



University
of Victoria

ANTHROPOLOGY COLLOQUIUM

Using Shell Middens to Explore Indigenous Population Change

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11:30 am – 12:50 pm

Cornett Building: B107

Estimates of precontact indigenous populations in Western North America are based on the inherently incomplete historical records of early settlers, and not on archaeological data. Existing research has not examined the possibility that the populations recorded at contact (~1774) in British Columbia had already been reduced by the effects of earlier European contact events elsewhere in the Americas. As such, historical records may drastically understate precontact Indigenous population size. I and other scholars hypothesize that precontact Indigenous populations were significantly larger than historical records indicate. My research undertakes a Geographic Information System (GIS) based analysis of archaeological shell middens (deposits of organic cultural materials predominately composed of mollusk shells) in Barkley Sound British Columbia as representations of precontact Indigenous landscape use to derive estimates of demographic change between the pre- and post-contact periods. Globally, current scholarship has neglected to use middens as gauges of population. Creating a better understanding of the geographic and demographic distribution of Indigenous populations helps to deconstruct the legacy of *terra nullius* (nobody's land) and other historically biased perceptions of Indigenous peoples that continue to have problematic social and legal implications for descendent communities. By clarifying the size and the extent of change in Indigenous populations my research helps us better understand how these people lived through catastrophic times and responded to the reconfiguration of their population in their own social, political and economic terms.

EVERYONE WELCOME. BRING YOUR COFFEE MUG.