

Pacheedaht elder's support for Fairy Creek protesters puts him at odds with own council

Norman Galimski / .
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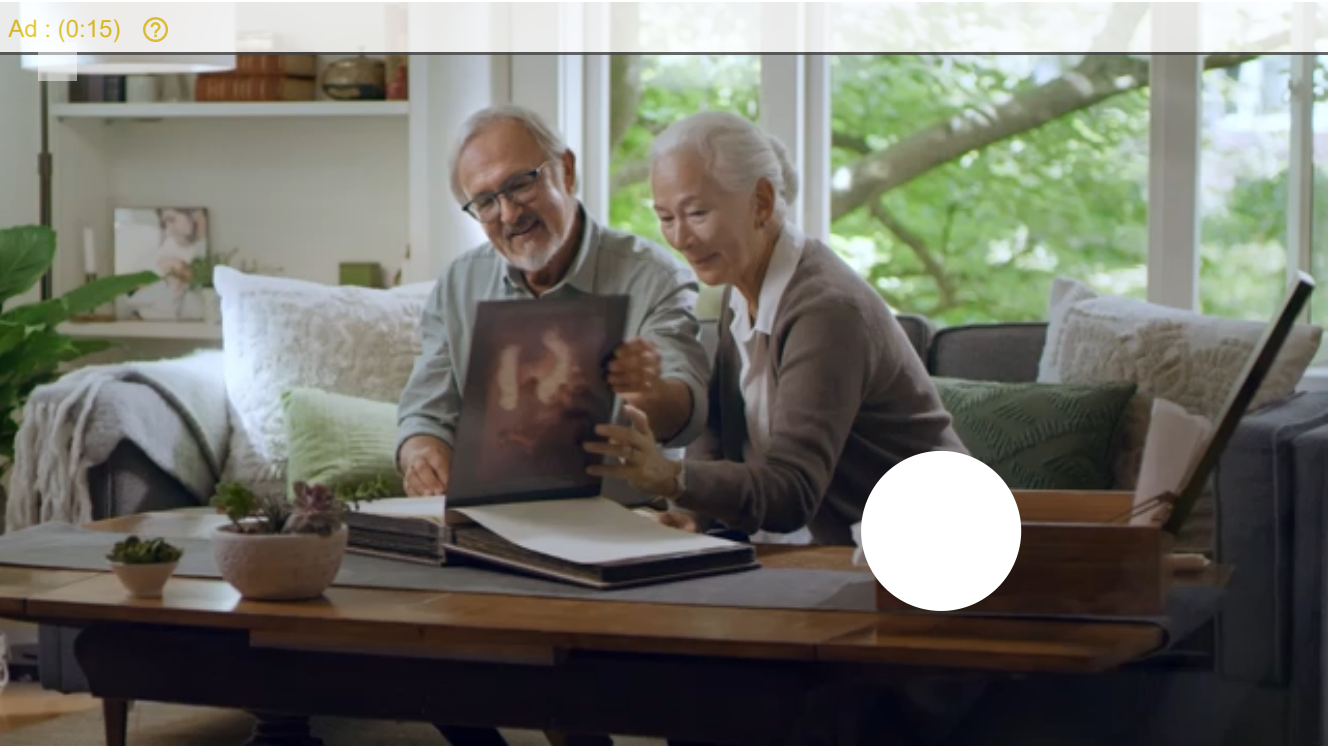
Elder Bill Jones stands on the porch of his home on the Pacheedaht First Nation. Jones has been an outspoken advocate for saving the remaining old-growth forests on his nation's traditional territory.
Norman Galimski

Before the logging roads were built, Pacheedaht elder Bill Jones' grandfather used to paddle up the San Juan River to Fairy Lake. From the lake, he would walk up to Fairy Creek and sit in the pools to bathe, pray and meditate.

He remembers his grandfather telling him: "You go up there to the forest. You do not cut it down. And you go there and be quiet. You pray and meditate and ask the forest what you can do — and then you come home."

