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### Storying Swílcha: Landscape, Memory and Relationality in the Soowahlie Reserve

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By Sabina Trimble

There was just an indian village there, a whole bunch of Indians were staying there, and all at once one of them Indians seen a round sort of crack like this you see the ground crack and kept cracking getting bigger and bigger, seemed to come up like this and cracked, and something tells this Indians better tell your people to move away from there so he went to work this one Indian he went and told all his peoples there you people better move away from here something is going to break he seen that crack and the other people they just laughed at him so he took his family and he moved them away from there, and sure enough not too long and where that crack was it just bust open like this exploded and it killed all the Indians that were living there and that's why it become a lake there the Cultus lake, that's why they call it Cultus lake there were hundreds of Indians.<sup>1</sup>

Swílcha, commonly known as Cultus Lake, is a freshwater lake abundant in resources and rich in stories. It lies south of Soowahlie reserve, a Stó:lō Tribal Council community on the west side of the Chilliwack River Valley, eleven kilometres southeast of the city of Chilliwack. The lake holds contested significance for the various peoples who have had, and been denied, access to it over hundreds of years. It is a storied Stó:lō landmark, marked by its diverse and often conflicting narratives of spiritual and social importance. This study focuses on the overlapping and sometimes seemingly irreconcilable stories that have historically made Swílcha a place of significance for Soowahlie community members, Stó:lō people from outside the reserve, and other non-Stó:lō people.<sup>2</sup> With its origin stories premised on human loss and its consequent narratives about mysterious and dangerous creatures living in its allegedly bottomless depths, Swílcha's history is both contentious and politically-charged. Situated in the heart of a popular recreational park in

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<sup>1</sup> David Johnnie, interview with Tillie Guitierrez, transcript, Stó:lō Nation Archives [SNA], 1972. Johnnie claimed that this tragic event occurred over 300 years ago.

<sup>2</sup> Soowahlie Band is one of eight Stó:lō Tribal Council communities; members of this political affiliation differentiate themselves from members of Stó:lō Nation, a separate and distinct tribal council of twelve other Stó:lō communities. The Stó:lō are associated with the broader Coast Salish linguistic family, comprised of twenty-four First Nations throughout the Fraser River Valley and Fraser River Canyon in a geographical area referred to in Halq'eméylem and in this paper as S'ohl Temexw. Upriver Halq'eméylem is the first language of most of the geographies and peoples covered in this study, and so will be the language of choice whenever appropriate in this analysis. When necessary, I will follow Halq'eméylem references with commonly-known place-names or English definitions in a footnote.

close proximity to Soowahlie reserve (IR 14), and surrounded by other non-Stó:lō settlements, the landmark has been central to conflicts and negotiations of place and power.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I engage dynamic stories from inside and outside of Soowahlie reserve as indicators of Stó:lō perspectives on landscape and history. In particular, I follow Swílcha's place-name narratives and origin stories, as well as other accounts describing the lake's legendary dangers. The persistence of these stories in contemporary Stó:lō historical consciousness is significant; they overlay Soowahlie's history of massive land loss through reserve reductions. Presumably consulting with leaders from the area in 1864, Governor James Douglas had first commissioned Soowahlie reserve at about 4,000 acres. Soowahlie people had exclusive access to the northern shore of Swílcha. According to Albert Louie, though, when Captain John approved reductions to the reserve in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, "he didn't want that," even though the "Cultus Lake people had pretty big land, you know, right up to the lake."<sup>4</sup> Captain John's approval of these reductions resulting in the present 1,100 acre-reserve that is geographically separated from Swílcha, Soowahlie's ongoing relationships with the landmark, maintained through widespread networks of orality, corroborate Keith Carlson's view that "aboriginal people continue to relate to, interact with, assert and exercise title to land outside of their reserves."<sup>5</sup> The metaphysical worlds contained in Swílcha and kept alive through stories exist "beyond the realm where government surveyors can effectively exclude indigenous people."<sup>6</sup> In the illuminating and profound case of Swílcha, whose stories were intended to limit access and keep people away, the landmark has also been a potent and fertile meeting ground for various ideas, peoples and conflicts. The lake and its

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<sup>3</sup> The current size of Soowahlie reserve is about 1,100 acres. It is shouldered on its southwest side by Cultus Lake community, made up of a group of residents that lease lands from the current Cultus Lake Park. The Park, established in 1925 and officialized provincially in 1948, encompasses the lake in its entirety, making it an overall 6,723.5 acres of recreation and conservation space. Massive reserve reductions just decades later meant that Soowahlie reserve members lost this access completely, opening the way for outsider settlement around the popular and attractive landmark.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Louie, Interview with Oliver Wells in Ralph Maud, Brent Galloway and Marie Weeden, ed., *The Chilliwacks and their Neighbors* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1987): 163.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Carlson, "Forum: Appraising Cole Harris' Making Native Space," *Native Studies Review* 16, no. 2 (2005), 134.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

stories have simultaneously connected and distanced Soowahlie reserve from both xwelitem society and a broader Stó:lō collectivity.<sup>7</sup> Corresponding maps to this paper spatially depict the networks of storytelling that, while centred on a single landmark, connect a seemingly isolated reserve with other, often distant, geographies.<sup>8</sup>

In his discussion of storied landmarks among the Western Apache of Arizona, Keith H. Basso argues that embedded in place-names are the histories that survive time and power struggles. Among the Western Apache, place-names are not simply references to spatial locations, but vivid descriptors of important landmarks, giving specific detail about why a community values certain spaces. Orality imbues landmarks with moral and social value not necessarily visible on standard maps.<sup>9</sup> Anthropologist Fernando Santos-Granero in 1998 referred to the process of storying landscapes as “topographic writing,” a means of inscribing historical memory on “individual elements of the landscape,” usually through oral narrative or what he refers to as “ritual.”<sup>10</sup> Santos-Granero views the process and persistence of topographical historical memory in Amazonia as proof that Quechua people had history before colonizers came. Building on Basso and Santos-Granero, I view Swílcha’s place-name history as evidence of the conflict, dynamism and relationality of both local Soowahlie and broader Stó:lō historical identities. Place-name creation is an important part of Stó:lō topographic writing, especially because historicizing landmarks through potent place-names may also mean mobilizing them for particular social or political purposes. Among the oldest

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<sup>7</sup> Xwelitem is the Halq’eméylem word for “white” people, literally translating to “hungry to the point of starving.” I will use this term to refer to non-Stó:lō people who have also had access to Swílcha and storied the lake in different ways as well.

