

"The pages of swiftly-appearing newspapers are indeed the mirror of the world. They reflect the deeds and the pursuits of divers peoples and kindreds."

Bahá'u'lláh

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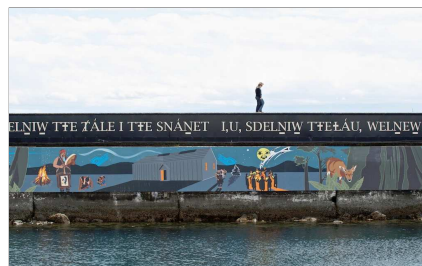
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Land and sea mural builds unity in Victoria

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Baha'i prayer to grace 800-metre long mural

Victoria, British Columbia, 14 June 2011 (CBNS) — A five-year-long project to create a colossal mural in Victoria's harbour has become more than a groundbreaking artistic endeavour. Just as important, says Darlene Gait, one of two artists that designed the Land and Sea Mural taking shape on the Ogden Point Breakwater, is its role in uniting local First Nations people and bridging the gap between First Nations' and other cultures.



The Land and Sea Mural in Ogden Point Breakwater. Photo by Dean Kalayn.

"The Land and Sea Mural project is bringing together Esquimalt and Songhees people across longstanding tribal barriers to share their cultures with the world," said Gait, a member of the Esquimalt Nation. "The cultures of the people who are the original inhabitants of what is now Victoria are not well known. The totem poles that can be seen around the city are not actually a local tradition. This mural will be the first time that local Coast Salish legends will be widely shared with the people of Victoria and tourists."

"The mural project is making us proud to learn our traditional legends and show them to the world," said Gait. "Now the first thing many visitors to Victoria will see is images of the Songhees and Esquimalt cultures. Over time, millions will see the mural. It is an attraction of national and international significance."

When completed, the mural will run the full 800-metre length of the Ogden Point Breakwater in British Columbia's capital city. With a total area of 2000 m², it will be among the largest murals in the world, according to the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority, which initiated the project in collaboration with the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations and funded its first two phases.

The mural was designed by Gait and artist Butch Dick of the Songhees Nation. For phase one, Butch Dick produced images for the sea theme while Darlene Gait's images represent the land theme. Each image has its own story and spirit. Darlene designed the layout of the mural and framed the land and sea under the motif of the wolf, the symbol of family unity for both Esquimalt and Songhees Nations.

"The spirits of our ancestors live on in those of us who try to bring dignity and nobility back to our people, through honesty, generosity and respect," said Gait.

Together, the land and sea images also reflect the breakwater's natural and cultural setting at Victoria's harbour gateway. The mural will be the first thing visible to the thousands of visitors who arrive in Victoria by sea. The breakwater area has also been redeveloped to encourage people to view the mural up close. Interpretative signage explains the legends and images.

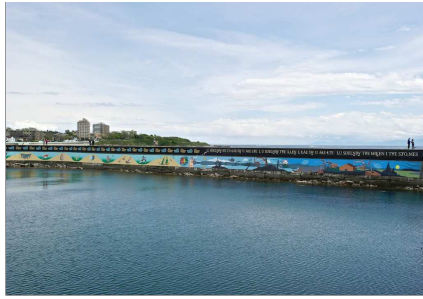
The second phase of the mural, which was dedicated on June 4, 2011, will be bordered by a blessing written in Lekwungen, an indigenous language never shared publically until this time. Only three people speak it fluently, but interest in reviving the language is increasing as a result of the project.

"The blessing is actually a very well known prayer by Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Baha'i Faith," said Gait, who joined the Baha'i community eight years ago. "The Baha'i teachings are similar in many respects to our traditional wisdom. When this prayer was proposed the elders saw in it a kind of prophecy that applied directly to Vancouver Island and its original peoples." The prayer was translated into Lekwungen by one of elders.

The words of the prayer are: "Blessed is the spot, and the house, and the place, and the city, and the heart, and the mountain, and the refuge, and the cave, and the valley, and the land, and the sea, and the island, and the meadow where mention of God hath been made, and his praise glorified." Gait explains that the elders recognized that all the features described in the prayer could be found on Vancouver Island; they said, for example, that certain caves are considered sacred refuges.

The Lekwungen transcription of the prayer runs along the top of the entire 120-metre length of the

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When completed, the mural will run the full 800-metre length of the Ogden Point Breakwater. Photo by Dean Kalayn.

second phase of the mural and is attributed to Bahá'u'lláh. [See attached image.] On-site signage also provides an English translation.

“We think this project has been blessed,” commented Darlene Gait. It is rare for something of this magnitude to move forward so smoothly. What has been very helpful is the spirit of consultation throughout the project and the involvement of youth.”

During each phase of the project, a team of six young artists-in-training, mostly First Nations youth, has been recruited to paint the designs on large panels for the mural, which are then weatherized and mounted on the sea wall. Each of the young artists also created one image of their own for inclusion in the mural. Youth from

diverse backgrounds were welcomed to the project to demonstrate the “unity in diversity” characteristic of the venture. The project provided valuable creative and career development experiences for the young artists, as well as summer employment.

Dean Kalayn, also a Baha'i, served as project coordinator and worked alongside with the youth to produce and mount the mural.

“The Songhees and Esquimalt people have been relatively unknown, even here in Victoria,” observed Darlene Gait. “Now through this mural we are writing our own book and telling our story to the world.”

For more information, including a video on the first phase of the project, visit <http://www.victoriaharbour.org/landandseamural.php>

The project is on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Land-Sea-Mural/125315537495704>

You can view Darlene Gait's work at <http://www.onemoon.ca/>

Butch Dick's work can be viewed at <http://www.songheesnation.com/html/artists/artists-butch.htm>

To view more pictures, please visit <http://www.flickr.com/photos/64069731@N03/>

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