

New life for Esquimalt harbour

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One heaping claw of rock after another, a new set of underwater reefs are slowly taking shape at the mouth of Esquimalt harbour.

A working harbour and navy base for well over a century, CFB Esquimalt is undertaking its first marine life enhancement project by building three rock reefs, each about one-third the size of a football field.

With innumerable surfaces and nooks among the nine barge-loads of stone, the military wants to encourage sea life to take hold. But the \$1.2 million project isn't entirely altruistic – the navy is replacing marine habitat before existing habitat is disturbed or destroyed near the jetties.

Mike Waters, a marine biologist with Formation Environmental, a Department of National Defence agency, said there aren't any specific plans for in-water work at CFB Esquimalt, but the navy wants to go beyond and above federal fisheries regulations.

“This project is being done independently of any specific works in the harbour,” Waters said. “It's about DND being proactive as far as making sure anything that does happen in the harbour in the future, it will already have habitat set aside ... and no net loss of fisheries habitat.”

Work is proceeding at a hurried pace to beat the fisheries window for in-water work. Awarded to Quantum Murray and subcontracted to Vancouver Pile Driving, the barge and crane crew working near Fort Rodd Hill has until Feb. 15 to assemble the three new reefs, each a rectangular heap of stones.

The stones themselves are clean of metals or organic matter and barged in directly from a Pitt River quarry on the Mainland.

“Rock is ideal for habitat. It's stable, long lasting, is minimally affected by weather,” he said.

The reef sizes and locations were chosen to maintain safe ship navigation, and that the seafloor in the reef areas is muddy and sandy, while being close to existing kelp beds.

Formation Environmental estimates the rocky mounds will create 11,000 square metres of new habitat.

“We wanted areas that could be maintained in perpetuity, areas optimal for rocky reef habitat. We placed them in areas that appear less productive,” Waters said. “Creating marine habitat it will provide foraging areas for fish, areas to escape predation, attachment for kelp. It will hopefully enhance the ecology of Esquimalt harbour.”

If work around existing navy jetties damages more marine habitat than created from the new reefs, Waters said DND will need to fund more reefs. This is the first time, at least on the West Coast, the navy has created rocky reefs specifically for marine habitat.

“The navy obviously has a strong presence in the marine environment,” said base spokesperson Lieut. Michael McWhinnie. “Part of our leadership priorities is to minimize the impact on the environment and improve on conditions.”

Major projects at CFB Esquimalt with the potential to impact marine habitat include the continued modernization of the Fleet Maintenance Facility, a \$607-million project to replace dozens of obsolete buildings with three modern buildings for ship repair.

The final phase includes environmental site remediation, building demolition, the construction of additional building extensions and equipping the new facility with shop equipment. The overall project is expected to wrap up in 2018.

—with files from Erin McCracken

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