<sup>8</sup> For maps, see appendices. This paper is one part of a larger community-mapping project for Soowahlie Band that began in May 2013. The project encompasses a much broader spectrum of information to be collected and mapped, and will result in a digital, layered series of maps accessible to the community of Soowahlie. I am grateful to the numerous community members who participated in this project by sharing about contemporary and historical places they felt were important to the project. This essay includes a smaller map designed specifically to spatially depict the stories that make Swílcha important to Soowahlie reserve and other Stó:lō people.

<sup>9</sup> Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places, Wisdom Sits in Places*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), see especially chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Fernando Santos-Granero, “Writing History into the Landscape: Space, Myth and Ritual in Contemporary Amazonia,” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 2 (May 1998), 128.

stories of Swílcha's place-name, the lake's origin story is one of disaster and a sudden loss of human life. This pre-contact disaster story has several versions, but all end, as in David Johnnie's version quoted above, with the mass destruction of almost an entire settled village. Both the Halq'eméylem name Swílcha (the translation of which I discuss below) and the post-contact Chinook-jargon name, Cultus, bear within them memories of this unsettling history.

Conflict over the lake's place-name reflects the dynamism of landscape stories and their importance in shaping relations among the peoples employing them. They perpetuate the social and metaphysical connections between the lake and Soowahlie people. "Cultus" means "bad" or "worthless" in Chinook, a language meant to bridge gaps between linguistically and culturally distinct groups for the potentially mutual convenience of both parties. Some place-name narratives attached to the lake suggest that non-Stó:lō people benefitted more from the use of the word "cultus" as a place-name than did Soowahlie people. Amy Cooper explained the original intention of the name Cultus, describing its misuse by non-Aboriginal surveyors in a 1964 interview with Oliver Wells. Cooper explained that Swílcha received its Chinook name because Indian doctors used to travel there for spirit power. The place-name lent to the lake a dimension of unapproachability; it was "bad" because of its perilous power, accessible only to certain men. At the same time, the lake "used to get pretty rough, and the surveyors would go there and fish trout, and well, they just couldn't get any trout."<sup>11</sup> Cooper also said that though the lake used to bear the name Swílcha, "the white man couldn't say Swílcha," and "they thought that 'Cultus' was an Indian word, and called it Cultus Lake."<sup>12</sup>

Amy Cooper's above explanation has three significant elements. One is that Stó:lō people defined the lake as "cultus" because it was spiritually potent, or perhaps because so many Indian doctors travelled there that it actually lost its potency. The second and third explanations suggest

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<sup>11</sup> Amy Cooper, "Amy Cooper at Soowahlie February 8, 1962" in *Oliver Wells Interview Collection (1959-1969)*, transcript, SNA, 76-77.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

the results of interactions with xwelitem visitors. In the one case, land surveyors trying to evaluate the lake had trouble accessing its resources when the weather was too stormy, and only the Stó:lō people who understood the lake from experience were able to fish. The other explanation points to the original place-name, Swílcha. Xwelitem people were unable to pronounce the word, and so accepted the name Cultus, thinking this was “indian.” These two elements of Cooper’s place-name narrative emphasize perceived differences between xwelitem and Soowahlie people’s understandings and uses of place. They focus on the negative consequences of colonial interactions with indigenous landmarks. Colonial land appropriations have certainly limited Soowahlie’s and other Stó:lō people’s access to this important lake, especially after the demarcation of Provincial Park boundaries from the 1920s onward. Additionally, non-Stó:lō place-names like Cultus have discursively displaced Halq’eméylem words in common conversation and on maps throughout S’ohl Temexw. Still, other interpretations of the name Cultus and the persistence of the name Swílcha in Soowahlie historical memory, suggest the continuity of Stó:lō place-making through orality.

Some Soowahlie community members have attempted to harness the lake’s changing place-name narratives for politically and socially powerful purposes. According to former chief Otis Jasper, the name Cultus might have some layered meanings that can only be speculatively gleaned from interviews with Wells.<sup>13</sup> As is clear from the 1980 Cultus Lake Provincial Park Management Plan and other park publications, colonizers have capitalized on a narrow interpretation of the word “cultus,” often arguing that if Soowahlie’s people considered the lake worthless, as the word seemed to indicate, then it was an open space that could be justifiably appropriated for the provincial park or for non-Soowahlie settlement.<sup>14</sup> The park website does mention the existence of Aboriginal stories attached to the lake, stating that the lake was “considered ‘bad’ in an ancient First

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<sup>13</sup> Otis Jasper (Former Chief, Soowahlie Band), interview by Anne Janhunnen, Dallas Posavad and Sabina Trimble, Chilliwack, B.C., May 21, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> B.C. Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing, *Cultus Lake Provincial Park Master Plan: 1980*, (Cultus Lake, B.C., December 1980).

Nations legend.”<sup>15</sup> This interpretation of the place-name, however, emphasizes the historical view of the lake as bad or unapproachable, obscuring a much longer history of Swílcha, and its importance to the foundation of contemporary community identities. Former Soowahlie band manager Otis Jasper suggested contrarily that the place-name Cultus was intended to signify taboo, to designate access to this spiritually potent place only for people with the appropriate intentions and enough spiritual strength (and so with a monopoly on social and political power). Jasper, who is active in trying to restore Soowahlie’s lost access to Swílcha through a land claim, resituated the landmark in a Soowahlie-specific narrative frame. He expressed the landmark’s continued spiritual and social meaning for Soowahlie people. The evident conflict over place-name narratives demonstrates the power of landmark stories in interpreting and potentially shaping relations among peoples, whether between Stó:lō and xwelitem people or among Stó:lō people.

