Article : **The seaweed ladies of Sooke**
Regional News:USA & Canada
The seaweed ladies of Sooke
Tuesday, March 17, 2009

I was taken aback when I caught sight of Amanda in her wetsuit at Muir Creek. The only clue that I was at the right place was her long dreadlocks that spread out wildly from her thick bush of hair. She was waiting for me in her tightly fitting wetsuit that revealed the silhouette of a true-to-life mermaid with her young daughters Mahina and Nesika milling about the beach with a friend in the distance.

The ocean is Amanda Swinimers' garden
[Photo courtesy Dakini Tidal Wilds]

Not being in tune with the tidal patterns of the ocean, the migration of the birds or even the frigid temperatures of the waters here, I suddenly realized how awkward my request had been to actually ask her to plunge into the sea. I had met Herbalist Amanda Swinimer of Dakini Tidal Wilds haphazardly in an airport mini-bus in Toronto, and was enraptured by her stories of seaweed culture and the small community of Sooke that sustained it. I had imagined that the sea was Amanda's element. What I hadn't considered was that it was early February, and the water temperature was about forty degrees and her underwater garden would largely be in hibernation.

No bothers, she seemed to have thought. Amanda is one of the seaweed ladies of Sooke. The ocean is her garden. While it may not yet be green or even plush, I seemed to have enticed her curiosity about just what was going on under the cold and salty waters at Muir Creek these days.

For Amanda seaweed are both a passion and her livelihood. With her catch she makes curative salves that she sells at the local James Bay Market, while others will be prepared for consumption in foods like salads, teas, soups and even deserts. She will also prepare some for fellow seaweed ladies.

"This is the winter harvest. I'm not sure what I'm going to find, but bull kelp is a good stand-by," she said optimistically as we walked towards the beach, "There might be something interesting underneath."

For eight months of the year - from May to October - Amanda plunges almost daily under the surf of the ocean here to harvest seaweed on this scenic beach of this community on this southern tip of Vancouver Island - about a half-hour drive from the provincial capital of Victoria. While in British Columbia there are some 700 species of seaweed - with 250 in this harvesting area alone - Amanda's main crop consists of alaria and bull kelp.

"I was always passionate about seaweed," she says, "Figuring out how to make a living of it came after. I just started harvesting. I had never seen a seaweed garden as diverse as this. It's incredible, and I still don't know all of the species that exist here."

Every year in April Amanda organizes the S.O.S Festival, or Save our Salmon, a festival of live music to raise money for the Muir Creek Protection Society. Her musical band of environmentalists - all but one member of whom are local women - share the stage with five other groups to play original music on these rocky shores.

The rare ecosystem of Muir Creek

The music they play is inspired by the rare ecosystem here that includes a spawning ground for three species of salmon, giant red cedars that can grow in excess of six feet in diameter and, of course, a robust garden of a plethora of varieties of seaweed. It all comes together at Muir Creek, Amanda says.

Seaweed can be used in salads, teas, soups and even deserts.
[Photo Andrew Princz, ontheglobe.com]

If writing is a lonely task, I thought, her daily routine of plucking seaweed from this ocean playground must be equally forlorn. But Amanda was a tree planter and she has probably spent as many hours planting - one seedling at a time - as she has collected her greens from the ocean. In season Amanda will wade daily into these waters for two hours hunting for alaria. She also pulls out loads of bull kelp - one of the fastest growing organisms on the planet. She even professes you can watch it grow with the naked eye on a sunny day.

Approaching the waters edge Amanda throws down her gear that includes fins and gloves, making her impermeable. She heads off about twenty meters into the waters from the rocky shores. In the distance I see her head bobble up and down intermittently as she scans bellow the surface of the cold waters, looking for signs of life.

After fluttering about for some time Amanda returns with a small bounty of bull kelp in the last stages of its existence. The life-cycle of this plant sees its reproductive cells almost swim to the ocean floor; latch onto a rock before speedily growing up once again - from 120 to 150 feet long towards the life-giving light.

"This one looks like it is good quality but if you feel it it's very soft and in its dying days," she says as she shows me her catch, "Normally it would be thicker and tougher than that."

Amanda described what she sees below the water on a summer's day as a blanket of kelp up to her waist floating in glacier-colored waters. Some fan out like the head of a palm tree growing from rocks on the distant ocean floor. Others look almost iridescent as the suns rays penetrate the water leaving traces of what look like little floating rainbows.

"Its like being in an underwater forest," she describes, "You can see the big bulls going down but you cannot see the bottom as they just kind of disappear into the sea bellow. It's very murky because there is so much algae bloom in the waters. Sometimes I can kind of see the side of an orca; I can picture those kind of things go by."

