. As of today, over 1100 unmarked graves of children who attended residential schools have been discovered. Many WSÁNEĆ children were forced to attend these schools, and many did not return. We expect that the remains of our children will continue to be found, and we anticipate that the broader public will finally need to reckon with what we've always known.

James Cook was an explorer that set the stage for the decimation of our people. He is a powerful symbol of settlers' perceived superiority and the erasure of Indigenous people. The WSÁNEĆ Leadership Council has consistently advocated for the removal of these symbols of oppression with the hope that they would be replaced by our cultural markers. WSÁNEĆ art in WSÁNEĆ territory is one of the many ways to counteract the legacy of James Cook. We belong to this land and want all to know of our continued strength and resilience.

While the removal of the James Cook statue reminds the public of our presence, it is a two-edged political tool. On one hand, it pushes the envelope and forces the public to confront the real issues. On the other, it can embolden racists, sway moderates, and put Indigenous people in harm's way. As a result, the WSÁNEĆ Leadership Council does not condone this behaviour. We support calls for the cancellation of Canada Day, and we support those who are grieving the loss of our children, but we do not support the destruction of property in their name.



The negative results of this approach were seen last night when a totem pole was burned on YOS, a mountain sacred to us. This was clearly an act of racist retribution and is reminiscent of the way settlers have worked to steal and destroy our history and culture time and time again. The RCMP, churches, and other public institutions confiscated—and, at times, burned—WSÁNEĆ regalia sending WSÁNEĆ spiritual and cultural practices underground. Museums—domestically and internationally—removed WSÁNEĆ art from WSÁNEĆ territory making the land appear bare of our presence. And, settlers—out of misaligned curiosity or for profit—robbed WSÁNEĆ ancestors, taking their remains, their personal belongings, and their grave-markers.

There are expectations for how people should live and behave on WSÁNEĆ lands. Although these expectations are rarely met, last night's desecration was a shocking example of settler cruelty. While the individuals who did this should be charged, we, as a society, need to join together to hold the Crown and churches accountable for their actions. We need to move past our impulses, which are justified by hundreds of years of colonial oppression, and have the difficult conversations that will lead to real, true reconciliation. It is clear that some people in our territory do not want that for us, but we must continue to lead the way by speaking the truth, fulfilling our obligations to the land, and honouring our relationships with one another. We must do this for all the children we've lost and all the children yet to come.

This much I say,

Chief Don Tom
Chair, WSÁNEĆ Leadership Council
Chief, Tsartlip First Nation