Swílcha’s origin stories and place-name narratives connect the lake’s existence to disaster and directly tie the landmark to the construction of contemporary Soowahlie identities. Keith Carlson argues that “within Stó:lō historical consciousness, accounts of such devastating and depopulating disasters as floods, fires and famine explain and account for population movements and changes in group identities.”<sup>16</sup> Though it varies from speaker to speaker, Swílcha’s origin story accounts for shifts in what became Soowahlie’s collective identity. Locals used the place-name Swílcha to signify to others the dangerous implications of misusing or misunderstanding the lake’s power. Place-name and origin stories also defined social boundaries based on access to the lake. Similarly, according to Amy Cooper in 1963, Soowahlie came to be as a result of the marriage between a lone surviving woman of a devastating famine in a village near Swílcha and a Nooksack man who had travelled north. This joining of the “remnants” of two peoples was the foundation of a

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<sup>15</sup> B.C. Parks, “Cultus Lake Provincial Park,” British Columbia Ministry of Environment, ([http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/cultus\\_lk/](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/cultus_lk/)).

<sup>16</sup> Keith Thor Carlson, *The Power of Place, the Problem of Time: Aboriginal Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Cauldron of Colonialism*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 87.

synthesized collective identity.<sup>17</sup> According to Cooper, the name that the new community took on, Th'ewalí, translates to “melting away,” perhaps a direct reference to the famine that began Soowahlie. Though the creation stories of Soowahlie and Swílcha have some striking similarities, it is unclear to what extent the Soowahlie origin story is tied to the disastrous origins of the lake. According to another Chilliwack elder, John Wallace, recorded in 1967, smallpox wiped out several Swílcha communities, and the remnants of the populations consolidated themselves in a village at the opening of Sweltzer Creek.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the origin stories about explosions, mudslides and flooded basins were attempts at rationalizing or historicizing smallpox epidemics preceding xwelitem settlement in ways that made sense to or tied in with existing historical and spiritual narratives. Only mobilized after contact, the Chinook place-name for Swílcha likely had far more layers of meaning than simplistic assumptions allow.

Linguists Brent Galloway and Allan Richardson state that the word “Swilylcha’s” main root, *wiy-*, means “warn”, and its suffix, *-elhcha*, means “dirty water.” They refer to “a tradition about supernatural creatures that were like swirling dust in the lake water and made people get sick or die if they saw it.”<sup>19</sup> The root may also be a reference to the origin stories in which a man attempts to warn his village about impending disaster from the waters bursting out of a nearby mountain. Some origin stories suggest specifically that the lake’s power comes from elsewhere. Albert Louie, from Yakweakwiyoose, told Oliver Wells in 1965 that the name Swílcha “has something to do that there wasn’t any water there, and then pretty soon there was lots of water.” There was a lake on the top of the mountain west of Swílcha that was originally dammed up. A man “practicing to be a doctor [...] got his thunder power there [...] he dugged a hole in there in that little lake, and that sloshed him right into Cultus Lake where it is.”<sup>20</sup> “That’s why,” said Louie, “they give it that name of

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<sup>17</sup> Cooper, February 8, 1962, 81-82.

<sup>18</sup> Carlson, *Problem*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Allan Richardson and Brent Galloway, *Nooksack Placenames: Geography, Culture and Language*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 117.

<sup>20</sup> Louie in *Chilliwacks*, 160.



Swílcha.”<sup>21</sup> Louie did not explicitly discuss the disaster that befell the village in Swílcha’s basin, as David Johnnie and others did. He did, though, express that Swílcha did not have a power of its own, but *received* its power (indeed, its existence) from an already-powerful lake on the top of the mountain. That Swílcha’s power comes from another historical landmark near to the Soowahlie settlement reflects that this particular landmark was never *inherently* important, but valued, rather, because of its relation to other powerful spaces.

Dan Milo related another version of the origin story to Oliver Wells in 1962. His narrative not only pointed to the lake’s powerful nature, but also legitimated a Ts’elxwíqw-centred interpretation of Soowahlie’s identity, obscuring other oral histories that suggest Soowahlie may have been the result of an amalgamation of Nooksack and Ts’elxwíqw peoples. A young man from the village in the lake basin used to go up the mountain to hunt deer; “well, he run into a place where the skin cracked on the rock. Well, every time he goes it’s getting wider and wider.”<sup>22</sup> When the boy told his village that the mountain was going to come down, they did not believe him and refused to leave. The boy and his family resettled “a little above the cemetery there at Cultus Lake,” but the people who had refused to move “every one of them got buried.” Milo claimed that these people in the lake basin were the “real Ts’elxwíqw Indians.” His story thus connects Soowahlie people generally both with this dangerous lake, as well as with a broader Ts’elxwíqw identity. This account suggests that, layered over the spiritually-laden stories making Swílcha inaccessible to certain people, other stories of exclusivity also surrounded the lake.

Referring to the “real” Ts’elxwíqw people as the lone survivors of mass disaster is political. The claim legitimates Ts’elxwíqw dominance over a space fraught with historical conflict. Amy Cooper made reference to a village at the entrance of Sweltzer Creek who had hostile relations with the Ts’elxwíqw settlement just north of it, near the present-day Soowahlie cemetery. According to

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Dan Milo, Interview with Oliver Wells in Ralph Maud, Brent Galloway and Marie Weeden, ed., *The Chilliwacks and their Neighbors* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1987): 90.

Cooper, “they were Swilcha [...] they were separate people.” This village “used Cultus Lake more than Soowahlie people,” and “you couldn’t go and hunt on their side and they couldn’t hunt on your side.”<sup>23</sup> Both Bruce Sam and Larry Commodore referred the tensions between these villages: “they spoke a different lingo – they were practically in hollerin’ distance from us,” but they did not associate with the other people.<sup>24</sup> Milo’s story claims the lake discursively not for the “separate people,” probably Nooksack, but for the Ts’elxwíqw inhabitants of the other village. In light of these explanations, the story suggests the landmark was central to conflict. It was an important stage for identity formation, differentiation and boundary-making, affirming Bob Joe’s statement that “long, long before the white race came into this country – the tribes at that time had their own boundaries [...] one tribe here, another tribe there.”<sup>25</sup>

Basso suggests that indigenous place-name narratives “illuminate the causes and consequences of wrongful social conduct,” and that “features of the landscape become symbols of and for *this* way of living.”<sup>26</sup> Constructions of behavioural deviance and measures of social control, he argues, are inscribed on physical landscapes by orality. Similarly, Bob Joe’s 1963 version of Swilcha’s origin story emphasized the sometimes-dreadful costs of social imbalance. His version of the story also pointed to the lake’s man-made origins, suggesting again the power of orality in lending landscapes importance. In Joe’s story, young people from the village in the lake basin mock a strong, young man who had dammed creek waters near Smith’s Falls and bathed there every morning. In response to their mockery, he angrily broke the dam. The waters rushed down the mountain, and as in other versions, “the people that lived in that basin all drowned.”<sup>27</sup> The story

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<sup>23</sup> Amy Cooper, “Amy Cooper at Soowahlie, November 24, 1964” in *Oliver Wells Interview Collection (1961-1968)*, transcript, SNA, 430.