Amanda also shares these shores with a resident seal that she says has staked out this land as his.

"He's let me know that," she says, recognizing that she is a visitor to these shores. "I have to be respectful of his territory here in the kelp forest. And I've let him know that I'm not killing anything."

"I was scared a couple of times and I just put it out there. I didn't go near his area, he likes to be on this side, usually," she says as she points off in the distance. "He checked me out and figured I was ok. Now it's easier every summer."

Once her work collecting done, Amanda stacks about seventy or eighty pounds of seaweed and hauls it in by hand from the beach to her wheelbarrow.

"It's very heavy and the water drains out of the bag," she says, "before I am out of the ocean there is the weight of the water too and when there's a big surf it's a very serious trek. I take off my fins. I have to touch the ground by then, otherwise I lose mobility. It's a bit of an operation at times."

From there it's only a couple hundred meters to where her truck is parked. She drives her catch to her nearby home where she individually hangs, inspects and dries each strand on a cedar beam, a natural antibiotic. Alaria will take thirty hours to dry while the bull kelp needs a day, she says. Once harvested, Amanda individually packs her seaweed for its different uses.

Sooke Harbour House: The focal hub

If Muir Creek is where Sooke hides some of the best of its seaweed, not far down the road is a focal hub for local seaweed culture. Sooke Harbour House overlooks a stunning bay that looks like a remote corner of the Galapagos Islands. Here too the lazy seals rest; an otter swims about gleefully, and eagles fly overhead in an area that is characterized by its sheer scenic beauty.

Sooke Harbour House is perched on a small elevation just meters from the beach at Sooke Inlet overlooking the Juan de Fuca Strait. In the distance you can see the peaks of the Olympic Mountain range, the first peeks of the neighbouring United States. The sounds of birds reverberate.

Sooke Harbour House is the focal hub for seaweed culture in Sooke, besides being a unique, internationally recognized restaurant and inn run by Sinclair Philip. [Photo courtesy Sooke Harbour House]

The Sooke Harbour House is an inn, a restaurant, a gallery, spa and an ecological way station where seaweed culture in Sooke meets. The inn prides itself on being distinctly local. The tasteful furnishings are made by local craftspeople, the art-works on the walls are local, and the food served in the restaurant is almost uniquely sourced in the surrounding region; including its seaweed.

It is here that two of the seaweed ladies of Sooke give tours to local and visiting tourists about sea-life, how to identify the seaweed, how to harvest it sustainably, how to cook and even garden with seaweed. This is an outdoor classroom where groups of six people to over a hundred people learn about this wild resource. To eat, wear and play with seaweeds.

On the shores of the beach at Sooke Harbour House I meet Diane, an entrepreneurial seaweed lady who was formerly a community activist and politician. Astute, communicative and self-assured, she is a true lobbyist for her cause. Just as fast as I arrive, she fits me with a pair of gum-boots and a durable hand-painted walking stick and we take a walk on the beach facing Sooke Harbour House. This is her ocean classroom.

Diane Bernard of Seaflora at Outer Coast Seaweeds has developed a line of skin-care products that she makes from seaweed collected around Sooke. Her line includes twenty-six products that she sells to upscale spas in Canada and around the world. She is the entrepreneurial magnet that brings together and likely holds together the seaweed ladies of Sooke. But the fruit of the ocean garden runs deep in her family history. It is deeply anchored on both of the Canadian coastlines.

"I am from the Îles de la Madeleine," says Diane, "I have been here on the British Columbia coastline for most of my adult life but I am actually a third-generation seaweed person. When locally they call me a seaweed lady, I sort of chuckle. But it's true. That's what I am."

Diane Bernard: A seaweed heritage

Diane says this while scrambling on chunky rocks in front of monster bull kelp that looks like a massive wound up piece of spaghetti. Of course she was a seaweed lady, I thought, it even says as much on her business card. She is a seaweed lady as I am a cultural navigator. Unusual vocations like these must be named as we call a spade, a spade.

Diane Bernard is the leading magnet, entrepreneur and 'spokesperson' for seaweed culture in Sooke
[Photo Andrew Princz, ontheglobe.com]

The Îles de la Madeleine are a series of small gulf islands in the province of Quebec, a series of interconnected islands inhabited by story-tellers, fishermen and seal hunters. In the Gulf of the St-Laurence, they are wind-swept and isolated for many months of the year, and inhabited by so-called 'Madelinotes', mostly descendents of French-speaking Acadians. But what the islands bring back for her are memories of the seaweed culture of another ocean.

