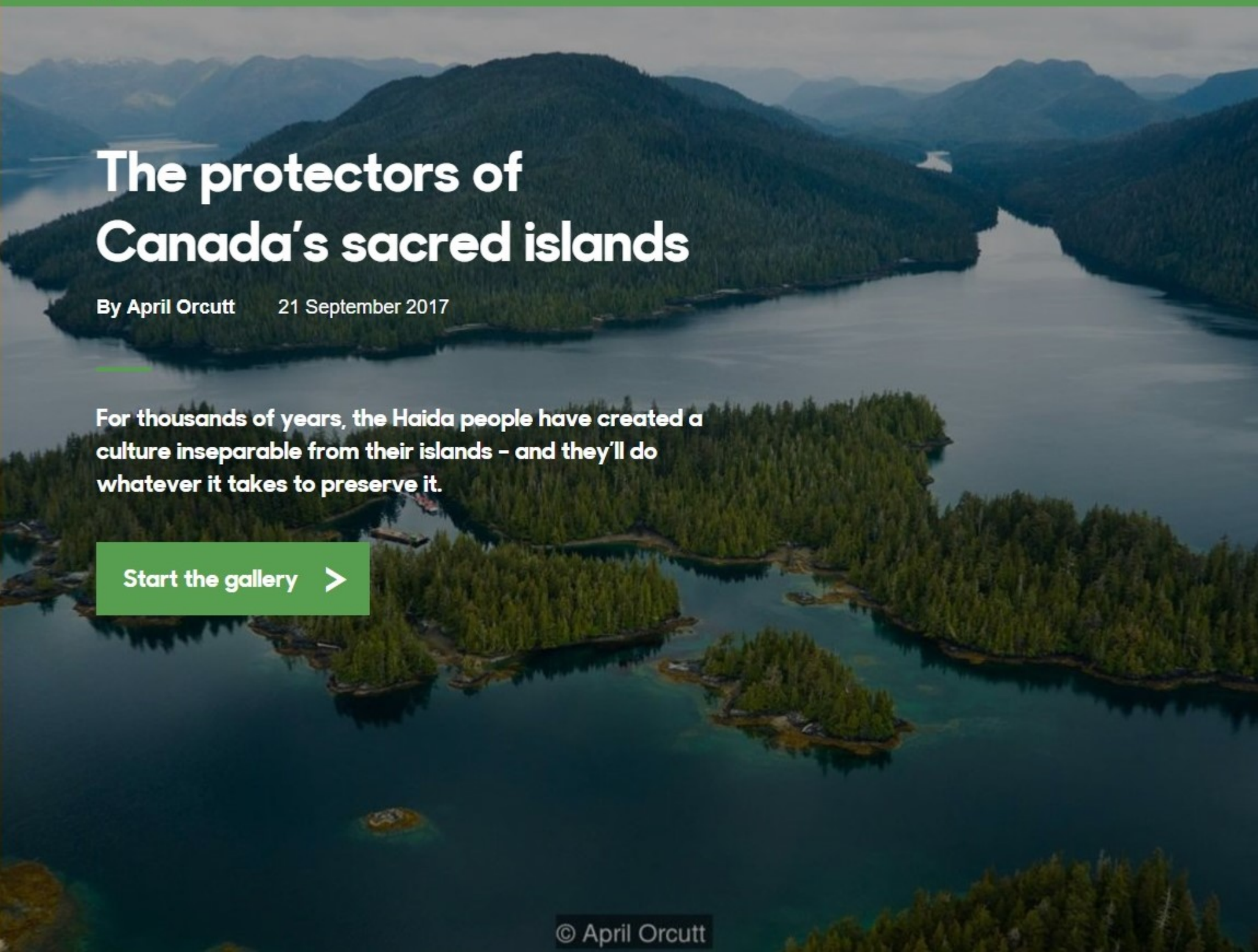

The protectors of Canada's sacred islands

By April Orcutt 21 September 2017

For thousands of years, the Haida people have created a culture inseparable from their islands – and they'll do whatever it takes to preserve it.