<sup>24</sup> Larry Commodore, (Former Chief, Soowahlie Band), interview by Anne Janhunen, Dallas Posavad and Sabina Trimble, Chilliwack, B.C., May 28, 2013; Bruce Sam, (Former Chief, Soowahlie Band), interview by Sabina Trimble, Soowahlie Reserve, B.C., May 29, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Bob Joe, “Bob Joe at Sardis, British Columbia, April 2, 1963,” *Imbert Orchard Recordings and Transcripts*, transcript, SNA, 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Basso, *Wisdom*, 24; 63.

<sup>27</sup> Joe, *Orchard*, 4.

expresses the consequences of a lack of cohesion. Mockery of a powerful man led to quick vengeance: ultimately, the destruction of an entire village. Joe referred to Swílcha as a “man-made lake, pond or whatever,” suggesting again that the landmark was important to Soowahlie people not because it existed from time immemorial, but because it stood as a “man-made” memorial to the dangers of human error.<sup>28</sup>

Current Soowahlie reserve member Maria Kelly’s origin story, like Joe’s, suggests that the lake’s unapproachability is a memorial to the disaster that formed it. Kelly referred to trees at the bottom of the lake, a visceral reminder of the human life lost under water so many years ago.<sup>29</sup> Kelly explained the trees with her grandfather’s version of the origin story: “the water came rushing in, and whoever was left there were never seen again [...] they were never seen again because they either were somehow kept down there or – and there is trees and that down there.”<sup>30</sup> In Kelly’s version of the story, the reason for danger is not described so vividly as in others. It simply concludes that “water came up so fast,” and people “didn’t really listen” to the warnings of others. Her grandfather’s story reflects more so the persistence of older origin narratives in contemporary Soowahlie memories. Rena Point-Bolton, who was born in Sumas but lives in Scowkale claimed, in conjunction with Maria’s story, that divers have seen “petrified trees down there” from the old village.<sup>31</sup> The trees are visible evidence of the lake’s significance in the making of Soowahlie identity and history. Importantly, although “he knew about the lake,” Maria Kelly’s grandfather was actually from Seton Lake in Lillooett.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Point-Bolton spoke extensively about Swílcha’s origins but her knowledge comes from her relatives Sumas. The distances travelled by these stories suggest its importance as a memorial containing symbols of moral significance in broader Stó:lō narratives of the world, thus connecting Soowahlie with other communities, and vice-versa.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Maria Kelly, interview with Anne Janhunnen, Soowahlie Reserve, B.C., May 31, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Rena Point-Bolton, interview with Dallas Posavad and Jamie Witham, Scowkale Reserve, B.C., May 24, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Kelly, interview.

In the tradition of the origin stories, the lake seems to be haunted with other stories intended to keep careless, or maybe powerless, people away. Oral histories about mysterious and powerful underwater beings called slallicum, as well as water babies and serpents in Swílcha, relate back to the lake's origins and perpetuate its unapproachability. Charles Hill-Tout made the earliest recorded reference to slallicum in Cultus Lake, recounting the story of the "shocking fate" of a young man who went into Swílcha with the wrong intentions and was "devoured piecemeal by the fish of the lake."<sup>33</sup> "No one thereafter," he wrote, "sought to pay a second visit to the slalakums of Cultus Lake."<sup>34</sup> Slallicum, according to this story, were mysterious underwater people, maybe those killed when the basin first filled with water. According to Hill-Tout's informant, the story is tied to a broader narrative about the finding of the sxó:yxey mask. His story involves a youth who tied a heavy stone to his waist and jumped into Swílcha. He sank to the abode of the slallicum and cured them of a mysterious illness, interpreted by Sonny McHalsie, in another similar oral history based at Kawkawa Lake, to be smallpox. At the end of Hill-Tout's story, the creatures rewarded the boy with "an object resembling a long stout icicle;" the boy in McHalsie's history received a basket with a mask and regalia in it.<sup>35</sup> The boy who cured the slallicum laid the foundation for cultural and social ties between Soowahlie and broader Fraser River identities. At the same time, the reference to the mysterious disease ailing the slallicum hearkens back to the village's destruction, maybe the result, as stated above, of a devastating smallpox epidemic. The slallicums' existence in Swílcha in oral narratives has been crucial to the development of Soowahlie community identities surviving disaster. They have also served to "keep people away," thus limiting access to the lake's spiritual power.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the power of these stories to deter Soowahlie visitors in some ways persists to the present. Soowahlie community members and other Stó:lō people, Rena Point-Bolton said, were

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<sup>33</sup> Sonny McHalsie, "We Have to Take Care of Everything that Belongs to Us," in *Be of Good Mind: Essays on the Coast Salish*, Bruce Miller, ed., (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2007), 112-113 ;Charles Hill-Tout, *The Salish People: Upriver Halkomelem* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1978), 3: 57.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> Joe, *Orchard*, 6.

