

War-canoes set out for NAIG
By GABRIEL ZARATE, SRJ Reporter 16.JUL.08
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Tomorrow (Thursday, June 17) the NWT's first "canoe family" sets out from Port Hardy, BC, on a nearly two-week maritime odyssey which will take them down the eastern coast of Vancouver Island to their final destination at Cowichan Bay (Quw'utsun). Tribal Journey 2008 is the largest ever, bringing paddlers from native communities primarily from Pacific Canada and the U.S.

"Talking to the coordinators in B.C. everyone was really excited that the NWT was coming down," enthused Shaun Doherty, Western Arctic assistant program manager for the Aboriginal Sports Circle.

Team NWT consists of 15 participants – nine youth, one elder, one man and four women representing twelve Northern communities and including Dene, Métis and Inuvialuit canoeists. Most participants are from smaller communities but three are from Fort Smith, the town being recognized for the historical significance of canoeing and the portage.

Team NWT will paddle their 29-foot Voyageur war-canoe for twelve days, stopping at native communities all along the way to meet, greet, eat and sleep. They'll be accompanied by other canoe families sharing their route, and still other families will carry out other legs of the journey, finally ending at Cowichan Bay, just in time to attend the opening of the National Aboriginal Indigenous Games.

The canoe families' visits en route will observe the traditional protocols of canoe visits – raising paddles as they approach shore to signal peaceful intent and asking the local chief's permission to land. On land the canoe family will share songs and dances with their host and exchange gifts in a proper potlatch ceremony.

At sea Doherty pretty much guarantees one exceptional sight. Robson's Bight, near the end of their journey is home to pods of killer whales that like to play and scratch themselves in the pebbly shallows in July and August, just in time for the Tribal Journey's canoes visit to them.

Doherty hopes the experiences of Team NWT's members will help revive the ancient canoe culture of the North, reminding people of a time when the rivers were the primary mode of transportation and trade between distant communities. Next year the Aboriginal Sports Circle of the Western Arctic intends to hold the Horizon NWT Cup, a competitive canoe race and spiritual and cultural event, following up on the NWT's participation in the Tribal Journey.