

Broken Group Islands: Exploring a marine playground

By Suzanne Morphet

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Imagine that some land-eating giant took a big bite out of Vancouver Island's west coast, and then spit some of it out. That pretty much describes the geographical layout of Barkley Sound. The part that got spit out is the Broken Group Islands, more than 100 in total, including islets just big enough for seals or sea lions to lounge on.

In fact, it's the abundance of wildlife that makes the Broken Group an exceptional place to explore. Sea lions, whales—both grey and humpback—porpoises and dolphins frequent the nutrient-rich waters. Deeper down, wolf eels, rockfish and giant Pacific octopus hide in the numerous reefs that make navigation hazardous. Not surprisingly, scuba diving is popular here, especially in winter when the water is clearest.

Overhead, bald eagles perch on wind-stunted hemlock trees, watching for salmon while orange-billed oystercatchers gather on rocky outcroppings. Around the shores of the myriad islands, pink, green and blue bat stars stud the sandy ocean bottom.

Thanks to the protection offered by national park status—the Broken Group is part of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve—these islands haven't changed much since Captain Charles William Barkley visited in 1787. Barkley named the Sound after himself, and one of the islands after his wife, Frances, who accompanied him on the voyage.

Barkley came to trade for sea otter pelts with the Nuu-chah-nulth, the First Nation whose people have lived on the West Coast for at least five

millennia, according to carbon dating of an old village site on one island. Canoe runs, shell middens and stone fish traps provide more visible evidence of aboriginal use.

The most popular way to explore the Broken Group is by kayak. Most of the Sound is sufficiently sheltered from the open ocean to provide safe paddling, even for beginners. But if you want to experience ocean swells, head west towards Effingham Island and be sure to paddle through the sea arch on the way.

Arches and caves are a defining feature of Vancouver Island's west coast, carved out by the incessant wind and waves. Those above sea level were once used by the Nuu-chah-nulth to bury their dead. Today, the caves are important nesting sites for seabirds.

Before the area was identified for a park in 1970, non-aboriginals came here to mine, log and, perhaps most of all, to fish. In 1893, John Benson built an eight-room hotel on what is now Benson Island. Today, Benson has the largest—and some would say the best—campsite of all with two beaches, one facing east to the rising sun.

With its rich history, abundant wildlife and secluded beaches, the Broken Group Islands are sure to remain a favourite destination. And given the return of the sea otter to the West Coast—they were wiped out in the trading frenzy that Captain Barkley engaged in—the area's future may be as rich as its past.

Fun

The M.V. Frances Barkley (www.ladyrosemarine.com): It's true that half the fun is getting there when you board the M.V. Frances Barkley, a working freighter based in Port Alberni. Carrying up to 200 passengers and 100 tons of freight, the Frances Barkley motors down the scenic Alberni Inlet and into

Barkley Sound in about three hours. **_Kayak:** Enjoy kayaking without worrying about safety and logistics with Batstar Adventure Tours (www.batstar.com, 1.877.449.1230), the premier kayak outfitter in the Broken Group. Batstar won the Tourism & Hospitality Business of the Year award for Vancouver Island in 2006. Off the water, their guides cook up such fine fare you'll forget you're camping. **_Dive:** Hundreds of ships have ended their journeys on the West Coast prematurely after floundering in storms or running into reefs. Two shipwrecks in the pristine waters of Barkley Sound are accessible to scuba divers. Reefs are also teeming with marine life. (www.rendezvousdiving.com or www.brokenislandadventures.com)

Food & Lodging

Camping: Parks Canada has designated eight campsites in the Broken Group. Solar composting outhouses are the only facilities. (<http://www.pc.gc.ca>). **_Sechart Whaling Station Lodge** (www.ladyrosemarine.com, 250.723.8313): the site of a whaling station from 1905 to 1917, this lodge is owned by the same company that operates the M.V. Frances Barkley. **_Rendezvous Dive Adventures** (www.rendezvousdiving.com, 1.877.777.9994): caters mostly to divers, but anyone can stay in their five-bedroom lodge, 16 km from the Broken Group. The family-run operation offers homestyle, healthy meals. **_Harrison's Cove Lodge** (www.harrisonscove.com, 1.877.265.8555): is geared to fishing and accommodates 21 guests.