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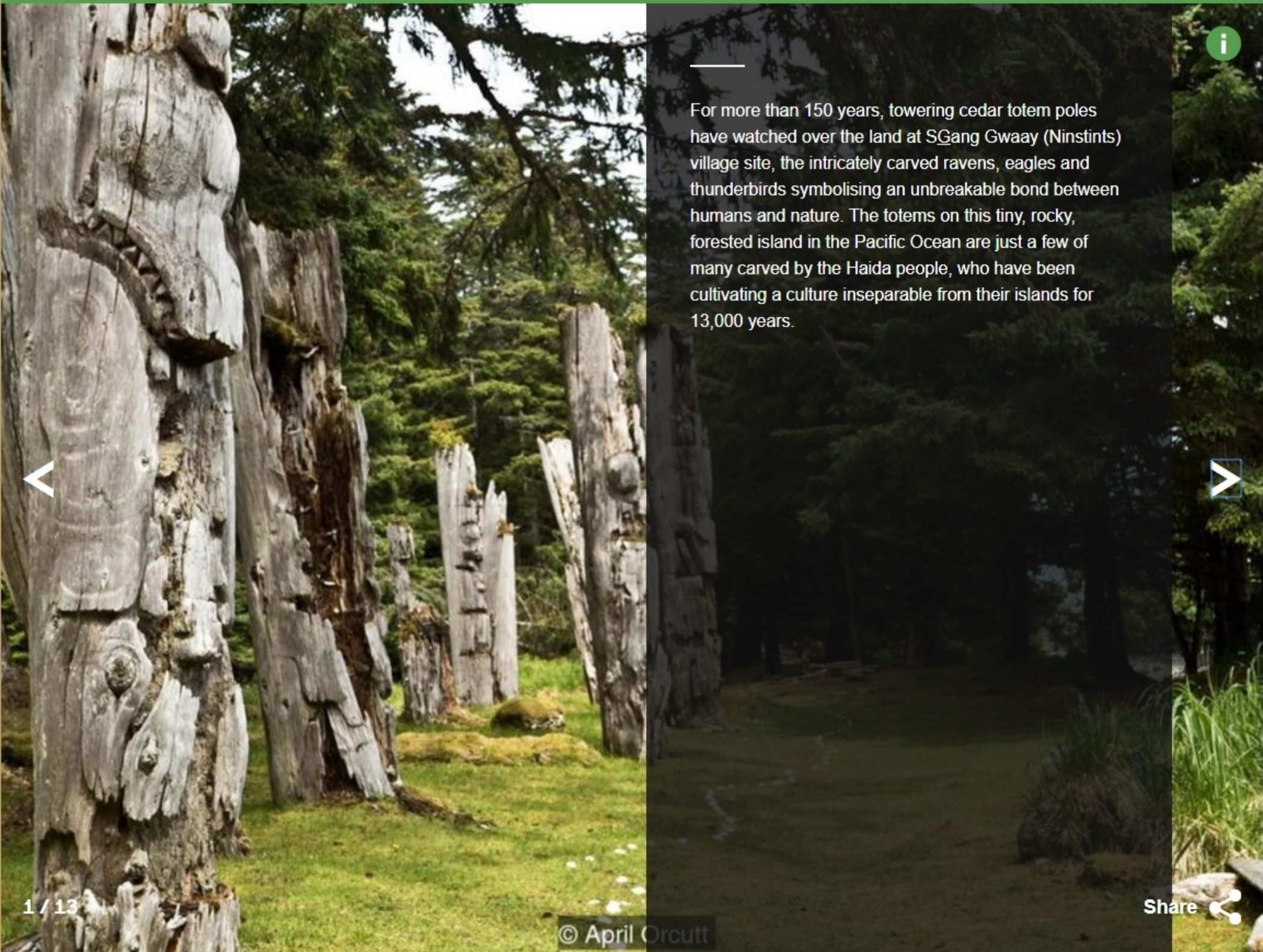
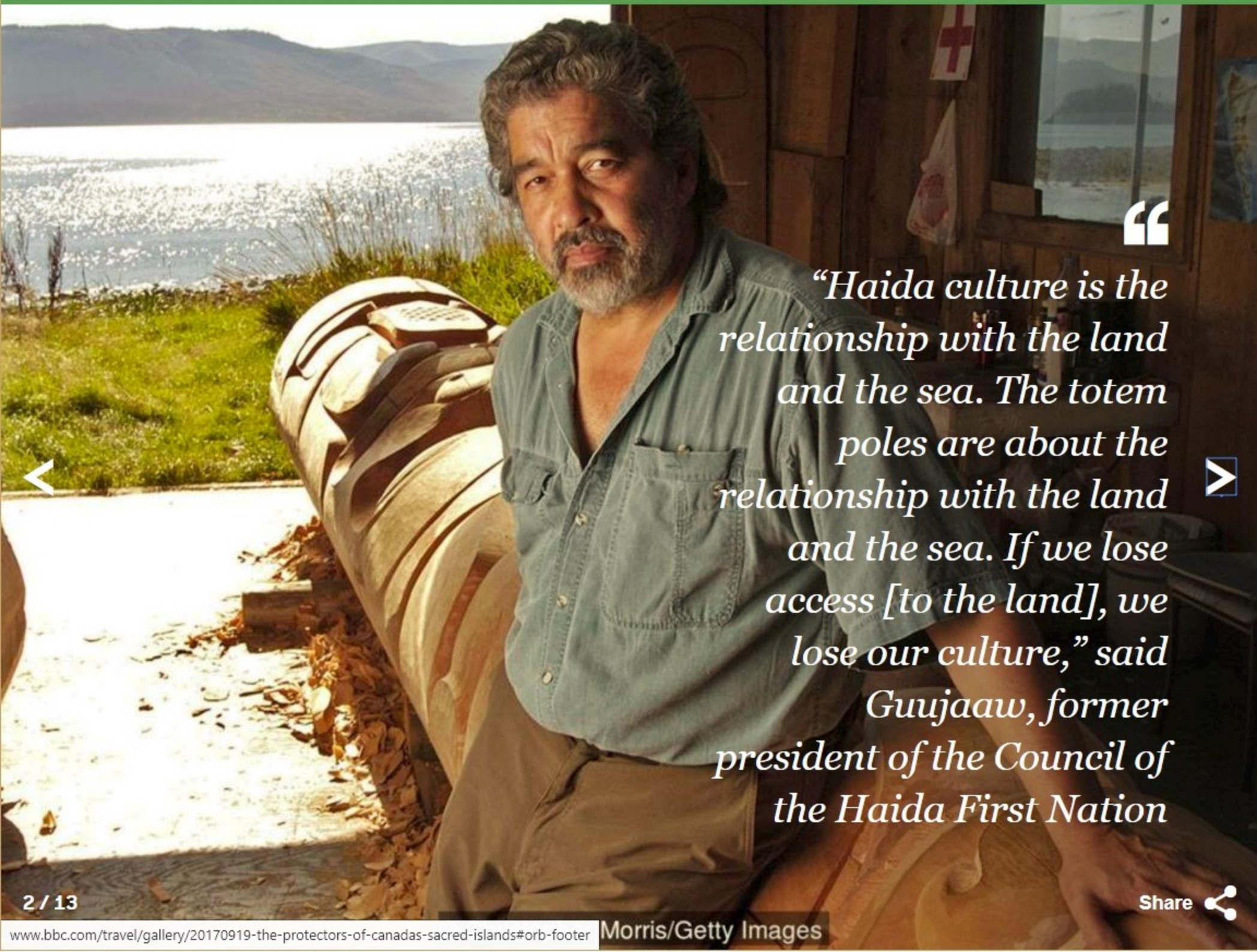


For more than 150 years, towering cedar totem poles have watched over the land at SGang Gwaay (Ninstints) village site, the intricately carved ravens, eagles and thunderbirds symbolising an unbreakable bond between humans and nature. The totems on this tiny, rocky, forested island in the Pacific Ocean are just a few of many carved by the Haida people, who have been cultivating a culture inseparable from their islands for 13,000 years.