“always told never to swim there.” Even a team of professional divers sent down to retrieve a body once said “they would never, ever go down there again.”<sup>37</sup>

Some oral histories suggest that the slallicum respond to particular human behaviours. In 1950, Gus Commodore explained to Norman Lerman that, although he had only heard bits and pieces, he knew some of the stories explaining Swílcha’s two-sided power:

They wanted to see if they could conquer the lake. If someone could, he would become a pretty good medicine man. A lot of them tried it. They’d let him down on a rope, and wait for a signal on the rope to pull him up [...] they’d wait and wait, and there wouldn’t be a signal. When they’d pull the rope up there’d be nothing but a skeleton.<sup>38</sup>

Although Rena Point-Bolton said she had not heard this story, she, like Gus Commodore, associated strange deaths in Swílcha with the slallicum or other underwater creatures called water babies, further discussed below. She heard a story as a girl that mirrored Hill-Tout’s, Bob Joe’s and Gus Commodore’s. She said that sometime in the 1940s or 1950s, two soldiers from CFB Chilliwack went out on the lake and their boat capsized, “and when the divers went in and found them, there was just bones left, and it was just a couple of days, they’d been down.” According to this story, the soldiers’ drowned bodies were “totally eaten up.” For Rena, this was both “strange” and recent evidence of the existence of slallicum or water babies in Swílcha.<sup>39</sup>

Rena’s story not only reflects the persistence of Swílcha’s infamous pre-contact reputation in Stó:lō historical memory. It also demonstrates how Soowahlie landscape stories have been reframed and adapted to incorporate, interpret and rationalize colonial change within existing Stó:lō narrative structures. In *Do Glaciers Listen?*, Julie Cruikshank discusses what she refers to as the “social life of stories,” her name for the dynamism of glacier narratives among Tlingit and

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<sup>37</sup> Point-Bolton, interview.

<sup>38</sup> Gus Commodore, “Gus Commodore Interview with Norman Lerman,” *Lower Fraser Indian Folktales Collected by Norman Lerman, 1950-1951*, transcript, SNA: 226.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Athapaskan-speaking peoples of northwestern B.C. and southern Alaska.<sup>40</sup> Oral narratives, she writes, adapt in relation to historical change, perpetuating social ties to landscapes while also making sense of historical processes of change and loss. Point-Bolton's story about the two soldiers is strikingly symmetrical to the story from Charles Hill-Tout's and Imbert Orchard's recordings. The soldiers were xwelitem, not Stó:lō, people, and they were living on lands that were appropriated from Soowahlie reserve for CFB Chilliwack. These men were, according to the story, still subject to Swílcha's dangers and rules, in spite of seemingly dominant discourses claiming the lake as non-Stó:lō space. Outside people investigating the situation "couldn't figure it out," but others who had knowledge of Swílcha's old stories "talked about it, and the old people, they talked about it and said, 'oh the water babies.'"<sup>41</sup> Reflecting Cruikshank's "social life", Rena's story fits colonial historical circumstances into pre-existing Soowahlie landscape narrative structures, ensuring that the Lake remained meaningful, through mysterious and dangerous power, to Soowahlie and non-Soowahlie people alike.

Rena Point-Bolton also spoke about water babies in Swílcha, relating a story that again suggests both the connectivity and taboo associated with the landmark. These creatures, who are not actually human babies but shape-shifting spirits that assume the form of small children, have been spotted in Swílcha, in Sweltzer Creek, and as far east as Chilliwack Lake:

My grandfather told me [...] this old fella had gone up there, and he set up camp, and he set his net out, and it was still daylight, so he decided to go hunting [...]so he went off into he woods, and he was gone for a quite a while, and he came back, and he thought he'd check his net, and he went out on the canoe and checked his net, and here there was uh, just nothing but heads on there, all the fishes' bodies were all gone, they were eaten up.<sup>42</sup>

After tossing away the heads and recasting his net, the man returned to the woods to hunt, then came back to his canoe, only to find fish heads without bodies again. This time, however, "a whole

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<sup>40</sup> Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters & Social Imagination*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Point-Bolton, Interview.

<sup>42</sup> Point-Bolton, interview.

bunch of little babies crawled out of the water, and they were laughing and they were talking uh some kind of a language, or making noises [...] and some of them were crawling up the beach towards his camp, so he waited until one came quite close, and he pounced on it and caught it.” A fog poured out of its mouth and it threatened to “do terrible things to the weather.” Unafraid of the creature, clearly more concerned about being able to eat, the man forced it to promise that the water babies would not keep stealing his fish. The baby agreed, and after it returned to the lake, the creatures took the form of large beetles. According to Rena, “when you’re in Cultus Lake you can see way, way down deep, and as they got down deep so far, they turned into great big bugs like beetles, huge huge beetles.” The creatures, she says, live there still.<sup>43</sup>

A guided tour with Isadore Charters, who is from Nlaka’pamux territory but married Jean Mussell and has lived in Soowahlie for over three decades, revealed that people have also seen water babies in Sweltzer Creek, the primary outflow of Swílcha. “My wife Jean Charters,” he said, “she’d swim down here as a little girl, and her mother told her there used to be water babies there.”<sup>44</sup> Charters stated too that Stan Mussell spotted water babies in Chilliwack Lake, a frightening image that he could not erase from his mind for a long time. During a fishing trip there, Stan’s friend told him to cup his hands and look into the water. When he did, “he couldn’t believe what he saw; it was like little children, walking around the bottom of the water, and crawling.”<sup>45</sup> Though Chilliwack Lake is nearly fifty kilometres east of Soowahlie, stories of sightings from there maintain ties between Soowahlie and geographies far beyond the reserve boundaries. While there is dispute over the extent of the “traditional” lands of Soowahlie, landmark narratives such as those about water babies in Swílcha, Sweltzer Creek and Chilliwack Lake, maintain networks of historical memory throughout the Chilliwack River Valley. These networks, interestingly, follow the drainage routes of

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Isadore Charters, interview with Dallas Posavad, Soowahlie Reserve, B.C., May 30, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Isadore Charters, interview with Dallas Posavad, Chilliwack Lake, B.C., May 30, 2013.

these important bodies of water. Swílcha is the primary drainage point for Sweltzer Creek, while both of these bodies drain into the Chilliwack River, whose valley ends at Chilliwack Lake.

