



NORTH VANCOUVER ISLAND

## Cultural and Archaeological Sites: Shell Middens

Shell middens are physical links to the past that have continued importance for First Nations. Shell middens are more than simple piles of shell; they were used as the foundation upon which First Nations villages were built and later thrived. Archaeologists visiting these sites can reconstruct dwellings, understand everyday household objects, identify the animal and plants people relied on, and determine how past societies changed along with their local environments.

Middens around North Vancouver Island are usually, but not always, found close to the coastline and beaches. It is important that people using the beaches around North Vancouver Island know about middens and avoid any behaviour that may damage them, including removing objects and dragging kayaks to shore.



# North Vancouver Island Cultural and Archaeological Sites: Shell Middens

## What's in a name

These important archaeological sites are called shell middens because they are normally made of piles of clam, oyster, and mussel shells discarded from ancient meals. Middens were often used as construction material because shell midden sites were lived places where families and relatives created places of importance.

The key difference between middens and natural piles of shells is that middens were constructed by people to build villages. Over time, they accumulated more shells, which were used as construction materials. Middens can be as large as hundreds of meters long and several meters deep or as small as a few centimeters deep and a few meters long.

If you spot any shell middens on your next visit to North Vancouver Island,

remember, it is against the law to disturb any of the contents.

## A physical link to the past

Shell middens provide important archaeological evidence of where and how people were living in this area before written records. First Nations culture, history and traditions are passed down orally. These middens are physical representations of the people who lived in the area before us and whose descendants still thrive today.

Shells offer a perfect environment for preserving artifacts, especially perishable materials. Shells are made of calcium carbonate, a chemical that helps preserve organic objects like plants and wooden tools. This preservation provides an opportunity for archaeologists, First Nations communities, and visitors to learn from them.

## For more information:

Visit the MaPP website  
[www.mappocean.org/nvi-culture](http://www.mappocean.org/nvi-culture)



Photo: Shucking clams (Scott Harris)



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