HISTORY BELOW THE TIDE

Visitors to many beaches along Texada's west shores can't miss the semi-circular ridges of rocks that slowly reveal themselves at low tide. Most recognise these as the remains of First Nations' fish weirs designed to corral salmon into the rock ponds where they can be more easily speared as they approach spawning creeks. (Photo) They are the most obvious evidence of historical First Nations enterprise on Texada.

In some places, though, similar rock enclosures serve a different purpose. These encircle flatter, mainly sandy/gravelly areas on the lower edge of the beaches and are, in fact, gardens for cultivating clams. Although they have been in use for millennia, these "clam gardens" were only "discovered" by the established scientific community within the last 30 years!

Rocks were cleared from patches of flat, sandy beach areas and were stacked parallel to the shore. This increased the usable area for clam production and helped prevent wave erosion.

Over time the gardens, with careful tending, became full of "biogenetic sand" (pieces of clamshell amid rich decomposition). The people created an ideal habitat for butter clams, originally the main harvest.

Clams were dug by women and children using a metre-long ironwood or yew stick and collected in woven cedar baskets worn on their backs. Clams were steamed over hot campfire rocks in a fern-lined pit covered with a mat.

The cooked clams were then dried and smoked beside the fire and threaded onto sticks (from the ocean spray bush). Smoked clams lasted a long time and were a valuable source of winter nutrition as well as a convenient food for travel and trade.

At Shelter Point the extensive buried remnants of ancient fires and discarded shells (middens) are modern day evidence of the historical importance of First Nations mariculture on Texada.

Peter Lock

Texada Island Heritage Society