Stories of a serpent at Swílcha connect the lake both to the Pacific Ocean as well as to other freshwater bodies in the Chilliwack River Valley. Jean Charters (née Mussell), who has lived in Soowahlie her entire life, said her grandfather used to tell stories of a huge serpent living in Swílcha. “People do say there’s a two-headed serpent,” she said, “there’s a lot of stories of people sighting it.”<sup>46</sup> According to Jean, the serpent has relatives that travel the river courses of S’ohl Temexw. Based on this explanation, the lake is transitional, and its stories mobile; water creatures in Swílcha exist elsewhere, thus connecting the landmark, and the people living near it, to other important waterways. Rena Point-Bolton, who also heard Jean’s story firsthand, described the serpent with greater detail. She guessed that it might actually be from the ocean, having somehow made its way to Swílcha via underwater tunnels:

he [David Mussell] and his grandfather went out hunting down by the lake, and I guess there weren’t too many people around then. I don’t know if there was a road there or just a trail or what. They were walking along, talking, or probably just being quiet. And they saw [...] a huge serpent lying on the side of the lake there, but it was asleep, or it was just lying there, and they said it was sort of um a khaki coloured, [...] and they said maybe about thirty or forty feet, and it was big, and it had a kind of a, strange head like a horse’s head, [...] when they realized that it wasn’t anything they had ever seen before, they were terrified of it. So they turned around and walked quietly away from it.<sup>47</sup>

If the serpent came from the ocean, it likely came by what Bruce Sam referred to as aquifers in Swílcha, or “rivers underneath.”<sup>48</sup> The rivers underneath Swílcha are part of a larger system of underground tunnels throughout Stó:lō territory.<sup>49</sup> Apart from physical connections made by of creeks and rivers, other Stó:lō stories lend to the Lake its mobility, further expanding the networks of orality that make it a meeting ground of many peoples. Carlson opens his recent work with a

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<sup>46</sup> Jean Charters, interview at Soowahlie Elders’ Meeting with Anne Janhunnen, Dallas Posavad and Sabina Trimble, Soowahlie Reserve, May 28, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Point-Bolton, interview.

<sup>48</sup> Sam, interview.

<sup>49</sup> Carlson, *Power*, 11; Sam interview.



discussion about “special tunnels” that link together Northwest Coast “settlements that might otherwise seem far apart” on both sides of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>50</sup> These spiritual or “mystical” tunnels make connections beyond the lines of isolation and separation delineated by reserves, and wilderness parks, throughout Stó:lō territory. Like the slallicum and creation stories, these lend certain waterways, including Cultus Lake, particular spiritual potency, designating places that are accessible to certain people and dangerous for others. Thus, these stories further organize people spiritually and socially. Metaphysical tunnels contained in Swílcha both connect and stratify people; in Carlson’s words, they “transform spatial distance and inform social distance.”<sup>51</sup>

“The legends have it,” Sam said, pointing at the waters near Bellingham, Washington, “that if you went into one of the tunnels, you would wind up over here.”<sup>52</sup> Interviewed by Norman Lerman in 1963, Gus Commodore said that “a lot of people think there’s an undercurrent there.”<sup>53</sup> In one story, Commodore explained, the body of a young man who went swimming by himself ended up “on the beach way down there in Bellingham.” At the same time that this story fills the lake with unapproachable power, it also connects to otherwise distant geographical spaces, such as Bellingham Bay, close to Soowahlie’s historical relatives at Nooksack. According to Bob Joe, Sweltzer Creek’s primary outlet is actually in the bottom of Cultus Lake. Young men who went to bathe or swim in the lake were told “don’t get too close to the mouth of the tunnel. You’re liable to get drawn in.”<sup>54</sup> A boy’s body, he said as Gus Commodore had reported, was reported to be found drifting “between Point Roberts [Washington state] today and White Rock” at Bellingham Bay. The underground passage, according to Joe’s story, led to an outlet across the American border. While the story further emphasizes Cultus Lake’s mysterious dangers, it also connects Soowahlie people with geographical places beyond the restrictions of reserve and geopolitical boundaries. Potentially

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<sup>50</sup> Carlson, *Power*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Gus Commodore, interview, 226.

<sup>54</sup> Bob Joe, interview. 2.

dangerous and definitely mysterious creatures coming to Swílcha from the ocean further instill a sense of taboo to this landmark that has also been described by the Provincial Park Board as “a natural paradise” containing “an almost limitless variety of diversions for the summer vacationer.”<sup>55</sup> In the historical memory of Soowahlie and other Stó:lō people, layers of storytelling containing older evaluations of the lake contrast starkly with narratives of conservation and recreation.

Each of the above stories explains and defines who was, or who was not, able or allowed to access the power of Swílcha. First, all of the narratives are about men. Though many of the storytellers are women, the subjects of Swílcha’s dangers are usually male. None of the stories explicitly say who is excluded from access to the lake, but it is not difficult to imagine that such narratives were likely used to empower some men over others and limit access to the abundance of physical and spiritual resources contained in the waters. The stories also define appropriate attitudes expected of visitors to the lake. Certain behaviours and attitudes merit fatal consequences. Young Stó:lō men trying to “conquer” the lake and young soldiers acting frivolously in Point-Bolton’s story met similar deaths in different narratives. On the other hand, a confident, older man attempting to secure his livelihood was undeterred by the water baby spirits, in spite of their threats. When the two Mussell men found themselves in the presence of a potentially dangerous saltwater serpent, their careful decision to ignore it kept them from harm, though not from fear. The sighting alone was enough of a reminder of the lake’s dangers. Swílcha’s stories generate a sense of geographical and community relationality that challenges colonial boundaries set up by Provincial Park and reserve lines. In multiple and adaptable tellings, these narratives make Swílcha a meeting ground for various peoples, communities, competing histories and ideas.

Swílcha is embedded with long histories of power, exclusion and community-building, through stories existing both on and beyond the plane of Stó:lō-xwelitem asymmetries of power.

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<sup>55</sup>Marion Soutar, *Cultus: A Natural Paradise* (Chilliwack, B.C.: Chilliwack Museum and Historical Society, 2005); *Cultus Lake Provincial Park Management Plan*, 9.

Swílcha's underground tunnels are not the only informants of dynamic Soowahlie identities. Conflicts over the lake's place-name, and stories about its mysterious and dangerous creatures, also inform interconnectivity between Soowahlie reserve and the rest of the Chilliwack River Valley, and even as far north as Merritt or Lillooett. The stories explain the sources of the lake's power and express, as Basso found among the Western Apache, the reason for the lake's significance in Soowahlie historical narratives. They set up measures of social protocol and warn against particular behaviours, especially forgetfulness or ignorance of the lake's origins and power. When traced spatially on physical maps, it is evident that these stories about Swílcha generate dynamic, longstanding and widespread networks of orality. While they have served to limit access to the powerful landmark, they also transform the lake into an important meeting place of peoples, histories and ideas. Swílcha and its stories have thus separated, stratified and connected people as long as they have had access to it.

