June 2024



Muχʷšiƛa Hot Springs Area Visitor Use Management Strategy
Summary of What We Heard

Background and Purpose

In the fall of 2022, BC Parks and the ʕaḥuusʔatḥ Nation, represented by the Maaqtusiis Hahoulthee Stewardship Society (MHSS), initiated a project to develop a Visitor Use Management Strategy (VUMS) for the Muχʷšiƛa hot springs area of Maquinna Marine Park. This project sought to identify a vision, management strategies and long-term operational guidance to support the achievement of desired conditions for this popular remote park. During the development of the strategy, interim park use permit conditions were put in place for commercial operators transporting guests to the hot springs. Part of the VUMS project involved engaging both commercial permittees (current and prospective) and park visitors in shaping the VUMS. The Hesquiaht Nation was also invited to engage in the planning process. The results of this engagement process have been considered along with the ongoing input from BC Parks and the ʕaḥuusʔatḥ Nation.

Engagement Process and Timeline

A variety of methods were utilized to invite feedback and shape the VUMS, including letter invitations, email correspondence, phone and virtual meetings, and online surveys.

Hesquiaht Nation Engagement

The Hesquiaht Nation was invited to participate in the process. This information is not included in this public report.

Permittee Engagement

Given the unique role permittees play in transporting and guiding visitors to the Muχʷšiƛa hot springs area in Maquinna Marine Park, permittees were engaged at several stages through the development of the Visitor Use Management Strategy planning process. These structured opportunities for feedback were timed to evaluate how the implementation of the 2022 and 2023 interim permit conditions affected permittees and their guests' experiences. This included:

- February 2023 – Online permittee survey #1 with a focus on desired conditions and visitor use
- February 2023 – BC Parks hosted a virtual meeting with permittees/tour operators
- October and November 2023 – Online permittee survey #2 with a focus on draft park values, visitor use, and interim permit conditions
- December 2023 – BC Parks hosted a virtual meeting with permittees/tour operators

Regular informal feedback provided directly to BC Parks and MHSS also informed the planning process.

Visitor and Public Engagement

An online survey on Help Shape BC was created to invite feedback from visitors on their experience at the Muχʷšiƛa hot springs area and invite them to share ideas on desired conditions. The survey was open from July 19 to September 24, 2023, during the peak visiting season to the Muχʷšiƛa hot springs, and under the conditions of the interim permits. Visitors could access the survey using an online link, a QR code found on posters in the park and other tourism venues in Tofino, or from the BC Parks website.

This direct feeback from visitors was complemented by phone interviews with staff at the Tofino Visitor Centre and Pacific Rim Visitor Centre who interface regularly with area visitors seeking information about the hot springs.

What We Heard – Permittee Engagement

The following is a summary of the prevailing themes and topics of interest that emerged from the permittee engagement process. Two permittee surveys were designed to gather feedback from commercial operators transporting visitors to the Muχʷšiƛa hot springs area of the park. In total, 19 operators responded to the first survey in February 2023, and 8 operators responded to the second survey in October/November 2023.

The first permittee survey invited participants to answer 16 questions on a range of topics, including:

- What visitors seek out and value most about their experience at the hot springs area
- Important ecological and cultural values that should be managed for
- Concerns related to protecting important visitor, ecological, and cultural values
- The ideal number of people in the hot spring pools, and the ideal length of time at the pools and in the park
- Interim park use permit conditions and their effect on visitor experience, commercial operations and utilization of the park
- Knowledge of ʕaḥuusʔatḥ Stewardship Guardian Program or fee

The second permittee survey invited participants to answer 7 questions on a range of topics, including:

- Comments on a draft vision for Muχʷšiƛa hot springs area of Maquinna Marine Park
- Comments on a draft approach for determining appropriate visitor use levels at the Muχʷšiƛa hot springs area of Maquinna Marine Park
- Visitor experience under the 2022 and 2023 interim permit conditions
- Coordination of daily arrival timing between operators
- Suggestions on overall park management
- Interest in meeting with BC Parks

Following each survey period, BC Parks hosted a virtual meeting with permittees to share results, invite feedback, and share updates on the VUMS process.



What We Heard – Permittee Engagement (continued)

Participant responses through the surveys and meetings can be summarized as follows:

- Desire for ongoing communication about and engagement in the VUMS planning process
- Desire for more information on the ʕaḥuusʔatḥ Stewardship Guardian Program and ʕaḥuusʔatḥ Guardian's role in park management and operations
- Desire for more coordination between operators on arrival timing to reduce crowding, spread visitation throughout the day, and ensure equitable access among operators
- Operators report generally positive visitor feedback on the visitor experience under interim park use permit conditions in 2022 and 2023 (compared to pre-pandemic visitor experience)
- There is a desire for as much advance notice of changes to interim permit conditions as possible to allow operators to plan for and manage any potential business impacts
- Infrequent and non-motorized commercial operators and educational groups request adjusted considerations under interim permit conditions to accommodate their unique circumstances
- General agreement from operators on the draft vision for muχʷšiƛa hot springs area of Maquinna Marine Park
- General agreement from operators on draft visitor use level that assumes a target of approximately 15 people in pools for approximately 1 hr, with approximately 3 hours total time in the park
- General feedback, comments, suggestions, etc. on a range of park operational issues


