

Disappeared at the Water's Edge:
*Investigating Disappearances and Suspicious Deaths Along Coastal and Marine
Corridors.*

BY KLARKE SHPIRUK

Chapter 1: The Forgotten Ones of Vancouver Island.

Vancouver Island is a place of breathtaking beauty, with lush forests, scenic landscapes, quaint communities, excellent hiking trails, and rugged coastlines. However, behind this peaceful scenery, a dark crisis has slowly been unfolding. To illustrate, British Columbia reported the highest rate of missing adults nationwide, with 269 reports per 100,000 people (Canada's Missing, 2023; RCMP, 2023). Within the province, Vancouver Island appears to account for a disproportionate number of these cases, though no single agency published a complete and accurate regional dataset.

The absence of this data, in itself, is a major problem.

Indigenous women are particularly affected. While they represent approximately 5% of the population, they account for a significantly higher proportion of female homicide victims—often estimated between 20% and 30% in Western Canada (Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC], Government of Canada, 2019). They are also overrepresented in missing persons cases reported to police. People disappear here.

The question becomes unavoidable: Why is this happening here?

Why does it feel like everyone is keeping quiet? And, importantly, why is no one treating this like a crisis?

Politicians, mayors, city council members, family members, the *RCMP*, and even some Indigenous communities all play a role. The answer is complex.

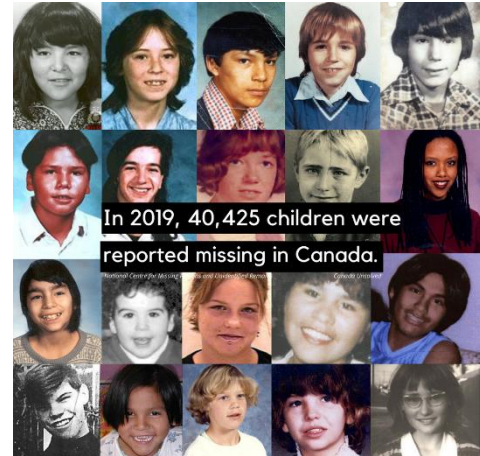
Vancouver Island's geography plays a role. Dense forests, remote villages, and several surrounding small islands, which make searches and investigations slow. But geography alone doesn't explain why so many people disappear, or why many cases remain unsolved. At the heart of the crisis are systemic problems. Jurisdiction confusion means no single authority takes full responsibility. The fractured system leaves families lost in a maze with little support and few

answers. Secondly, many of the missing were last seen in vulnerable situations, alone at night, hitchhiking, struggling with addiction, or possibly trafficked.

These realities increase risk for the missing; however, there is also another issue that often gets overlooked:

Silence.

Sometimes, it is not complete silence, but a lack of urgency that does not match the scale of the issue. Public discussion is very limited, databases are fragmented, and patterns are rarely examined in totality.



(Canada Unsolved)

The silence is powerful.

Politicians may worry that addressing the crisis will hurt their reputation or government investment. City leaders may fear that the Island's tourism will be tarnished. Some Indigenous communities face internal challenges and lack the resources to speak out. Law enforcement agencies hesitate to admit that they are overwhelmed and underprepared. So, what would it take? A politician's son to go missing? A daughter to be trafficked? Or maybe a serial killer found as a way to gain media attention.

However, it is the families of those missing who suffer the most.

They are tired and overwhelmed.

Parents, siblings, children, and friends live with constant fear and heartbreak. They wait years and years without any answers or closure. According to the *BC Coroners Service (2023)*, hundreds of cases remain open.

Many families report feeling ignored or dismissed by officials. Despite some progress, including the *Missing Women Commission of Inquiry Status Update* (Government of British Columbia, 2019), which revealed many investigative failures. Programs like *Violence-Free BC* aims to prevent violence and support survivors (Government of British Columbia, 2020), but the crisis continues and change remains slow.

The *RCMP* rarely comments publicly, meanwhile, families wait as hours turn into days- days turn into months- and months into years.

As missing persons cases remain open, what lies beneath Vancouver Island's landscapes?

Is the marine shipping industry involved in this current crisis?

Chapter 2: Silhouettes in the Tide- The Marine Factor

The coastal waters surrounding Vancouver Island are as vast, mysterious, and constantly moving. Amongst the waves, cold currents, hidden coves, treacherous shorelines, and several vessels. For missing persons, these waters may represent both a barrier, and a haunting backdrop to their disappearances.

Vancouver Island's geography is unique, as it is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean, dotted with smaller islands, and bordered by the US coastline. This area is also largely defined by its marine environment.

Marine environments change everything.

