

A Brief History of the Arrowsmith Massif

Peter Rothermel, October 2009

Vancouver Island was formed many millions of years ago from an equatorial subcontinent, called Wrangellia, that eventually traveled northward, from below the equator and collided with the west coast of North America. This is why Vancouver Island consists of many different types of sedimentary and volcanic layers of rock, as opposed to the mainland's predominantly granite makeup. Vancouver Island, the Queen Charlotte Islands and part of the Alaskan Panhandle are all formed from Wrangellia.

The Arrowsmith Massif is made mostly of Karmutsen Formation basalt and pillow lava formed from undersea eruptions, from the Late Triassic age. Much of this area was heavily glaciated through the various ice ages, with only the tops of the highest peaks escaping the scouring action of the ice. This is what accounts for the sharp rugged peaks, deeply notched couloirs and cirques on the north and northwestern sides.

The hydrology of this massif is such that all of its water run off ends up in either the Cameron/ Little Qualicum or Englishman River systems and the snowpacks are valuable in aiding and cooling water levels for salmon, steelhead and trout. The boundaries of these watersheds are what makes up the area that is the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Reserve, a United Nations sanctioned reserve.

The mountain and its surroundings are home to cougar, deer, wolves, bear and elk. On the high ridges the white tailed ptarmigan can be found blending in perfectly with its surroundings. Many of these animals are subspecies of their kind, and rare, endangered, and known only to Vancouver Island. One of the rarest of mammals in Canada, the Vancouver Island marmot, used to have colonies on the Arrowsmith Massif, but their numbers have dwindled to near extinct levels. Still, as recently as the fall of 2000, a pair, probably transient, was seen on one of the popular high trails and sometimes their whistles are heard on the more remote parts of the mountain. Hopefully the marmot recovery breeding program, taking place on Mt. Washington and elsewhere, will bring them back from the brink of extinction and they will call Arrowsmith home again.

This massif is an area of alpine, not very well connected with other Island alpine areas and has many species of plant life that are rare or disjunct. In 1915, the only *Lewisia Pygmaea* ever found on Vancouver Island was found on Arrowsmith's slopes and then rediscovered in 2008.

The native people from the Alberni area called this mountain, "Kuth-Kah-Chulth", also pronounced as "Catch-Catch-Oos", both translated as, "that which has sharp pointed faces". In the mid-1800s, the English gave it the name of Arrowsmith after two cartographers, Aaron Arrowsmith and his nephew John Arrowsmith. Early settlers on the east side of the mountain called it "The

Sleeping Maiden", as translated from a native name, for its profile at sunset that resembles a reclining woman.

The first ascent of this peak is unknown for certain. It is very likely that native people were the first, as there is archaeological evidence that they went up into the Island mountains to hunt marmots from time to time. Being so close to a summit and human curiosity being what it is, why not? As well several First Nations groups count the height of land of Arrowsmith as the border of their traditional land areas.

The Arrowsmith massif has been attracting visitors since before the turn of the past century. One of the first written accounts was in 1887. John Macoun (Naturalist to Geological Survey, Assistant Director and Dominion Botanist), his son James, along with "Qualicum Tom" and his son Jim made a trip up the massif. Professor Macoun mentions in his account, of being able to see the Pacific. Whether this was the Alberni Canal as seen from Cokely or Barkley Sound that can be seen from the main summit of Arrowsmith is not clear. (*The Ottawa Field-Naturalists Club*, 1922).

Another well documented early ascent on Arrowsmith was in 1901, by Dr. James Fletcher, Canada's first Dominion Entomologist and Botanist, J.R. Anderson, Deputy Minister of Agriculture, the Revrend G.W. Taylor, John Clutesi (father of the famed author and native elder George Clutesi of Port Alberni) and Rob McKinley. Fletcher wrote to his sister, "This was a glorious trip of four days, it is the highest mountain on Vancouver Island." [as it was thought in those days]. (Lindsay Elms, *Beyond Nootka*, 1996.)

One interesting bit of folklore is that Edward Whymper, (of Matterhorn first ascent fame), made the first European ascent, sometime between 1901 - 05 and some people refer to the cairn on the summit as the "Whymper cairn".

In 1910 the C.P.R. built a tourist chalet at the East end of Cameron Lake. By 1912 a pack trail was completed from the lake to an overnight hut at 4200 feet on the slopes of Mt. Cokely. From here visitors could do an easy day hike to Cokely or a more challenging day to Arrowsmith's summit. This trail, known as the Old Arrowsmith trail, is still very popular to this day.

A 1912 Victoria Daily Colonist article states, "If one were to go into the fastness of Vancouver Island and find a great deposit of coal or ore, the discovery would be hailed as a real achievement of tremendous benefit to this section of British Columbia, and as another big addition to its assets. By the same process of reasoning, when one considers the benefits accruing from tourist travel, it will have to be admitted that the 'discovery' of Mt. Arrowsmith is also a great achievement, and that it will prove an asset of incalculable value."

Arrowsmith's sister summit, Mt. Cokely, once also known as "The Hump", was unofficially named in 1926-27 after Leroy Sterling Cokely, a Dominion & B.C. land surveyor. In 1973 the name was officially adopted.