"Haida culture is the relationship with the land and the sea. The totem poles are about the relationship with the land and the sea. If we lose access [to the land], we lose our culture," said Guujaaw, former president of the Council of the Haida First Nation
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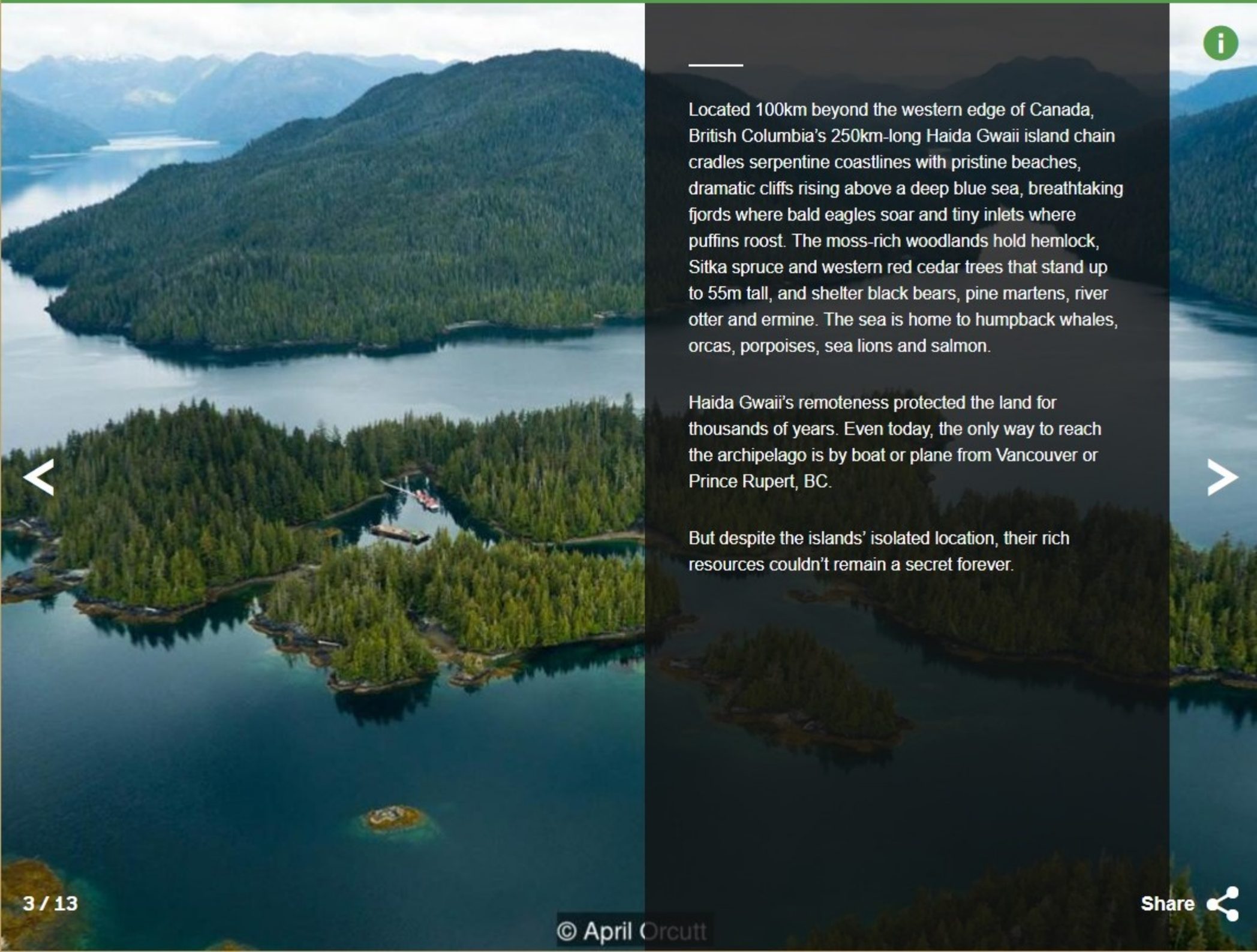
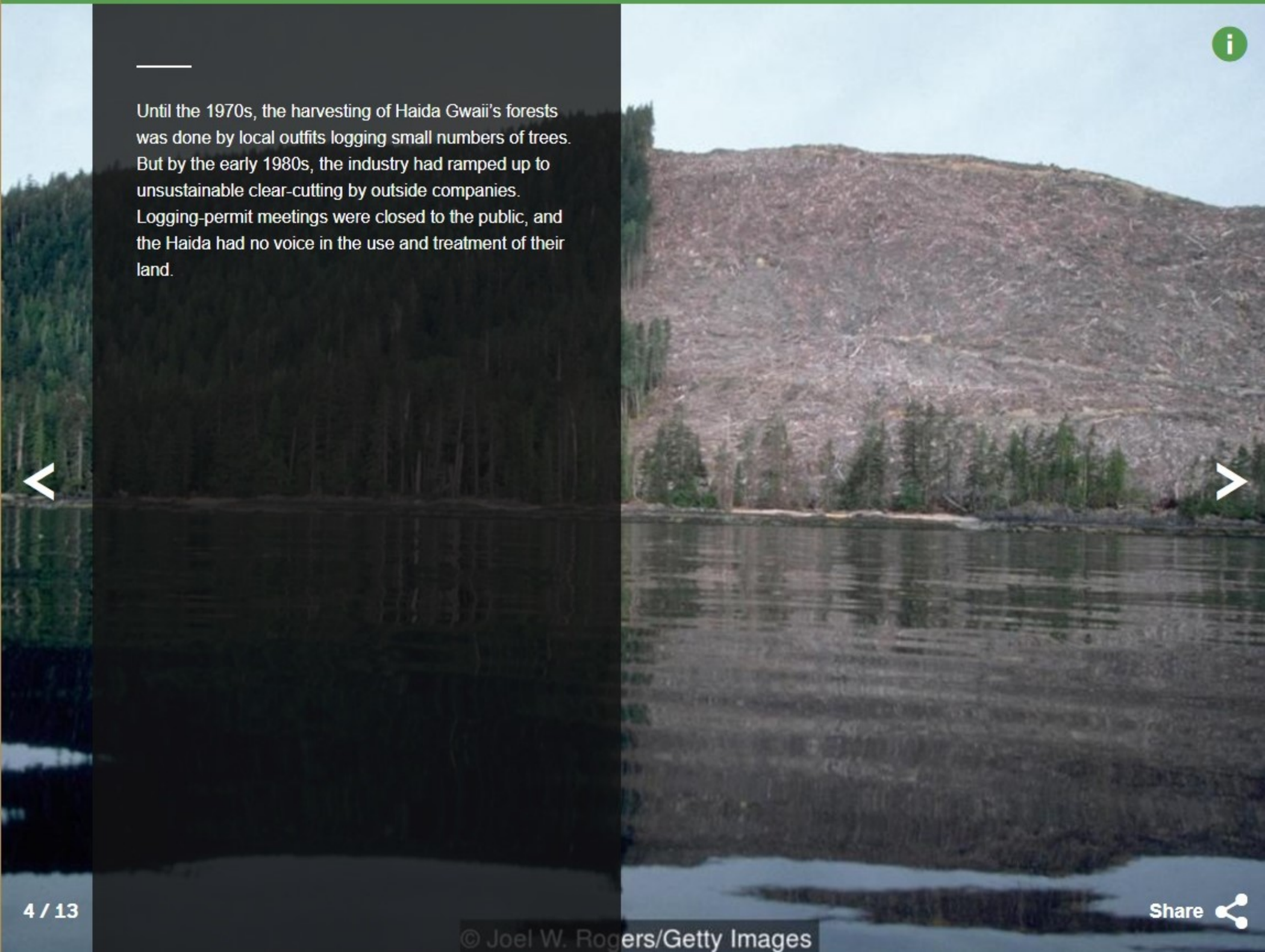


Located 100km beyond the western edge of Canada, British Columbia's 250km-long Haida Gwaii island chain cradles serpentine coastlines with pristine beaches, dramatic cliffs rising above a deep blue sea, breathtaking fjords where bald eagles soar and tiny inlets where puffins roost. The moss-rich woodlands hold hemlock, Sitka spruce and western red cedar trees that stand up to 55m tall, and shelter black bears, pine martens, river otter and ermine. The sea is home to humpback whales, orcas, porpoises, sea lions and salmon.

