

Our Living Languages: First Peoples' Voices in BC

Opening in 2014

A collaboration between the First Peoples' Cultural Council and the Royal BC Museum

The Exhibition

Are any of these words familiar to you? Anishnaubemowin, Dene K'e, Ktunaxa, Nisga'a, Tse'khene, She shashishalhem. These are just some of the names of First Nations languages and dialects in British Columbia. With 34 Indigenous languages, BC is the most linguistically diverse region in Canada, but most people are unaware of this variety and richness.

(For a full list of languages with their orthography, please see "34 Languages List.pdf")

Next year at the Royal BC Museum there will be an opportunity to learn more about the languages and the devoted people who are working to document and revitalize them. The First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) and the Royal BC Museum are developing an exhibition titled *Our Living Languages*.

First Nations languages are at risk due to disruptions caused by colonization and policies of assimilation, including legislation, residential schools, loss of resources and loss of traditional ways of life. The last speakers of many Indigenous languages – typically elders – are passing on, taking with them entire storehouses of cultural, historical and environmental knowledge. Fluent speakers now make up only 5.1% of the total population and the vast majority of these are elders. Some languages are 'sleeping' and have no current speakers.

Throughout the province, language champions are working to ensure that languages and traditions can reclaim their rightful positions within the province's evolving history. The FPCC is a leader in these initiatives. A First Nations directed provincial Crown Corporation formed by legislation in 1990 to administer the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Program, FPCC has a mandate to assist BC First Nations in their efforts to revitalize their languages, arts and cultures. By marrying traditional teaching methods with innovative technologies and contemporary media, FPCC supports the engagement of Aboriginal language learners of all ages as they revive and share their sacred words and the knowledge they carry.

Our partnership project has been defined by a formal Memorandum of Understanding with the overall goal of sharing professional expertise, information and knowledge in order to collaborate on an active program of developing exhibitions and presentations about First Nations languages, arts and cultures. For *Our Living Languages*, FPCC and the Royal BC Museum are working together on budgeting, fundraising, communications, educational and learning programs, curatorial and project management of the exhibition. Drawing from an extensive network of community-based language specialists and cultural experts throughout the province, FPCC is developing the exhibition content and acting as a conduit to First Nations communities. The Royal BC Museum is responsible for organizational structure, management, design and construction of the exhibition.

(more)

In February 2013, representatives of FPCC and the Royal BC Museum met at the Musqueam Nation's Cultural Pavilion to plan an approach to developing the exhibition. Workshop participants – including speakers of 17 different languages – considered a series of questions including key messages, effective practices and inspiring stories of language revitalization and reclamation, display strategies and cultural materials, and how communities can be involved in creating content.

Through a call to their established network of language and culture specialists and artists, the FPCC next convened a project Advisory Committee that met in Victoria on June 17 and 18 to establish themes and general content. *Our Living Languages* (the title chosen by FPCC in consultation with the Advisory Committee) will feature dynamic video and audio presentations commissioned especially for the exhibition through the FPCC's network of artists and cultural experts. A key component will be stories about community champions and elders who are working hard to ensure that their languages continue to be vital and will be there for the generations who come after them.

What will visitors think when they leave the exhibition? They will leave knowing that BC's First Nations are dynamic, living cultures; that there are many ways of being a Canadian; that language maintenance and revival are essential to keeping culture; and that our shared history begins with First Peoples.

The exhibition, *Our Living Languages: First Peoples' Voices in BC*, will open in 2014 and its legacy program will continue through to 2015.

The First Peoples' Cultural Council is a provincial Crown Corporation created by Government of British Columbia legislation in 1990 to administer the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture program. Its mandate is to assist B.C. First Nations in their efforts to revitalize their languages, arts and cultures. FPCC's programs and expertise are recognized nationally and internationally. Since its inception, the FPCC has distributed more than \$25 million to First Nations communities in B.C. for language, arts and culture projects.

About the Royal BC Museum

As the provincial museum and archives, the Royal BC Museum explores the province's human history and natural history, advances new knowledge and understanding of BC, and provides a dynamic forum for discussion and a place for reflection. Through collections, research, presentations and partnerships, the museum and archives tell the stories of BC in ways that enlighten, stimulate and inspire. Its two-hectare cultural precinct in Victoria includes a number of historically significant buildings and First Nations sites.

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