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Magazine for  
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## LAND OF ADVENTURE

Make the most of a visit to  
the North Island

### At the Core of Culture

Reviving the Heiltsuk  
language in Bella Bella



### IT'S A DOG'S LIFE!

Winston, the canine  
ambassador at Victoria's  
Fairmont Empress



*Pacific Coastal*  
AIRLINES

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# At the Core of Culture

<p><b>w</b> ▶</p>  <p><b>wáwádi</b> ▶ kelp</p>	<p><b>ú</b> ▶</p>  <p><b>púxva</b> ▶ blow with mouth</p>	<p><b>u</b> ▶</p>  <p><b>gvusí</b> ▶ potatoes</p>	<p><b>w'</b> ▶</p>  <p><b>wáxaci</b> ▶ pipe for smoke or smoking</p>
<p><b>h</b> ▶</p>  <p><b>há'yásu</b> ▶ hand</p>	<p><b>á</b> ▶</p>  <p><b>k'vás</b> ▶ small mussels</p>	<p><b>a</b> ▶</p>  <p><b>k'vas</b> ▶ to sit outside</p>	<p><b>h'</b> ▶</p> <p><b>Yes</b></p> <p><b>lá'há</b> ▶ yes</p>

The original Heiltsuk Alphabet Chart was developed by the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre in 1986, with text by Dr. John Rath and illustrations by Shirl Hall. Heiltsuk Language & Culture Mobilization Partnership and Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre, <https://heiltsuk.arts.ubc.ca/alphabet/>

## Reviving the Heiltsuk language in Bella Bella

By Hans Tammemagi

"I'll be very happy to do my little part in the work to stabilize our language because doing away with our language and culture is nothing short of cutting our own throats."

As languages continue to disappear at an alarming rate, these words spoken in 1972 by William Freeman to the chief of the Bella Bella Band (now the Heiltsuk Nation) remain relevant. Of the 7,000 languages in the world, 2,680 are endangered. Thus, the United Nations has declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

This is particularly relevant to British Columbia, a linguistic hotspot with seven Indigenous language families and 34 languages, representing 60 per cent of the First Nations languages in Canada.

A good example of language revival programs in BC is occurring with the Heiltsuk language in Bella Bella, a community set among the inlets and forests of Campbell Island off the central coast of BC. However, it's a rocky road. First, Indigenous languages are more complex than English. Second, only a few aging Elders speak fluently. And finally, native languages in Canada traditionally have no written form and although this is changing, it is not an easy process since the Indigenous Heiltsuk language has 60 letters (compared to 26 in English).

"Our language connects us to the wisdom and knowledge of our ancestors and infuses our people with valuable insights and understanding," states the

Heiltsuk Nation website. However, only 4.7 per cent of the 1,500 population are either fluent or semi-fluent speakers.

For 30 years now, the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre in Bella Bella has been devoted to researching, preserving and revitalizing Heiltsuk history, language and cultural traditions. It has worked to develop a practical orthography (alphabet) for writing; produce word lists and dictionaries; identify the grammar of the Heiltsuk language; and record oral traditions, narratives, and discourses. The resulting work is archived at the Centre, which also plays an important role in ensuring that new programs are suited to and sensitive to the community. Its website ([hcec.ca](http://hcec.ca)) is a valuable resource.



At the Bella Bella Community School (grades K-12), the curriculum incorporates Heiltsuk culture and traditions, and since 1978 has delivered Heiltsuk language programs. For example, about 10 years ago, under the supervision of teacher Susan Russel from Simon Fraser University, a Heiltsuk language class tackled a remarkable project to translate the standard safety and boarding messages of Pacific Coastal Airlines, which connects Bella Bella to the rest of BC.

"It took us about three months to make the translations," recalls Liz Wilson, one of the students at the time. "It wasn't easy because our traditional language doesn't have words for things like cabin baggage, cell phones, seat belts and so on. We relied on our Elders to help find translations. For example, to explain how much baggage is allowed, we used an analogy of how much weight an eagle could carry in its talons."

The class translated five different announcements.

"It was well received and we were very proud," said Wilson, who is now studying to be a teacher, and planning to teach the Heiltsuk language.

Pacific Coastal was approached and soon PCA announcements were being made in Heiltsuk (as well as English and French) on flights between Bella Bella and Port Hardy. Generally, the Heiltsuk announcements were only made when Indigenous people were aboard, especially Elders. The Heiltsuk announcements ran for almost a decade before they were discontinued in 2016. A short video, *Our First Voices – Heiltsuk*, describes how the PCA announcements translations were made and the importance of speaking the language. It can be



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viewed at: [knowledge.ca/program/our-first-voices/short/e9/airplane](http://knowledge.ca/program/our-first-voices/short/e9/airplane). It features Liz Wilson as one of the narrators.

"It's important for non-Heiltsuk people to hear our language" she says, "so that they understand that we do still love it and care for it."

A major new language initiative began in Bella Bella 2016 with the University of British Columbia's First Nations and Endangered Languages Program (FNEL) becoming a formal partner with the community school and cultural education centre.

Together with its Bella Bella partners, UBC is helping develop the technological tools to bring the Heiltsuk language into the digital age, thereby encouraging the revitalization and use of the language. The partnership has developed a Unicode keyboard input system so that written Heiltsuk words will be rendered and shown in a consistent manner across all computer operating systems including Mac, Windows and Chrome.

In addition, the UBC-Bella Bella partnership developed a conversion tool that translates the original (non-standard) font to Unicode. As of 2018, a pre-existing



A Heiltsuk-language stop sign in Bella Bella.  
Photo by Mark Turin

10,000-word Heiltsuk-English digital dictionary is now online for all to consult, and users regularly access it on their cell phones. The Heiltsuk English Digital Dictionary includes audio pronunciation of words, which can be viewed as flash cards to aid learning. Through the partnership, UBC is hoping to offer a credit-bearing Heiltsuk language course at its Vancouver

campus in due course.

Mark Turin, former chair of UBC's FNEL program, explains, "British Columbia is home to an extraordinary number of Indigenous languages. I'm delighted and honoured that UBC is involved in this creative partnership to support Heiltsuk goals for breathing life back into their language."

To ensure coordination and collaboration, the Heiltsuk Language Authority Board was recently established to oversee the activities of all parties involved in language work. Reviving a complex language is an exceedingly difficult undertaking and requires a determined, persistent and collaborative commitment, and on-going funding. It's exciting to imagine that in the future, the Heiltsuk language will once again be commonly heard throughout Bella Bella. 🇨🇦

## GETTING THERE ➔

Pacific Coastal Airlines runs a daily flight between Vancouver Airport's South Terminal and Bella Bella.

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