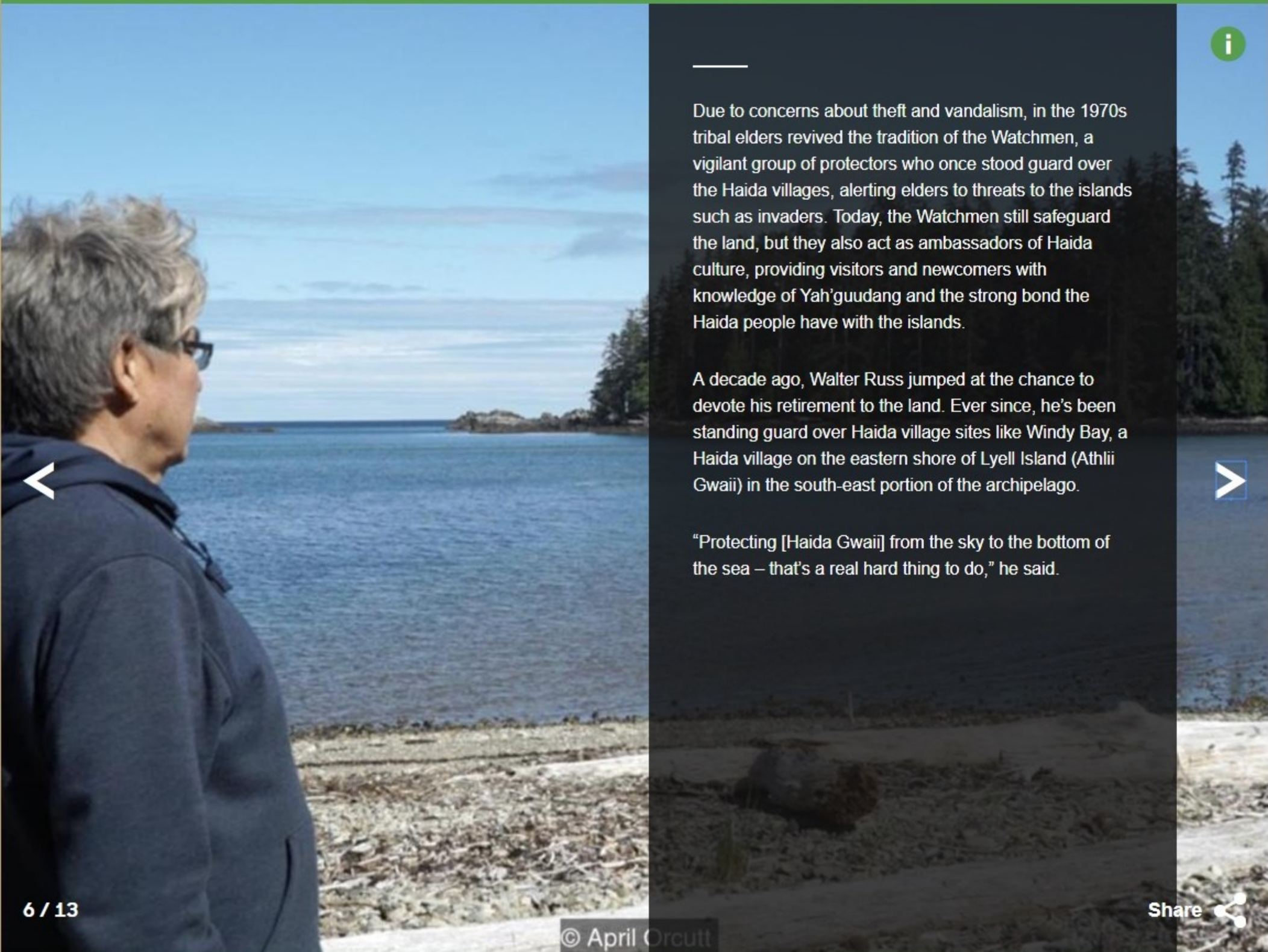
Haida Gwaii's remoteness protected the land for thousands of years. Even today, the only way to reach the archipelago is by boat or plane from Vancouver or Prince Rupert, BC.

But despite the islands' isolated location, their rich resources couldn't remain a secret forever.



Until the 1970s, the harvesting of Haida Gwaii's forests was done by local outfits logging small numbers of trees. But by the early 1980s, the industry had ramped up to unsustainable clear-cutting by outside companies. Logging-permit meetings were closed to the public, and the Haida had no voice in the use and treatment of their land.

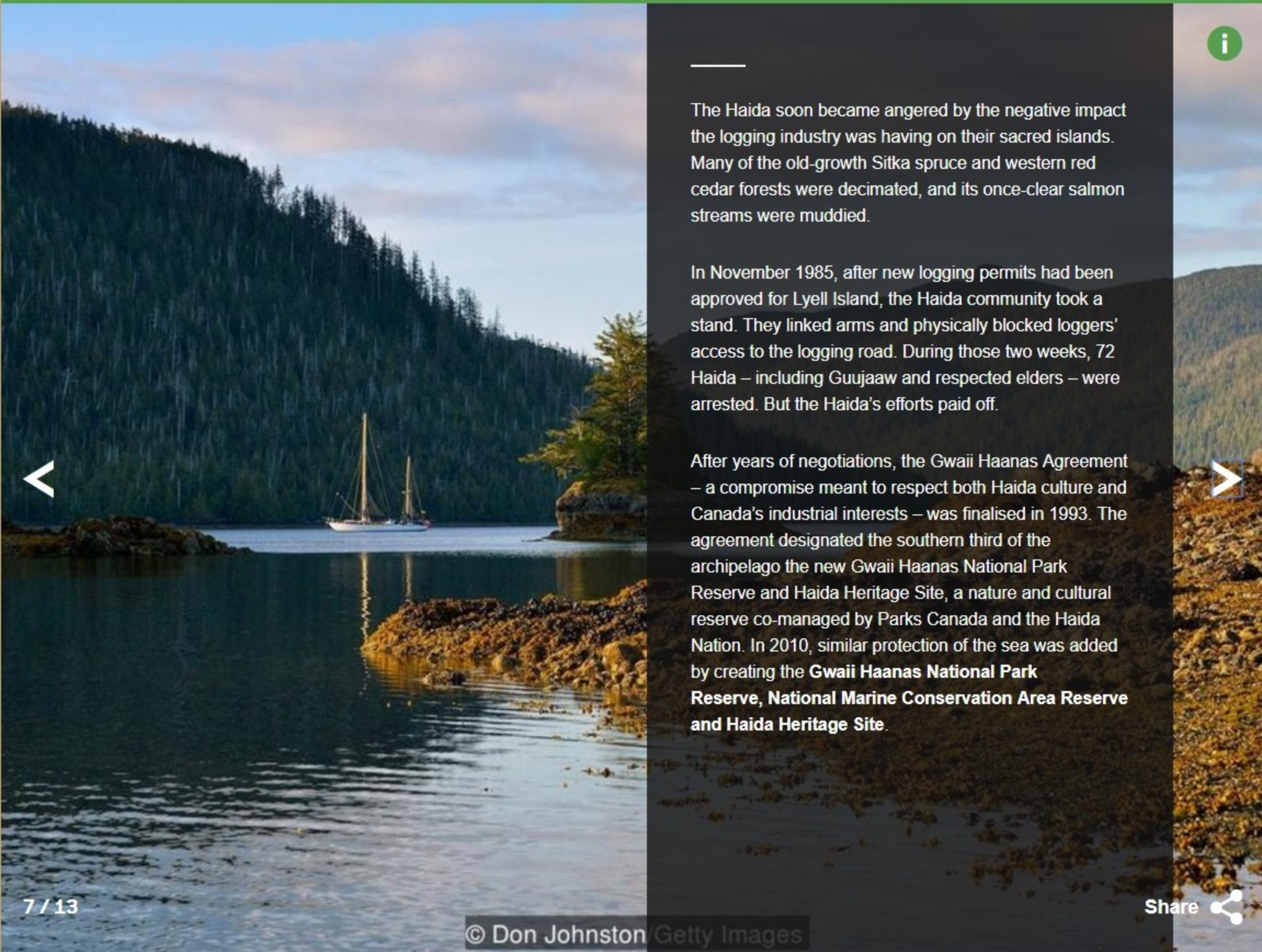
The Haida have long lived by the principle of *Yah'guudang*, which calls for respect for the relationship between all living and non-living things, from the clams in the intertidal zones and the salmon in the rivers to the trees in the forest and the eagles in the sky. For acts as small as picking berries or as large as felling an ancient cedar for a totem pole, Yah'guudang requires the Haida to be mindful of how each action affects the rest of the ecosystem for seven generations to come.



