Wolves of the Sea

1 The cool and misty landscape of the Great Bear Rainforest can be found along the coast of British Columbia, Canada, and its nearby islands, from Vancouver Island to the Alaskan border. Within this protected area, wolves roam the forests, islands, and beaches. When biologist Chris Darimont began to study these wolves, he wanted to confer with local First Nations groups, as aboriginal Canadians are known, in order to learn what they knew about these wolves. He spoke with Chester Starr, an elder of the Heiltsuk Nation that has occupied the Great Bear Rainforest for thousands of years. What Starr had to say about the wolves changed Darimont's perception of the animals.

2 Starr asked Darimont which wolves he and his team were going to study—the timber wolves (mainland wolves) or the coastal wolves on the islands. The question took Darimont by surprise. Biologists had always believed that the wolves that are sometimes spotted swimming between islands and eating salmon are the same wolves that live on the mainland. Darimont was intrigued by Starr's classification of the wolves as two different groups. At first, he was hesitant to accept the idea. The distances between the mainland and the islands are small, less than a mile. Why would the wolves on the islands be any different from the wolves on the mainland? To find out, Darimont and his research team studied the wolves on the islands and in the densely forested territory of the Great Bear Rainforest for ten years.

3 Throughout the study, Darimont recorded several significant, observable differences between the "sea wolves," as they are nicknamed, and the mainland wolves. Compared with the mainland wolves, the sea wolves are smaller in size and are strong swimmers. In 1996 sea wolves were spotted on an island nearly eight miles from any other land formation. While mainland wolves almost exclusively eat meat, such as deer and elk, and teach their young to hunt for land animals, sea wolves get as much as 90 percent of their nutrition from the sea and teach their young to dig for clams and to catch fish. Sea wolves regularly swim between islands and have been known to sneak up on a seal sunning itself on a rock and make a leaping attack from the water. Some salmon-eating mainland wolves come and go from the islands with the fish-spawning season, but the sea wolves are full-time island residents. Darimont suspects that some sea wolves live their entire life on the islands.

4 The sea wolves displayed not only physical and behavioral differences but also genetic variations from the mainland wolves. After collecting and analyzing the DNA in 800 samples of gray fur and wolf waste, researchers could produce hard biological evidence that sea wolves had genetic markers that made them distinct from the mainland wolves. A genetic marker is a variation in a DNA sequence that can be used to identify individuals or a species because it is passed down to offspring. Darimont hypothesizes that a change in habitat led to the eventual genetic differences between sea wolves and mainland wolves. Many years ago, loss of habitat and food sources forced some mainland wolves out to the islands. They learned to eat everything from kelp and fish eggs to the remains of sea creatures that washed up on the beach. Wolves living on the islands and mainland wolves became more isolated and rarely mated with each other. Over time the two types of wolves became more distinct.

5 It turned out that Chester Starr was right all along. "It sounded totally bizarre at first," admits Darimont, "that there could be two versions of the species." But he now realizes that this skepticism "definitely reflected my ignorance of indigenous knowledge at the time." Learning to trust the wisdom of the Heiltsuk people opened Darimont up to knowledge accumulated over millennia and positioned him so that he could gather new scientific evidence about one of British Columbia's most elusive species, the sea wolf.