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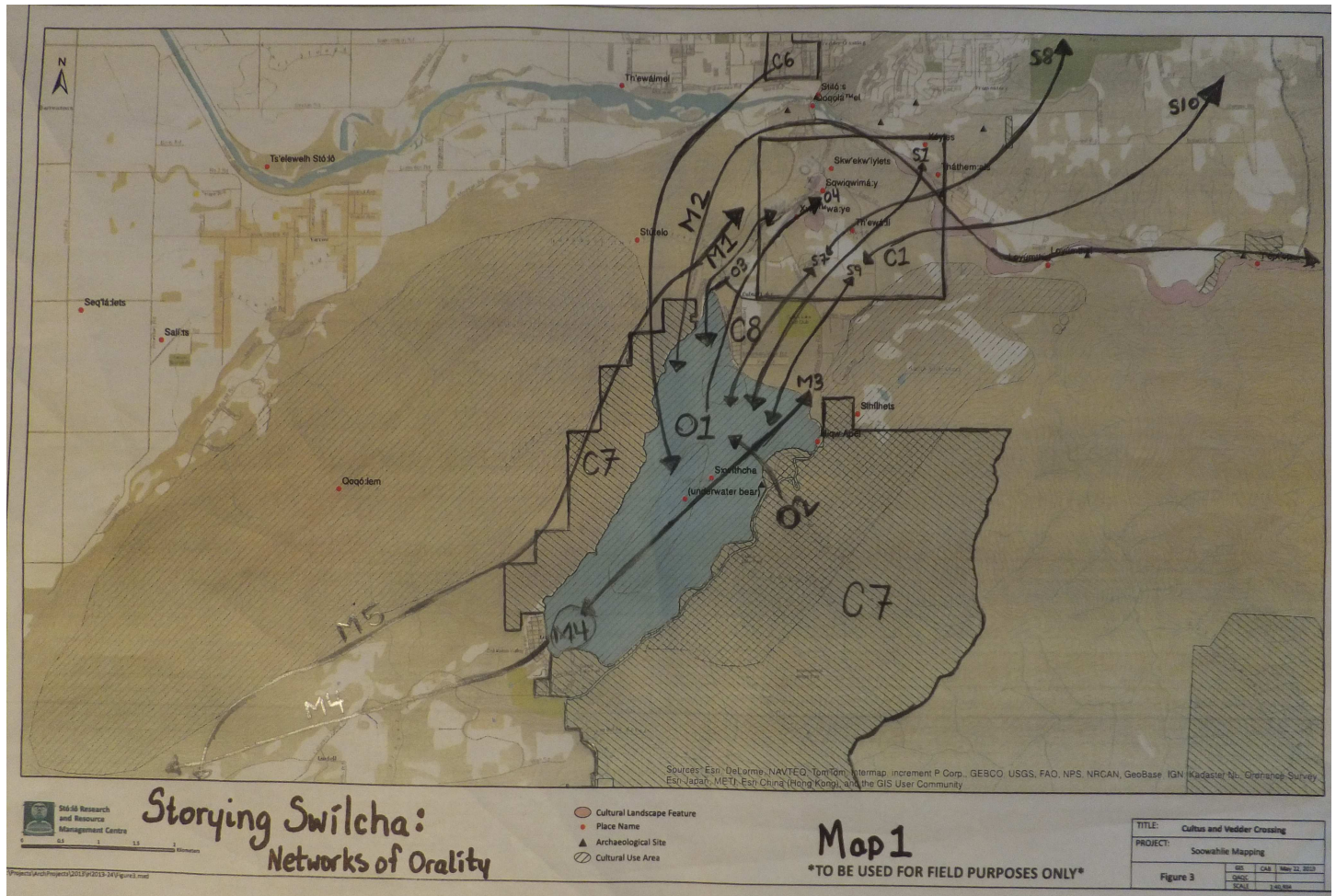
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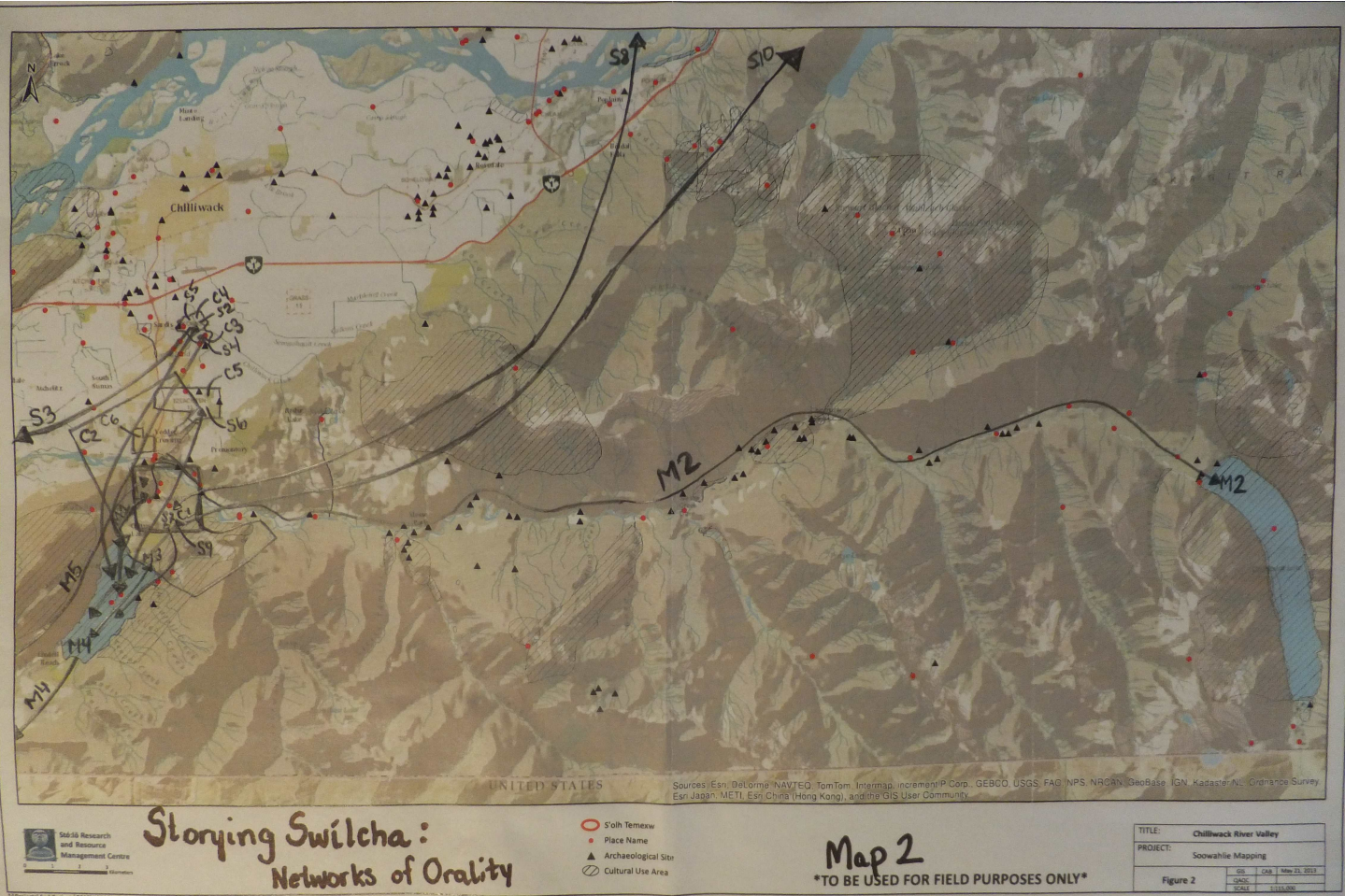
## **Appendices**