This brings challenges that go beyond land-based investigations. First, marine conditions complicate search-and-rescue efforts. Strong tides, unpredictable currents, and rugged rocky coasts can quickly erase physical traces of evidence. According to *BC Search and Rescue Association*, a person missing near the coastline may be swept out into the waters or trapped in inaccessible areas, making recovery efforts extremely difficult and time-sensitive. The *RCMP*, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*, and *Canadian Coast Guard* often coordinate in these cases, but resources are stretched thin. The vast maritime area to cover means searches can take days, or weeks.

This means precious time that families cannot afford to lose when a loved one goes missing.

Marine Traffic and Vulnerability: The island's ferry terminals and busy ports also create complex movement patterns. Indigenous women traveling between remote communities, or seeking work or shelter, often rely on marine transportation. This transit exposes them to additional risks, including human trafficking and exploitation, which are hard to trace across water routes.

But the marine environment is not just a barrier, it is also a network.

Reports indicate that some missing persons were last seen near ferry terminals or fishing harbors. Places where transient populations mix, and where criminal activity can be more easily hidden. Yet, marine surveillance policing remains limited in this area. *The BC Submission to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2018)* highlights gaps in monitoring coastal and marine-adjacent areas. While land-based investigations are more visible, the maritime dimension remains underexplored.

Jurisdiction Challenges on Land and Water: Jurisdictional complexity is even more pronounced in marine environments. Indigenous territories, provincial waters, and federal maritime zones all

overlap, complicating responsibility for investigations and patrols. This patchwork of authority can delay responses or lead to communication breakdowns among agencies such as the *RCMP*, *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*, and Indigenous guardianship programs.

Environmental Hazards and Disappearances: From sudden fog banks to cold water temperatures, these increase the danger for those vulnerable on, or near water. Hypothermia and drowning risks are high, and in many cases, missing persons are never recovered, leaving families with unanswered questions. *BC Coroners Service* data (2023) and search reports, along with *MMIWG* case mapping, show that many missing Indigenous women’s last known locations are near shorelines or waterways, underscoring the deadly intersection of social vulnerabilities and environmental risks.

Despite the critical role that the marine environment may play in these cases, public and political discussions rarely address it. Understanding the maritime dimension is essential to improving search efforts, prevention strategies, and community safety on Vancouver Island. It also highlights the need for better coordination, resources, and Indigenous-led maritime patrols.

As the tides shape the coastlines, so too must this crisis be shaped by a deeper awareness of the waters that surround, and sometimes swallow the voices of the missing.

The ocean does not just hide evidence. It moves it. It changes it. And sometimes, it disappears entirely.

Chapter 3: Vancouver Island is Canada’s Cluster

On a quiet morning, coffee is made as fog rolls in along the coastline. Swallowing the rocky shores of Vancouver Island, the ocean roars with secrets, spreading through the communities. Stories begin to circulate from family to family about men, women, and children, who disappear without a trace.

No grand headlines, no community noise, no flashing sirens or announcements, just silence!

These disappearances are not confined to rural areas; Vancouver Island has become a “hot spot” for disappearances. They occur in towns, cities, and daily transit zones. The island itself is a remote stretch of land and ocean, and disappearances are not anomalies, but rather have become a haunting pattern. The *BC Coroners Service Unidentified Human Remains (UHR)* database includes approximately 200 active cases and over 1,300 missing persons files.

Each dot on the interactive map is a family interrupted, a family left searching.

The terrain is unforgiving: Dense forests hug shorelines and waterbodies and narrow logging roads twist through the wilderness. Sometimes this leads to police delays, which often means crucial evidence is lost and victims remain missing. Narrow roads and isolated access points which limits surveillance and creates gaps. Human trafficking networks also exploit these gaps in remote areas. A reminder, we are all vulnerable to exploitation when isolated, and it is a factor in many disappearances.

The ocean is cold, unpredictable, and ever-moving. People and evidence can vanish overnight. Last sightings often occur near ferry terminals, fishing docks, boats, and places bustling with transient activity, yet evidence and awareness remain a secret.

A woman hitchhiking at night, a young mother waiting for a ride, a husband's last whispered goodbye—are these the stories of the Island's missing?

In conclusion, the ocean is not the only barrier for these cases. Jurisdictional lines crisscross the water and land, creating a tangled web. This web slows investigations and leaves gaps for exploitation. Some ignorance, some criminal, some yet to be determined. There are also concerns raised by advocacy groups and researchers about trafficking in coastal regions. These issues are complex, underreported, and part of a broader pattern that remains poorly understood.

Families speak of delayed response, limited updates, and unanswered questions. Law enforcement agencies operate within certain constraints, but the silence around missing persons cases only deepens the mystery and uncertainty.

So, what hides behind the quiet?

The question is no longer whether there is a pattern, but why has it not been fully investigated?

