

# Gorge Waterway Initiative 2018 Annual Update



## Introduction

The Gorge Waterway Initiative (GWI), supported by the Capital Regional District (CRD), is a collaborative, community-driven group of organizations and local government partners working to protect, enhance and restore the natural and cultural features of the Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet and the surrounding watersheds. GWI provides a coordinated approach to environmental stewardship of the Gorge and Portage Inlet and their watersheds. GWI is led by a consensus-based steering committee responsible for guiding the implementation of the Gorge Waterway Stewardship Strategy. A part-time coordinator initiates and manages projects, seeks funding and provides administrative support.

In 2018, GWI provided input to the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure regarding the McKenzie Interchange Project, to the Victoria Highland Games Society about a proposal to build a community centre on the Gorge, and worked with regional partners to promote the Greater Victoria NatureHood and the local migratory bird sanctuaries. GWI members attended many community events with the GWI display and watershed model, reaching over 1,500 people with conservation and stewardship messaging.


*Pictured above: A volunteer appreciation barbeque was held at the Gorge Waterway Nature House. Volunteers from the GWI, Esquimalt Lagoon Stewardship Initiative and Bowker Creek Initiative were all invited for a chance to mingle and learn about each other's initiatives.*

## Vision

A healthy environment for all life in the Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet, their watersheds and communities for the well-being of present and future generations.

## Goals

- Provide a forum for the exchange and sharing of information regarding the Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet and their watersheds
- Promote education and awareness programs on appropriate land and water use
- Establish and encourage activities that show care and concern for the natural environment

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# Highlights

## Water Quality

In 2018, CRD staff conducted the following monitoring activities in the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet to assess the impacts of stormwater on the environment and human health:

- Fifty of the 145 stormwater flows that discharge into the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet were sampled for bacteria levels in summer and winter. Low and moderate ratings for human health were assigned to 43 stormwater discharges, and high ratings to seven. Three of the seven high-rated discharges have been a concern for at least the last four years.
- Sediment was collected from five stormwater discharges, and none of these were rated high for environmental concern. Zinc was slightly above background levels in sediment from three discharges, which is not unusual.
- Intensive marine sampling was done in Victoria Harbour, the Gorge and Portage Inlet. Cecelia Creek watershed health was assessed through intensive monitoring and collection of benthic invertebrate data. Results from marine and watershed sampling will be analyzed, shared with municipalities and made publicly available in 2019.

## Land & Water Use

The GWI consulted with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (TRAN) several times in 2018 about the McKenzie Interchange Project adjacent to Cuthbert Holmes Park and the Colquitz River. GWI expressed concern about repeated sediment spills into the Colquitz from the construction site, and requested to be consulted about the remediation plans for the ecosystem loss and planting plans for the large berm being constructed.

TRAN staff met with GWI members several times at the project site to discuss these and other concerns, and attended a GWI meeting to present draft plans for a water quality treatment wetland for runoff from part of the interchange. GWI members were very supportive of the wetland proposal to ameliorate some of the interchange runoff. We continue to consult with TRAN about a mitigation plan for offsetting

the loss of large stands of Garry oak, trembling aspen and other mature trees removed during this project. Members were concerned about the low monetary values assigned to the ecosystems lost in this project. At GWI's recommendation, an ecological restoration expert was engaged to ensure that the roadside berm being constructed is revegetated with site-appropriate species. "Rough and loose" surface treatment of the soil is being used to encourage plant establishment, as well as inclusion of coarse woody debris.

The Victoria Highland Games Association (VHGA) now manages Craigflower Manor Historic Site on Portage Inlet, and a Scottish Community Centre is proposed for the site. Following input from GWI on design and placement of the building, VHGA relocated the proposed new structure to the opposite side of the property away from the waterfront. GWI also emphasized the value of incorporating Green Shores™ design principles to their shoreline development. The new design fits well with the site and leaves the shoreline in its more natural state.