### Map 1: Swílcha and Soowahlie Reserve





Map 2: Swilcha and the Chilliwack River Valley



Map Key

Entry	Map Code	Description
<b>Origins</b>		
The basin village	O1	Swilcha's origin stories always begin with a village in the basin of the lake where there used to be no water.
Swilcha's origins in Smith's Falls	O2	Bob Joe claimed that the young man's dammed swimming hole was near Smith's Falls.
Swilcha, "separate people"	O3	Amy Cooper, Larry Commodore and Bruce Sam all referenced an old Nookack Village where the current DFO site is, northwest of Swilcha. These people allegedly did not associate with the other nearby Soowahlie village.
A new settlement	O4	After the basin flooded and only the young man (sometimes with his family) survived, he migrated north, near to the Soowahlie graveyard to build a new settlement. This is the current site of some pithouse markings.
<b>Storytellers</b>		
Amy Cooper's lands	S1	Amy Cooper related a series of Swilcha stories to Oliver Wells. She was married to Albert Cooper and lived on Soowahlie reserve.
Rena Point-Bolton's home	S2	Rena Point-Bolton knows a lot of stories about Swilcha. She learned them from her grandfather and other relatives as a child. She is not a member of Soowahlie reserve, however. She lives currently in Scowkale reserve.
Rena Point-Bolton's birthplace	S3	Rena, and the stories she and her family know about Swilcha actually comes from Sumas.
Albert Louie's Home	S4	Albert Louie lived in Yakwakwayouse when Oliver Wells interviewed him in 1963.
Dan Millo's Home	S5	Dan Millo was born in Scowkale October 10, 1967. He related stories about Swilcha to Oliver Wells in January 1962.
Bob Joe's Home	S6	Bob Joe lived on Tzheachten reserve when he shared with Oliver Wells in February 1962.
Maria Kelly's Home	S7	Maria and Lloyd Kelly live in Soowahlie reserve.
Maria Kelly's Grandfather's Home	S8	Maria Kelly's grandfather, and the stories she knows about Swilcha, come from the north, in Seton Lake near Lillouett.
Jean and Isadore Charters' Home	S9	Jean Charters (niee Mussell) has lived on Soowahlie reserve all her life, and knows a lot of stories about Swilcha from her grandfather. Her husband, Isadore, has lived in Soowahlie for over thirty years.
Isadore Charters' Birthplace	S10	Although Isadore Charters hails from Merritt, which is Nlaka'pamux territory, he holds an abundance of knowledge about Swilcha and Soowahlie.
<b>Movements</b>		
Water babies in Sweetzer Creek	M1	Jean Charter's mother told her as a child that water babies used to live in Sweetzer Creek.
Water babies in Chilliwack Lake	M2	Stan Mussell saw water babies as far east of Swilcha as Chilliwack Lake.
Serpent from the Pacific	M3	Two Mussells were walking near Swilcha and spotted a huge serpent sleeping by the water. Frightened, they carefully turned around and left the lake.
"Aquifers" in Swilcha	M4	Swilcha contains some underground tunnels that lead to other distant places, including out to the Pacific Ocean.
Nookack trail	M5	Soowahlie and Swilcha have been connected to the peoples of Nookack and Sumas for hundreds of years. An old trail from Nookack to the lake physically kept these people connected.
<b>Colonial Change</b>		
Current Soowahlie Reserve boundaries	C1	After a reduction and, later, a small expansion, Soowahlie is presently about 1,100 acres in area. Though stories keep people connected to Swilcha, the reductions physically cut the reserve off from access to the lake.
Original Douglas Soowahlie Reserve Boundaries	C2	The Douglas reserve boundaries of 1854 encompassed nearly 4,000 acres and gave Soowahlie people access to the northern shore of Swilcha.
Yakwakwayoose Reserve	C3	
Scowkale Reserve	C4	
Tzheachten Reserve	C5	Formerly part of the Douglas Soowahlie Reserve, and uninhabited for most of its existence as a separate reserve, people from Tzheachten maintain connections to Swilcha and Soowahlie through stories.
CFB Chillack	C6	Two soldiers from CFB (lands from the former Douglas Soowahlie reserve) drowned in Swilcha. Their bodies came up as skeletons when they were retrieved.
Provincial Park Boundaries	C7	Cultus Lake Provincial Park was established as a municipal park in 1925 and gained provincial status in 1948. It encompasses the entire lake. It is a total of 6,723.5 acres in area.
Cultus Lake Community homes	C8	Residents of Cultus Lake community lease their residential and commercial lots from the province.