



Natives wary about claims of residential school graves
Port Alberni band wants to be included in investigation at residential school sites

Judith Lavoie
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Allegations by a defrocked United Church minister that bodies of children from residential schools are buried in mass graves on four Vancouver Island reserves are raising concerns that bands were not consulted and that unauthorized researchers could start excavating sites.

There is also skepticism on some reserves about the accuracy of detailed descriptions of grave sites.

Kevin Annett, spokesman for a group calling itself the International Human Rights Tribunal into Genocide in Canada released a report in Vancouver this month which said 28 mass graves across Canada hold "the remains of untold numbers of aboriginal children who died in Indian residential schools."

Annett, 52, a former United Church minister, spent from 1993 to 1995 at St. Andrew's United Church in Port Alberni before being "delisted" as a minister in 1997 after he made repeated allegations that the church was covering up abuse and murder of students at Alberni Residential School.

"I had been allowing residential school survivors to speak from my pulpit," he said in an interview.

Annett, who calls himself Eagle Strong Voice and now works as a counsellor in the Downtown East Side of Vancouver, said investigations into the grave sites, including collecting remains, would start shortly. Information came from government records and eyewitness accounts, said Annett, who has written a book and made a film on the topic.

It will be up to individual First Nations how they deal with the information, he said.

Tseshah First Nation chief councillor Les Sam said there was no consultation with the Port Alberni band and he does not want people unilaterally investigating. "I think the Tseshah people would welcome a good investigation into these allegations, but it should be under our guidance," Sam said.

Sam has no idea whether graves really are in an area described by Annett as "a series of sinkhole rows."

"Tseshah is concerned that people from outside the community have been trespassing on the territory to investigate these claims without the knowledge or permission of the Tseshah council," he said.

On Kuper Island, where Annett said graves are in a field and in a lagoon, Penelakut Chief Lisa Shaver said the reports are alarming. "We had no idea about any investigation and we are required to

be consulted," she said.

Penelakut Robert Sam, a residential school survivor, said he knows stories about children trying to escape from Kuper Island on logs, but has not heard about mass graves.

Other bands say some of Annett's facts are wrong.

In Alert Bay the gravesites are described as "an overgrown field adjacent to the building and also under the foundations of the present new building, constructed during the 1960s. Skeletons seen between the walls."

None of that adds up, said George Speck, Namgis senior administrator. "I did some inquiries in the community and no one has a clue what he's referring to," he said.

On Meares Island, where Annett describes a body storage room in a basement and burial grounds near what is now the Kakawis Healing Centre, no one from the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation was available to comment, but councillor Angus Campbell of the neighbouring Ahousaht band said there has been no talk about a mass grave. "People would know if it was there," he said.

"Ugly things happened (with residential schools), but I didn't hear about that."

A fifth Vancouver Island site identified by Annett is adjacent to Malaspina College.

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