Jones has become a high-profile figure in the protests against old-growth logging at Fairy Creek, which began almost a year ago. The 82-year-old former logger is often cited as the person who has invited protesters into the Pacheedaht nation's - traditional territory near Port Renfrew.

His is the loudest voice in the Pacheedaht community speaking up for saving the old-growth forest. It has made him an Indigenous ally to protesters and an occasional thorn in the side of the band council, which has repeatedly asked protesters to leave its territory.



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A logger for much of his life, his experience in forestry left a deep impact on him. In his later years, he has felt compelled to speak out in defence of the trees his grandfather considered sacred, and to share his knowledge with those who will listen.

Throughout his life, he worked on and off in forestry, starting in 1956 as a 16-year-old. He worked in logging camps in the U.S., Port Alberni and Port Renfrew and others tucked away deep in the inlets of the B.C. mainland and Vancouver Island. Although he worked in other fields, each time he transitioned, he would return to logging to make ends meet.

In the 1960s, Bill Jones worked as a class-A aircraft maintenance engineer, leading a small crew of his own. This, he said, is the reason he requires hearing aids — the scream of the aircraft engines during that era of aviation. He then worked for two years in the courts while he studied criminology before making the transition to a career as a nurse for several years.

He was good at his job as a nurse, but struggled with alcoholism. He once even ended up in jail because of it. That ultimately led him to leave nursing and he returned to the Pacheedaht reservation in 1979. He struggled with alcohol until July 1, 1980, where he took his last drink.

Through each of his careers, Jones said, he was treated differently from his white peers. While he was an aircraft engineer, his crew doubted his ability to lead; in the courts, he dealt with harassment from law officers; and in logging, machine-operating positions were saved for non-Indigenous people.

After returning to the Pacheedaht reservation, Jones began logging again, working mostly as a choker setter, attaching cables to logs of newly fallen trees so they could be pulled into an open area, and towing log booms by boat.

It was in these later years of logging that he remembers two moments where he felt overcome by guilt because of his work.

In the first, he was alone, towing cedar logs for stowage. He had stopped the boat in the middle of the water and walked out on the logs to turn a sign around. Standing on the logs, he looked up at his surroundings and began to cry.

"I realized then that I was feeling guilt and crying about what I was doing," he said. "I just couldn't stop crying."

He paused for so long that other boats noticed and began to approach, he said. By the time they reached him, he had pulled himself together and got back to working.

The second time, he was working with a crew of men setting chockers near the Franklin River when one of the men pushed a small cedar sapling off the hill they were working on. At the bottom of the hill, a Nitinaht crew member picked up the sapling, dug a hole and planted it back in the ground.

The small group of tough loggers sweating in the cold rain all had warm tears running down their faces, Jones recalled.

"My personal view now, after years of mulling over those two experiences, I feel that you have to be desensitized to be a logger. You have to be numb to the environment, numb to what you are doing."

He worked in the industry until October 14, 1984, when he and about another 280 men were laid off.

Being laid off was not an unfamiliar part of the job, but this time it was different. When he asked his boss how long the layoff would be, he was told "about 300 years." In B.C., coastal forests are classified as old-growth if they contain trees that are more than 250 years old. In essence, what he was being told was: until the forests grow back.

It was not until 2012, however, that Jones took his first step into activism, joining protests in the Walbran Central Valley, in the traditional territories of the Pacheedaht. He was convinced logging companies intended to "grimly reap all that's left." It was then that the numbness he had felt before left him.

His grandfather's words came back to him. "It didn't dawn on me ... the huge importance of the spiritual nature of the forests. And that became important to me."

Today, you can find Jones sitting in a rocking chair in his home metres from the shore of the San Juan River on the Pacheedaht reservation, looking out his living room window at the river and mountains.

Despite health problems, he remains active in his community — he has taught lessons in Pacheedaht culture at the local school for the past 10 years and even goes to other nearby communities such as Sooke to share his knowledge with the next generation.