Due to concerns about theft and vandalism, in the 1970s tribal elders revived the tradition of the Watchmen, a vigilant group of protectors who once stood guard over the Haida villages, alerting elders to threats to the islands such as invaders. Today, the Watchmen still safeguard the land, but they also act as ambassadors of Haida culture, providing visitors and newcomers with knowledge of Yah'guudang and the strong bond the Haida people have with the islands.

A decade ago, Walter Russ jumped at the chance to devote his retirement to the land. Ever since, he's been standing guard over Haida village sites like Windy Bay, a Haida village on the eastern shore of Lyell Island (Athlii Gwaii) in the south-east portion of the archipelago.

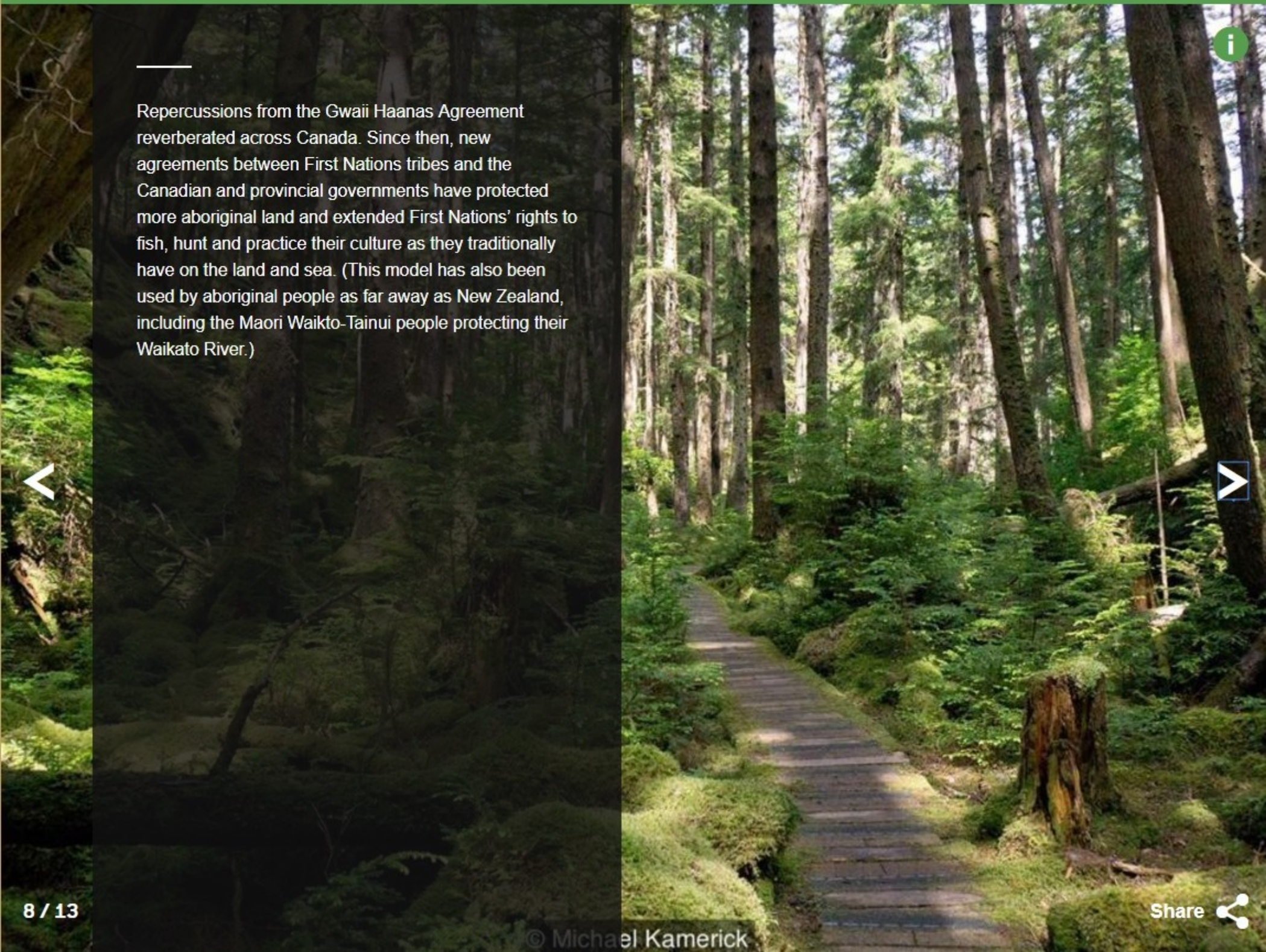
"Protecting [Haida Gwaii] from the sky to the bottom of the sea – that's a real hard thing to do," he said.