Her grandparents' generation harvested seaweed to insulate homes, stuff mattresses and refrigerate fishing vessels. They used to keep lobsters cool as they were brought to market and she even remembers as a child when it was used as a poor-man's chewing tobacco.

"They weren't focused on the health benefits of seaweed at the time," says Diane, "When my aunts cooked up lobster or clam bakes they would dig a pit and a add layer seaweeds followed by a layer of clams, after which they would water it and layer it again. They always drank the broth in the end."

"I have to tell you that as a child I found that totally disgusting. But now when I look back on those years; they worked with what they had," she reasons.

Diane bends down and picks up the long monster-sized seaweed from the beach, likely thrown ashore from a coastal storm. She lifts it in the air and appears statuesque, talking to me but looking out into the landscape.

"These are some of the healthiest plants on the planet. When you have clean oceans, you have clean seaweed. I am not hiding behind anything and our oceans are in a lot of trouble. But the ocean in this area is exceptionally clean."

Commercial seaweed, she explains, is used as fillers for paints, varnishes, car polishes, toothpaste and even ice cream. It is even used in chocolate milk, ice cream and even paints.

"Over the course of the past hundred years seaweeds around the world are being harvested brutally," says Diane, "What the world does in treating it as a commodity is that they strip it, freeze it, boil it and bleach it. They filter it, and filter it, and filter it until it is rendered down into a very fine white powder. After that whole process there would not be one decent vitamin left."

Intent on creating a new model, Diane does more than rendering seaweed into a simple white powder. She developed a business based on overseeing the development of a beauty product from the time it was harvested from the sea to the time that it put into the users hand. Her idea was to bring real seaweed back into the seaweed products, focusing on their nutrient values.

As we move along the pebbles of the waters edge, suddenly Diane motions me to stop. Suddenly we hear three crisp cries of birds in the distance.

"They're oyster catchers," she whispers. But in front of us there are also ducks, gulls and cormorants. We move on and sitting idly on top of a series of rocks in the distance are lazy looking seals casually watching us. We stop for a few minutes enjoying the rays of the mid-afternoon sun.

Bathing in seaweed culture

On the move again I leave Sooke Harbour House for my third and final stop. I return to French Beach, not far from Muir Creek where I am promised another unique experience; the so-called French Beach Special. Christine was waiting for me for a thlassotherapy session. The word sounds rather complicated but in plain English it was basically a bath in seaweed followed by a scented aromatherapy massage, "especially suited to your individual requirements".

Christine Hopkins had been practicing aromatherapy for more than a dozen years when she began to introduce seaweed into her treatments. A meeting with Diane six years ago - who at the time was researching her own seaweed products - resulted in Christine testing the use of seaweeds as a complement to her own aroma therapies. Today, she bathes in seaweed at least five times a week and believes in the healing power of a mixture of the use of seaweed and essential oils.

"About four years ago I was enjoying using the seaweed so much," she tells me, "I started soaking with them myself in baths. I was not intending to do this, but I was able to get off of thyroid medication that I was taking as the result of a combination of essential oils and seaweeds."

The health benefits of seaweed were not discovered yesterday. They are cited in ancient Chinese poems or even Egyptian papyrus. Christine hands me a book which describes the health benefits of various kinds of seaweed that includes its use in the treatment cancer, fibroids, cholesterol, cardiovascular ailments, diabetes, hepatitis, weight loss or burns. Sure it's not a panacea, I thought, but in a world of imperfect sciences age-old medicines certainly have a place.

Christine turns on the tap in a hot-tub that is speckled with various kinds of seaweed. She turns on some Irish-light spiritual music and leaves the

room as I watch amazed as the small shrivelled up bits of seaweed expand into their original sizes. Floating in the water is what looks like an array of multi-coloured washcloths. One develops into a silk-like kerchief that gives off some kind of gelatine. Another is as rough as sandpaper, but all of them develop color and suddenly look as if they had been plucked from the sea by Amanda the day before.

I hop into the bath and begin to bathe in the seaweed that by now has expanded five to six times their shrivelled sizes, and turned into bright purples, greens and browns. You could really smell the sea, and l begin to play like a boy in his tub with the flimsy seaweed that were my magical discovery of the day.

Montreal-based cultural navigator Andrew Princz is the editor of the travel portal ontheglobe.com. He is involved in journalism, country awareness, tourism promotion and cultural-oriented projects globally. He has traveled to over fifty countries around the globe; from Nigeria to Ecuador; Kazakhstan to India. He is constantly on the move, seeking out opportunities to interact with new cultures and communities.

Andrew Princz - *Tuesday, March 17, 2009*