"I think with the few [children] that are sitting with him and actually soaking it in, they're actually going to be more knowledgeable than the rest of us," said Nadine McClurg, who works at the Pacheedaht Gas Bar and has three children.

The elder is a driven man who gets right to the point and doesn't hesitate to voice his thoughts in the community as he sees it, said elected chief Jeff Jones.

actions.

"I'm giving Bill Jones a little breathing room to do what he needs to do as an elder," he said.

The elder is well-respected in the community and has a lot of knowledge that he is willing to share, said Jeff Jones, adding, however, that only a handful of community members explicitly support the protesters.

"I think individuals that are entering the territory have to understand that the backing is not there."

In fact, because of the scarcity of Pacheedaht voices within the movement, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the Pacheedaht community are common among the protesters, many of whom come from cities such as Vancouver and Victoria and even from Europe.

"[From] my understanding I think Bill Jones is the hereditary chief and that the elected chief is [someone] whose ancestors are not actually from this land," said Elizabeth Hodgins, a protester from Quadra Island.

Bill Jones is, in fact, neither the elected nor the hereditary chief of the Pacheedaht. The title of hereditary chief is disputed. It's held by Frank Queesto Jones, but others say it's 19-year-old Victor Peter, who has joined the protesters and spoke at a recent protest at the legislature.

On April 1, elected chief Jeff Jones and hereditary chief Frank Queesto Jones issued a single statement telling municipalities in the capital region to respect their territorial sovereignty and asking the protesters to leave.

"I got pissed off about that," said Bill Jones. "I had to say something about that."

Bill Jones sees Victor Peter as the true hereditary chief of the Pacheedaht because his father, Michael Peter, was hereditary chief until he passed away. However, the elected Pacheedaht council recognizes Frank Queesto Jones as the hereditary chief. Frank Jones was adopted by Charlie Queesto Jones — who also was hereditary chief — a fact that some use to discredit his claim.

While Bill Jones is the highest-profile member of the Pacheedaht First Nation to speak out against the logging of old-growth forests, other members of the community have also joined the protesters, including Patrick Jones and Victor Peter. For them, Bill Jones' involvement and presence in the movement is important.

"It shows a lot of power, especially for the Pacheedaht," said Victor Peter. "He knows what's going on [and] he knows the history about everything."

The Pacheedaht community is small. Total band membership is less than 300 people, with about a third of those living on reserve. The impact of words or actions is felt immediately, unlike in a large city. While the community has been slowly learning more about forestry issues — through a series of forestry meetings held via Zoom by the band council — for a community member, speaking out may come at the cost of their relationship with their neighbours and the band council. In fact, elected chief Jeff Jones and elder Bill Jones live next door to each other.

In June, the province agreed to a two-year deferral of old-growth logging in the Fairy Creek watershed and Central Walbran at the request of the Pacheedaht, Ditidaht and Huu-ay-aht First Nations, who say they want the time to prepare stewardship plans for the areas in their territories.

Surrey-based forestry company Teal-Jones Group has said it will abide by the nations' request and put a stop to harvesting and road-building in the deferral areas. This deferral covers most, but not all, of the old-growth that protesters and Bill Jones want to protect.

Still, for Bill Jones, it is not enough to hear that a forest might be protected. He heard promises before at the Walbran protests — only to see them broken.

He has no plans to stop speaking out in defence of the old-growth trees in his nation's territory — there is too much at stake.

He says the pools where his grandfather used to bathe are now filled with boulders. Some are now piled higher than the creek itself, causing the lower creek to flood and wash away the earth from the surrounding tree roots.

The creeks have a delicate balance of drainage, he says. Once the mountainside loses the trees that grip and entangle the earth, the boulders end their long dormancy and begin to move. Runoff from the constant rain washes the finer soil away, starting a cascading effect of erosion that, over time, has created a slow stream of falling boulders.

This is the second of three stories about the Fairy Creek protests by 2021 Langara College journalism graduate Norman Galinski. [To read the first, Fairy Creek and Clayoquot Sound: A tale of two protests, go to timescolonist.com/Islander.](#)

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