

# National Post

## Uneasy truce on the island: Old-timers, dopegrowers: Both want island preserved, but in ways that can conflict

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**CORRECTION:** (From The Natinal Post, Thursday, August 24, 2000) The surname of a forestry consultant who lives on Lasqueti Island, B.C., was misspelled in a Best of Summer feature last Friday. The resident is Chris Ferris. Illustrations: Black & White Photo: Nick Didlick, National Post / Pat Forbes looks out over False Bay from her home on Lasqueti Island in the Strait of Georgia, where she has lived for 50 years. Dopegrowers moved to the island, which has no police, in the 1970s, and have thwarted attempts to get it connected to the hydro grid.

LASQUETI ISLAND, B.C. - When Pat Forbes first arrived on Lasqueti Island in 1948, she taught in a one-room schoolhouse, hauled water from the creek to her house and shared one phone line with everyone on the island.

Lasqueti is the most undeveloped of the inhabited Gulf Islands off the coast of British Columbia, and little has changed in 50 years. Nearly everyone has a phone line now, but there is not a single paved road, no hydroelectricity and little, if any, tourism.

Mrs. Forbes, a retired school principal and great-grandmother in her seventies, is one of the few old-timers remaining on the island. She can well remember the days, long before the influx of draft dodgers and the "back to nature crowd" that flocked to the island in the 1970s, when she and her husband, Peter, earned a good living from logging and fishing.

But the demise of those two staple economies opened the field for other growth industries; hence the arrival on these shores of marijuana, now the most lucrative cash crop in Lasqueti's history.

Driving her rusty Hyundai up the hill from the ferry dock, Mrs. Forbes points out the one hotel (powered by a generator), the pub, the health food store, the post office (letters and parcels, but no newspapers, are delivered three times a week).

"It's hard on old people here," she says, manouevring a sticky gearshift. "A lot of widows have to leave in the winter because they can't chop wood, fix the generator and tend to the farm animals alone."

For years, the older islanders have been asking to be hooked up to the hydroelectric grid. But the majority, says Mrs. Forbes, the marijuana-growing, hippie majority, vote it down every time.

"What we got here is what we want to keep," she says as we steer past Squitty Bay Marine Park and its spectacular views of Georgia Strait. "We don't want to modernize. We just want a little more convenience."

Mrs. Forbes has mastered a number of alternative energy sources in her years on Lasqueti. She is proud of her solar panels

and battery-powered computer, photocopier, television and track lights. But, she says, "life didn't become easy for me until I was 65 and we moved into this house with an electric fridge and an oil furnace."

Mrs. Forbes is a supporter of the "ten-acre freeze," an island rule that dictates no more than one house, and maybe a guest cottage or two, per ten acres.

The issue that most unites the islanders is the ferry. Most of the other Gulf Islands, such as Saltspring, Galiano and Hornby, are serviced regularly by huge car ferries. Lasqueti's ferry is a passenger-only vessel that makes the hour-long trip from French Creek, offering limited access to the island.

Near the ferry dock, several youths are hanging out on the benches outside the health food store, listening to rave music and getting high. "We're easily into our second generation of pot growers," says Mrs. Forbes, passing them by.

"They've made money, invested in legitimate businesses and go on their winter safaris to far off, golden lands. But they stay on the island because there's no law here and they can do what they want."

There are no police on Lasqueti. And until recently, when insurance rates were reduced by 70% for island residents, few vehicles had licence plates. (Cars have to be barged over at a cost of \$200 each way.)

However, Chris Farris, a forestry consultant and one-time elected trustee, says it is unfair to paint Lasqueti as a lawless, dope-smokers' paradise. Ms. Farris came to the island as a 19-year-old in 1971, and never left.

"Because we're isolated, there's a mystique about us," she says. "It's easy to build an image of Lasqueti as a renegade place."

But compared to the other Gulf Islands, Lasqueti is very much a renegade place. The Sonora and Savary islands, for instance, also lack paved roads and electricity but, unlike Lasqueti, are an oasis for the old monied class who visit their waterfront homes almost exclusively in the summer, ferried to and fro by the island caretaker.

The residents of Lasqueti may be rich with the bounty of their illicit crop, but in their worship of nature and dogged self-sufficiency they distinguish themselves from the other Gulf Islanders, who long ago abandoned those values for tourist dollars and are now facing the consequences -- traffic, strip malls and crime.

As she sips from a cup of coffee on the deck of the Lasqueti Island Hotel, almost empty in the height of tourist season, Ms. Farris muses on what the islanders have done right to keep the developers and tourists at bay.

"People don't come because there's not a lot of nice beaches you can access without a vehicle," she says. "There's not nice little shops. You can't bring your RV."

In recent years, Lasqueti has been discovered by kayakers, and adventure travellers may not be far behind. Too much change and Lasqueti's population will be up in arms. The island's insular culture is a well-protected secret, held close to the hearts of old-timers like Mrs. Forbes and the back-to-nature crowd alike.

"You get ties to the island and the ties remain," she says, turning on to the road that leads to her home.

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