The 1920's and 30's saw more ascents by the Alpine Club of Canada and others, most notably in June 1925 by the husband and wife mountaineering team of Don and Phyllis Munday. Don later wrote, "Phyl's eyes shone as she handed me the binoculars and pointed to a tall mountain due North through a cloud rift." They had discovered the Waddington Range with the highest mountain peak wholly within B.C. They went on to explore that area for the following decades and would become famous in the mountaineering fraternity for their efforts. Mt. Arrowsmith was to hold a special place in their hearts. (Don Munday, *The Unknown Mountain*, 1948).

In the 1940's and 50's, more cabins were built on the massif and this area became a destination for hardy folk to go on winter ski trips and for others, to enjoy the summer alpine beauty. The most noteworthy cabin was the Rosseau Chalet, named after a Port Alberni mountaineer, Ralph Rosseau. The cabin was destroyed by vandals in the 70's, but a popular trail on the massif still carries his name. A few of these user-maintained cabins still exist today, used by yet other generations of hikers and mountaineers. Ralph died in a climbing accident in the Septimus range and the highest peak in that range was officially named Mt. Rosseau.

The 60's saw logging roads pushed further up the mountain's flanks. As drivable access became easier, the popularity of the massif increased dramatically. "Arrowsmith...Must rank as the most popular mountain among the Vancouver Island climbing community", (Randy Morse, *Canada/The Mountains*, 1980). and "It [Arrowsmith] is the most popular training ground on Vancouver Island and offers great potential for winter climbing because of its 'Scottish' conditions and reasonable access." (Bruce Fairley, *A Guide to Climbing & Hiking in Southwestern B.C.*, 1986). The roads, as they often do, opened the area to more activity. Some would say for the better, some old-timers say the mountain was overrun and ruined.

In 1972, 607 hectares on the northern slopes of Cokely was sold, for a dollar, by MacMillan Bloedel to the Regional District of Alberni- Clayoquot (RDAC), to be turned into a regional park, since there was already a small volunteer ski operation held there. Since then several commercial ventures have tried their luck at offering downhill skiing with no success and have all gone out of business. Finally in 2005 the lift towers were taken out and the area completely cleaned up, allowing it to return to a wilderness state. Still it makes for a popular backcountry ski destination in the winter and easy hiking in the summer.

In 1992, the Commission on Resources and Environment (CORE) looked at making the massif into a Class A Provincial Park, but as there was already a

small regional park in place and the recreational area is above 1,000 meters, therefore containing little merchantable timber, it was decided to use their 12% of allotted land to make parks in more threatened lowland areas, a decision since regretted.

Since 1995, the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN) has shown some interest in turning this block of land into a protected area, either a Provincial or a Regional Park.

In the fall of 1998 the Public Access Resolution Committee (PARC) garnered the support of over thirty clubs, societies, federations and outdoors groups and petitioned the Regional District of Nanaimo to obtain block 1380 to turn it into a wilderness type park. RDN staff went one step further and recommended the district to also aim towards leasing the privately owned land that the Old Arrowsmith Trail runs through, for additional park land. When these proposals went before the RDN Board of Directors it was unanimously voted for in favor to obtain these areas for park status.

In 1999 the RDN appointed a committee from local citizens representing a broad range of outdoor groups to advise them on the direction this park should go. This proved to be a very good working relationship between the frequent users of this alpine area and the body that governs the area.

In the fall of 2001 a deal was brokered, between the Regional District of Nanaimo and the timber companies, to lease the land the Old Arrowsmith Trail runs through, from Cameron Lake to the defunct Ski Park, for regional park trail use.

The RDN entered a Memorandum of Understanding with the Hupacasath First Nations in 2008 and the summits of Arrowsmith, Cokely and South Summit, the Lakes Jewel, Hidden, Fishtail and Lost and all the area in block 1380 was finally declared a Regional Park on November 25, 2008. Finally, a dream come true for many people. Still, for future generations much more park area will be needed, as population increases demand.

The stewards of the Arrowsmith Massif envision an Arrowsmith park linking to the Cameron Lake Provincial Park, via the Old Arrowsmith Trail, created as park; to the Little Qualicum Falls Provincial Park and further to RDN Regional Parks along the Little Qualicum River and finally to the protected estuary area at the mouth of the river. The eventual goal would be to have an uninterrupted series of protected lands that would stretch from the summit of Mount Arrowsmith, to the mouth of the Little Qualicum River. In other words, an alpine to tidewater wildlife and recreational corridor.

The Victoria Times Colonist wrote, May 15, 1965, about the logging, mining and damming in Strathcona Provincial Park, "If the parks are whittled, demoted,

exploited, in the absence of any foolproof guarantee of the continuity and preservation, we shall have little enough to enjoy in our time and a poor bequest to hand on to the millions of the future who will look back on us as despoilers rather than stewards of nature's irreplaceable treasures."

This applies to all lands whether Federal, Provincial or private, that hold areas important to wildlife, watershed, cultural or recreational values. We need to reverse the whittling process and begin building it back up.

As we stand on the threshold of a new millennium, these words ring as true and clearer now, than ever before.