In the shadows cast by towering arbutus and rolling tides, the truth still awaits. Waiting for those courageous enough to seek the truth out, speak out, and demand justice for those along these coastal shores. As we journey deeper into these communities, their stories will unfold. Stories of loss, resilience, and the fight to bring home their missing loved ones!

Chapter 4: Families Left Waiting

Behind every missing person is someone left waiting for answers, justice, and hope. And for many families, the waiting never ends. On Vancouver Island, countless families live in the agony of not knowing what happened to their loved ones. Many report frustration with the systems in place and calls sometimes go unanswered, or delayed. Investigations can stall, leaving families feeling

ignored, unprioritized, and blamed. According to the *2019 Status Update of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry* (Government of BC, 2019), a significant number of cases involving Indigenous women were poorly investigated with a lack of urgency and coordination. While improvements have been made, implementation has been uneven, particularly in rural and coastal areas.

The emotional rollercoaster is profound.

Parents, siblings, children, and friends hold vigils, organize searches, and advocate tirelessly, often with little support. Grassroots organizations and Indigenous-led advocacy groups, such as *NWAC* and initiatives such as *Safe Passage*, have become vital allies, helping families document cases and raise awareness. But for the majority, the silence around missing Indigenous women on Vancouver Island is deafening.

It is a silence that stretches from the halls of government to the streets of small towns, and even reaches inside our households.

But why do so many powerful voices stay quiet? That is something we are hoping to uncover in our next phase of investigation.

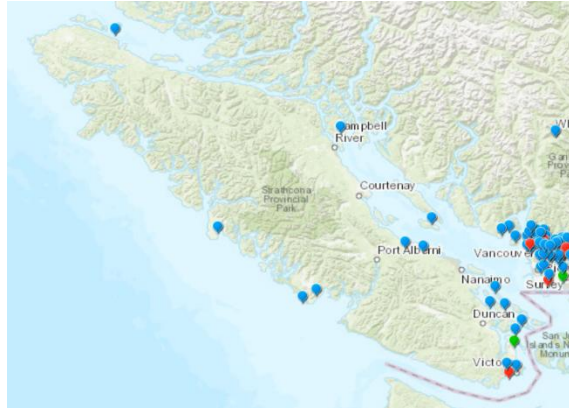
Chapter 5: Breaking the Cycle, Can We Bring Change to Vancouver Island?

Efforts to address the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in British Columbia has gained momentum in recent years. Reflecting a growing recognition of the urgent need for change in today's society. Vancouver Island's missing young men are another serious issue that is easily forgotten, with cases often quickly dismissed by authorities, communities, and media. Suicides deemed too quickly and without questioning.

The Missing Women Commission of Inquiry established to examine the failures in investigating disappearances and murders of Indigenous women, produced a detailed report with numerous recommendations. These included improving police training, enhancing data collection, and sharing practices among law enforcement and social agencies. Additionally, fostering stronger inter-agency cooperation in order to avoid gaps. Since the inquiry, many of these recommendations have been adopted slowly, with efforts to standardize investigative protocols and increase accountability across agencies.

One cornerstone of response is the *Violence-Free BC Strategy*, introduced by the Government of British Columbia in 2020 (Government of British Columbia, 2020). This comprehensive strategy aims to prevent violence by addressing its root causes, such as poverty and historical trauma. It emphasizes providing safe support for survivors.

To better understand the remote nature and geography of this crisis, I would direct you to the *BC Coroner's Service's* interactive map (shown below) launched in 2023, and *Safe Passage* from



NWAC. Both maps visually represent cases of missing and murdered people across the province. The tools allow communities, policymakers, and law enforcement to see patterns and clusters, such as those on Vancouver Island, and its surrounding small islands. By making this data accessible, transparent, and accurate, it can help support informed decision-making and raise public awareness about this ongoing crisis. Furthermore,

there is a critical need to develop safety initiatives that are culturally appropriate and community-driven, rather than externally imposed.

Families of the missing and murdered, along with advocates, continue to demand transparency, justice, closure, and healing. They emphasize that meaningful change cannot be achieved solely but requires genuine collaboration.

Will these calls be answered before more people disappear? Stay tuned as we dive into the communities missing and the marine shipping industry.

The Next Phase

This research project will move forward with a clear objective. To examine whether marine environments, transportation routes, and coastal access points play a measurable role in disappearances on Vancouver Island.

This includes:

- Mapping missing persons cases against ferry routes and ports
- Analyzing environmental factors such as currents and tides
- Marine incidents and frequent routes
- Identifying potential high-risk zones
- Exploring gaps in surveillance and response



(Additional details on the GIS interactive missing persons map to come in later phase. By Klarke Shpiruk)

I want to highlight that the goal is not to assign blame, but to begin asking better questions. Begin a conversation about this crisis, because the most important question still has not been answered.

If this many people are going missing in one place, why aren't we treating it as a pattern?



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