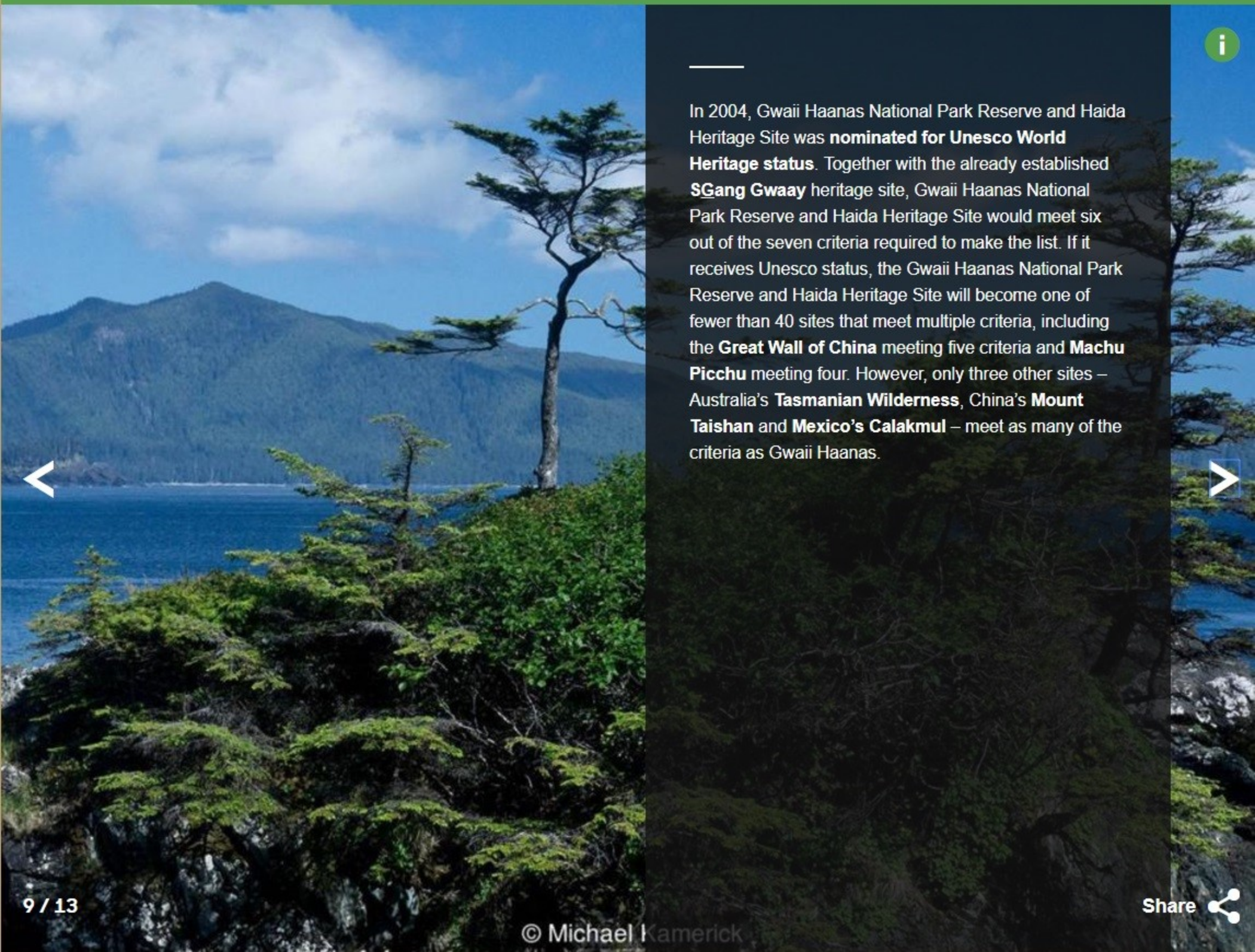
The Haida soon became angered by the negative impact the logging industry was having on their sacred islands. Many of the old-growth Sitka spruce and western red cedar forests were decimated, and its once-clear salmon streams were muddied.

In November 1985, after new logging permits had been approved for Lyell Island, the Haida community took a stand. They linked arms and physically blocked loggers' access to the logging road. During those two weeks, 72 Haida – including Guujaaw and respected elders – were arrested. But the Haida's efforts paid off.

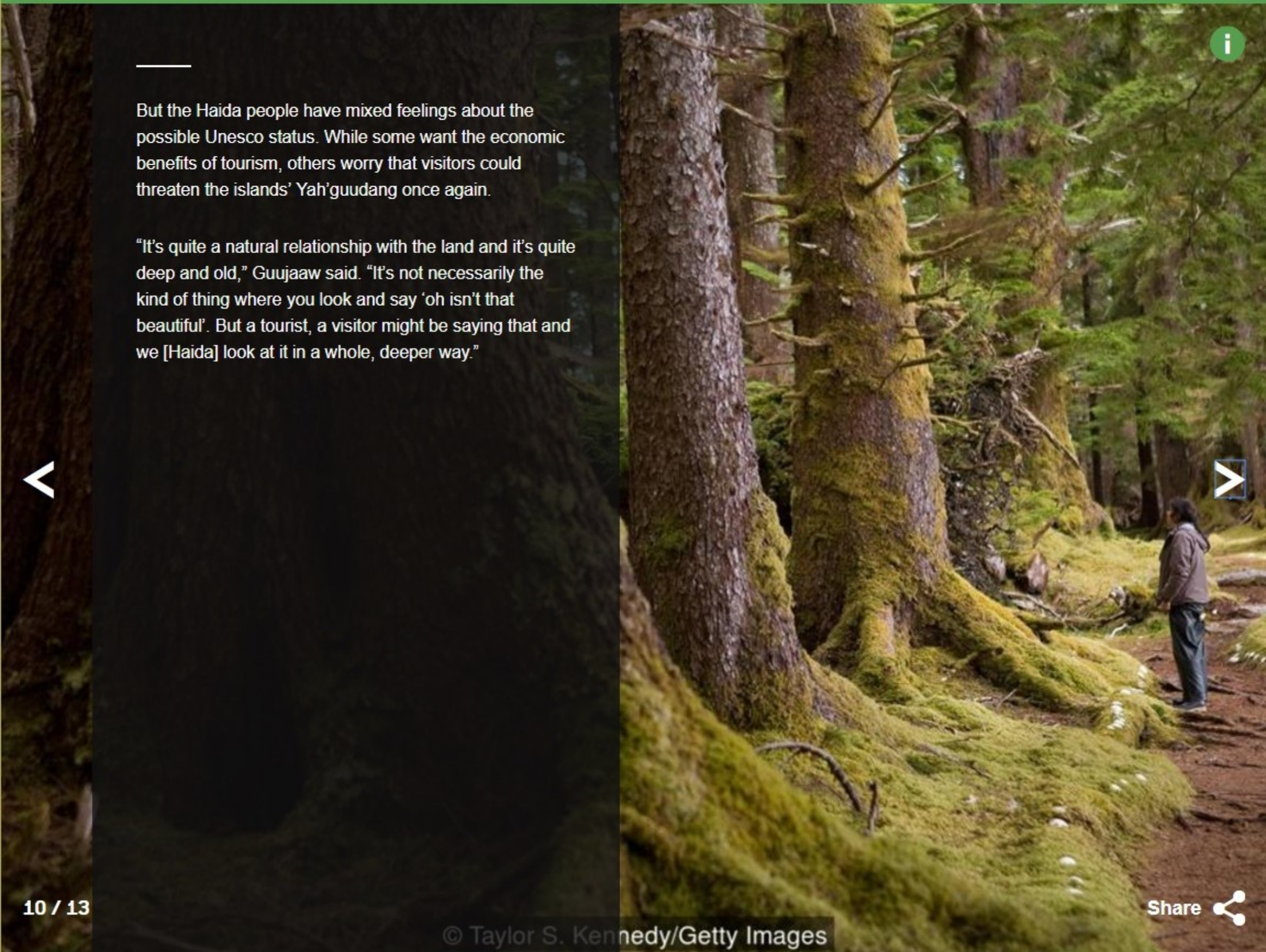
After years of negotiations, the Gwaii Haanas Agreement – a compromise meant to respect both Haida culture and Canada's industrial interests – was finalised in 1993. The agreement designated the southern third of the archipelago the new Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site, a nature and cultural reserve co-managed by Parks Canada and the Haida Nation. In 2010, similar protection of the sea was added by creating the **Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site**.