Photo Credit: ƥiiʔačiɬ - Tristan Hinder-Hohlweg

What We Heard – Visitor Engagement

The following is a summary of the prevailing themes and topics of interest that emerged from the visitor engagement process. In total, 41 participants responded to the survey. The visitor survey invited participants to answer 16 questions on a range of topics, including:

- Origin, frequency of visitation, and how they travelled to the hot springs
- Factors contributing to an enjoyable visit to the hot springs
- Actual and ideal number of people encountered in the hot spring pools
- Length of stay at the hot springs pools and in the park
- Number of people encountered on the boardwalk
- What would improve the experience at the hot springs
- Sources of information about the park
- Whether visitors would recommend the park experience to others or return again themselves



Participant responses can be summarized as follows:

- Most visitors were from the local area or elsewhere on Vancouver Island and visit the park infrequently or occasionally
- Most visitors travelled to the park by boat, either on commercial or personal vessels

- When asked how important various factors were to their enjoyment of the park, visitors strongly valued the following aspects of the park experience:
  - Seeing and experiencing the geothermal hot springs and pools
  - Walking on the boardwalk and experiencing the coastal old growth forest
  - Quietness / tranquility of their experience in the park
  - Condition of the park facilities including the toilets and change house

- Visitors also somewhat valued:
  - Learning about the cultural and natural history of the area
  - The experience of traveling to and from the park by boat, air or paddle craft
  - Talking with Ꞃaḥuusʔathḥ park operators or Guardians
  - Signage and information available in the park

- Visitors reported that, on average, 11 people was the ideal number of people in the hot springs pools at one time
- The majority of visitors reported staying at the hot springs pools for 45 to 90 minutes and in the park for 2.5 to 3 or more hours
- Visitors felt comfortable with the number of people they encountered on the boardwalk
- Visitors provided a variety of ideas on how the park experience could be improved, with most suggestions focusing on managing visitation timing and visitation numbers, more signage, more information on fees, and a variety of operational suggestions
- All visitors that participated in the survey would recommend the experience to others and most plan to visit again in the future.

What We Heard – Public Engagement

The Draft Muχʷšiƛa Hot Springs Area Visitor Use Management Strategy was posted for public review and comment on the Help Shape BC - Let's Talk BC Parks website from March 6 to April 19, 2024. In total, 14 participants responded to the online survey and 51 site visitors downloaded documents. All participants were from British Columbia and 9 of 14 had visited the hot springs. The survey invited people to answer questions on the following topics:

- How well the Draft VUMS describes the cultural, ecological, and recreational values of the Muχʷšiƛa Hot Springs Area
- Comments on the shared vision for the Muχʷšiƛa hot springs aea
- Whether the management objectives and strategies provide good direction for protecting cultural, ecological and recreational values, and providing enjoyable visitor experiences
- Level of agreement with the guidance for setting appropriate use levels at the hot springs



Participant responses to the survey questions can be summarized as follows:

- General agreement with the description of ecological, cultural, and recreational values
- Desire for more information about plants and animals, species at risk, and ecological values, and for further research on these values
- Desire for more information about the local history of Hot Springs Cove and the development of the hot springs as a tourism destination
- Overall support for the shared vision and the collaborative approach, including protecting ecological values, setting aside time for ʕaḥuusʔatḥ and Nuučaaʔuł cultural and community use, managing visitor use levels to provide an enjoyable experience, and preserving the unique hot springs for the benefit of all British Columbians
- Agreement with the guidance for setting appropriate use levels at the hot springs by most respondents (9/14 agreed, 1/14 disagreed, and 4/14 neither agreed nor disagreed), which targets a maximum of 15 people in the pools for approximately 1 hour, with about 3 hours total time in the park
- Desire for more information on implementation of the VUMS, including:
  - Allocation of commercial recreation opportunities
  - Monitoring, compliance, and enforcement of park use permit conditions
- Emphasis on the importance of park operations, such as:
  - Maintaining a management presence (Stewardship Guardians/Park Operator staff)
  - Visitor safety and emergency response, including equipment (e.g., AED) and training
  - Facility maintenance (e.g., boardwalk)
  - Ensuring adequate funding for park operations


Photo Credit: piiɬaɬɬ - Tristan Hinder-Hohlweg

What's Next

Feedback received throughout the engagement process was reviewed and considered in the development of the final Muχšiƛa Hot Springs Area Visitor Use Management Strategy. The next phase is implementation and monitoring of the approved VUMS. Further engagement may be undertaken at a future date to assess progress toward the desired conditions and inform ongoing management.