GWI provided input to Saanich on a proposed dock expansion at Victoria Canoe & Kayak Club. Members also provided input to the City of Victoria regarding the lighting regime at the new Johnson Street bridge, to reduce potential impacts to fish and other marine life passing beneath it. Esquimalt staff presented highlights of proposed revisions to their official Community Plan at a GWI meeting.



*Lush eelgrass meadows in the Gorge Waterway offer ideal feeding grounds for the Pacific Great Blue Heron, a federally listed Species of Special Concern. (Credit: Jacques Sirois)*



*Water quality has improved in the Gorge in recent years, and there are now monthly swim events throughout the year. Not surprisingly, the largest crowds come out in July for the annual Gorge Swim Fest. (Credit: Heather Wright)*

## Elk/Beaver Lake

CRD staff have re-engaged an intergovernmental working group to review water quality, with a particular focus on reducing cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) blooms and invasive plant growth, and improving fish habitat. CRD staff collected water quality samples in fall 2018 to supplement historical data from the Ministry of Environment & Climate Change Strategy. CRD retained expert consultants to analyze decades of water quality data, identify critical knowledge gaps and collect additional data needed to identify an appropriate remediation solution. Staff continued to monitor for the visible presence of cyanobacteria.

In 2019, staff will continue to coordinate efforts with the intergovernmental working group, expert consultants, stakeholders and interest groups to improve water quality at Elk/Beaver Lake.

## Migratory Bird Sanctuary

GWl members continued to promote public awareness of the Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary. The problem

of Canada geese uprooting eelgrass in the Gorge was discussed and members alerted the Canadian Wildlife Service to this regional issue. The CWS recently hired new staff to manage federally protected areas in BC, and GWl is looking forward to action being taken on this issue. A two-year bird survey, part of a larger harbour ecological inventory, will provide data on numbers of geese seasonally in the waterway, and possible impacts on the extent and density of eelgrass meadows.

GWl continued to work with regional partners to raise awareness of the Greater Victoria NatureHood established in 2017.

## Community Outreach

The GWl display was brought to many community outreach events in 2018, including the Vic West Fest, Selkirk Waterfront Festival, two Oceans Day events, Canada Day on the Gorge and the Gorge Swim Fest. Approximately 1,500 people were reached through these efforts. In addition, the GWl display, InfoSheets and the interactive watershed model of the Gorge Waterway were on display and used for programming at the Gorge Waterway Nature House throughout the year.

# GWI Partners

## Community Groups

- Burnside Gorge Community Association
- Esquimalt Residents Association
- Friends of Cuthbert Holmes Park
- Friends of Swan Creek Watershed
- Friends of Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary
- Gorge Swim Fest Society
- Gorge Tillicum Community Association
- Gorge Waterway Action Society
- Habitat Acquisition Trust
- Peninsula Streams Society
- Portage Inlet Protection Society
- Portage Inlet Sanctuary Colquitz Estuary Society
- Salmon in the City
- SeaChange Marine Conservation Society
- South Island Aquatic Stewardship Society
- South Island Sea Kayaking Association
- Veins of Life Watershed Society
- Victoria Canoe and Kayak Club
- Victoria Golden Rods and Reels Fishing and Social Club
- Victoria Highland Games Association
- Victoria West Community Association
- World Fisheries Trust
- World Wildlife Fund

## Government Agencies

- Capital Regional District
- City of Victoria
- District of Saanich
- Township of Esquimalt
- Town of View Royal
- Canadian Wildlife Service

# Gorge Waterway Initiative

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*Thanks to efforts by GWI partners and the Canadian Wildlife Service, there are now over 50 signs like this in place throughout the Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary.*

## Focus for 2019

In 2019, GWI will focus on:

- Continuing to provide input to review processes for developments along the waterway
- Providing input to the CRD Harbours Program habitat mapping, focusing on tidal marsh, eelgrass, kelp and Olympia oysters and identifying key areas for restoration
- Providing input to bird and fish surveys throughout the waterway
- Promoting the Green Shores™ program to shoreline residents and encouraging municipalities to incorporate Green Shores™ principles into planning initiatives
- Promoting activities that engage the community in stewardship of the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet

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