Repercussions from the Gwaii Haanas Agreement reverberated across Canada. Since then, new agreements between First Nations tribes and the Canadian and provincial governments have protected more aboriginal land and extended First Nations' rights to fish, hunt and practice their culture as they traditionally have on the land and sea. (This model has also been used by aboriginal people as far away as New Zealand, including the Maori Waikto-Tainui people protecting their Waikato River.)

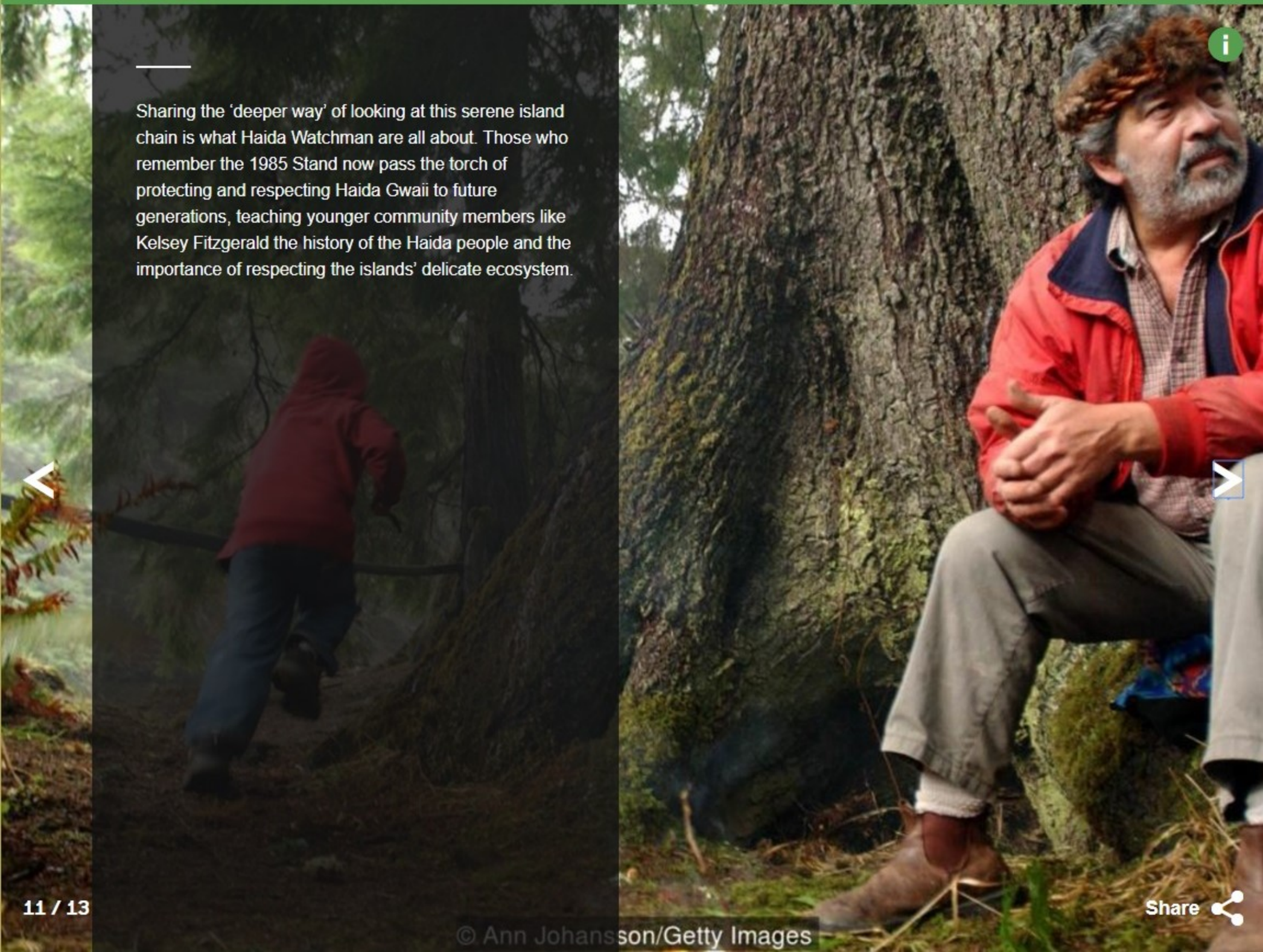


In 2004, Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site was **nominated for Unesco World Heritage status**. Together with the already established **SGang Gwaay** heritage site, Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site would meet six out of the seven criteria required to make the list. If it receives Unesco status, the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site will become one of fewer than 40 sites that meet multiple criteria, including the **Great Wall of China** meeting five criteria and **Machu Picchu** meeting four. However, only three other sites – Australia's **Tasmanian Wilderness**, China's **Mount Taishan** and **Mexico's Calakmul** – meet as many of the criteria as Gwaii Haanas.

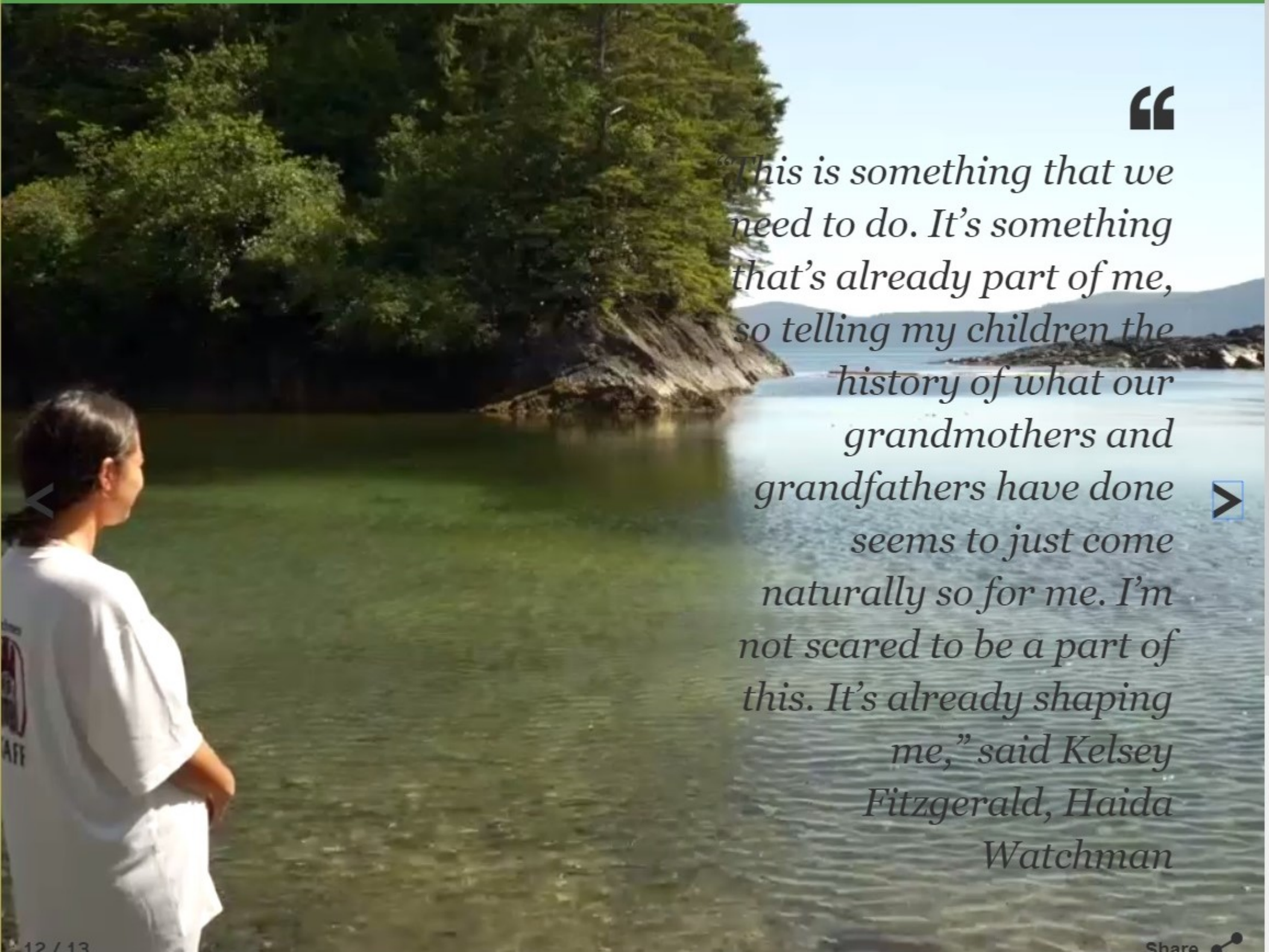


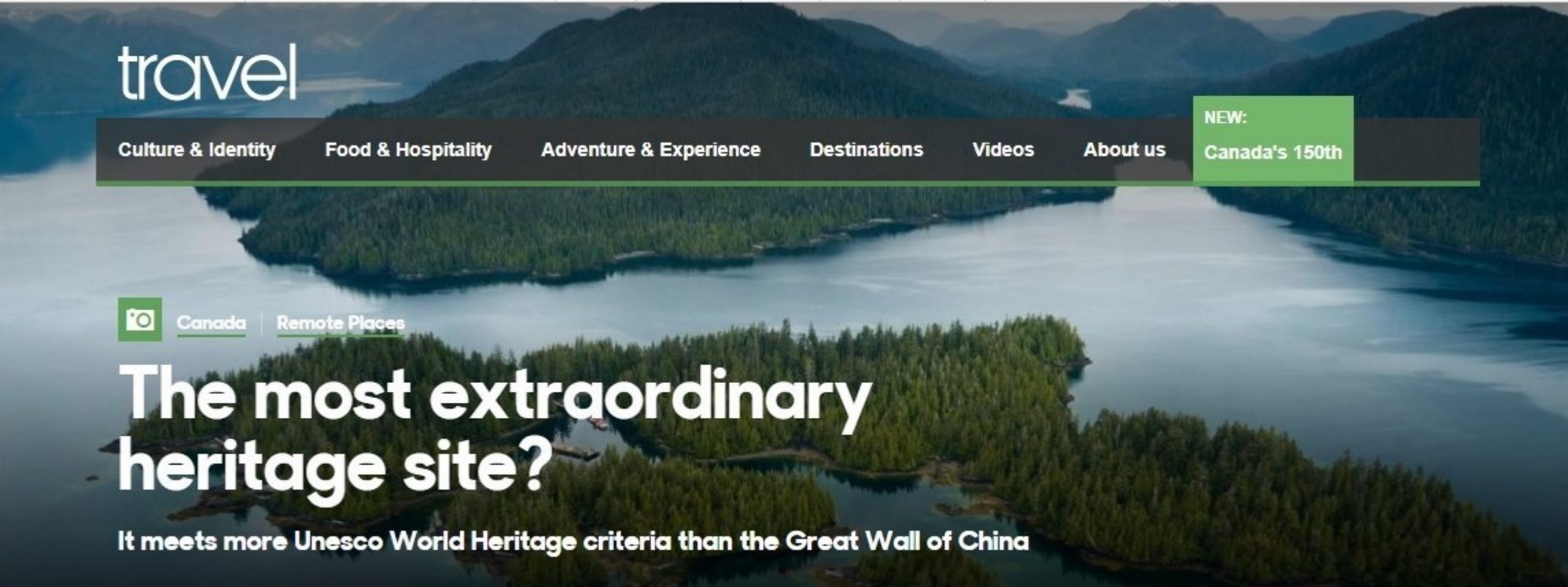
But the Haida people have mixed feelings about the possible Unesco status. While some want the economic benefits of tourism, others worry that visitors could threaten the islands' Yah'guudang once again.

"It's quite a natural relationship with the land and it's quite deep and old," Guujaaw said. "It's not necessarily the kind of thing where you look and say 'oh isn't that beautiful'. But a tourist, a visitor might be saying that and we [Haida] look at it in a whole, deeper way."



Sharing the ‘deeper way’ of looking at this serene island chain is what Haida Watchman are all about. Those who remember the 1985 Stand now pass the torch of protecting and respecting Haida Gwaii to future generations, teaching younger community members like Kelsey Fitzgerald the history of the Haida people and the importance of respecting the islands’ delicate ecosystem.


“This is something that we need to do. It’s something that’s already part of me, so telling my children the history of what our grandmothers and grandfathers have done seems to just come naturally so for me. I’m not scared to be a part of this. It’s already shaping me,” said Kelsey Fitzgerald, Haida Watchman



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The most extraordinary heritage site?

It meets more Unesco World Heritage criteria than the Great Wall of China