

Gorge Waterway Initiative 2014 Annual Report



GWI Interpretive sign on the new Craigflower Bridge.

Introduction

The Gorge Waterway Initiative (GWI), supported by the Capital Regional District (CRD), is a collaborative, community-driven group of organizations 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 2014 the GWI worked with Esquimalt Nation and Songhees Nation to develop interpretive signage for the new Craigflower Bridge, in partnership with the District of Saanich and Town of View Royal. The committee provided input to City of Victoria on the proposed Gorge Waterway Park zoning bylaw, and made a request to all municipalities to become a regular referral group for development proposals along the waterway. Throughout the year GWI continued to improve community appreciation and stewardship for the waterway, helped protect threatened and endangered wildlife on the waterway and conducted habitat restoration projects.

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

Goal 1:

Provide a forum for the exchange and sharing of information regarding the Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet and their watersheds.

Goal 2:

Promote education and awareness programs on appropriate land and water use.

Goal 3:

Establish and encourage activities that show care and concern for the natural environment.

Highlights

Water Quality Objectives

CRD Harbours Program staff presented results of their 2013 public survey of the core area harbours to the committee. For the purposes of the survey, Portage Inlet and the Gorge Waterway were considered as one harbour. Results indicated that the primary uses of the Gorge include using trails and walkways, visiting parks and beaches, and viewing wildlife or birding. The most important concerns were water pollution, marine habitat loss, garbage/littering, disturbance of wildlife and degradation/loss of shoreline habitat/vegetation. The most valued features of the Gorge were: clean water; aesthetics; wildlife; parks, walkways and public access; freshwater creeks and estuaries; and marine ecosystems and recreation. The community vision statements that most people agreed with were: healthy natural areas/biological diversity; recreational activities can be enjoyed; people recognize and protect natural and cultural features; engaged and active community, and solitude and tranquility. The topic of most concern in the open comments section focused on anchored boats near the Selkirk Trestle. Survey results will form part of the water quality objectives being established for the harbours by CRD Harbours Program and the BC Ministry of Environment.

Land & Water Use

Saanich and View Royal completed the Craigflower Bridge replacement project and the bridge was officially opened in April. Municipal engineering staff kept GWI members informed of the progress throughout bridge construction, including updates on the mitigation efforts for Olympia oysters and intertidal marsh habitat. GWI member group World Fisheries Trust (WFT) conducted the Olympia oyster monitoring for this project, including establishment of artificial reefs of oyster shell cultch to provide substrate for the Olympia oyster larvae to settle and grow. WFT established two reefs, one near Christie Point and one adjacent to the Gorge Waterway Nature House, which they will continue to monitor for five years.

GWI partnered with View Royal, Saanich, Esquimalt Nation and Songhees Nation to develop interpretive signage for the new bridge. The design was based on the template developed for the existing GWI signs along the waterway.



Development of the interpretive sign for the Craigflower Bridge provided a unique opportunity to forge stronger relations with the Lkwungen people of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations.

The GWI provided a coordinated response to the City of Victoria's proposed zoning regulation bylaw amendment, creating a new "Gorge Waterway Park" zone for the water body just upstream of the Selkirk Trestle. The main issues of concern expressed by the GWI included proliferation of boats at anchor, sewage and other waste discharge into the Gorge, potential impact to eelgrass and other marine habitats, degradation to shoreline habitats and impact of this use on other users of the waterway. The GWI supported the proposed bylaw and encouraged the City to consider a regional approach to the issue of anchored boats to prevent the problem from moving to another municipality.

The GWI submitted a formal request to the four municipalities on the waterway (Town of View Royal, City of Victoria, District of Saanich, Township of Esquimalt) requesting that the GWI be considered as a referral agency/stakeholder group for review of development proposals on the Gorge. Although the GWI is usually consulted on such matters, formalizing this request will help ensure that this happens routinely.

The GWI met with CRD engineering staff and Shoreline School administration to discuss restoration of the school's waterfront during construction of new Craigflower sewer pump station in Portage Inlet.



The newly renovated Gorge Waterway Nature House is now equipped to offer education programs on a year-round basis.

Community Outreach

Member volunteers hosted the GWI information display and the interactive Gorge watershed model at many community events including Earth Day at Highrock Park, Vic West Fest in Banfield Park, Oceans Day Festival at Fishermen's Wharf, Buccaneer Days, Canada Day Picnic in Gorge Waterway Park and at the Gorge Swim Fest. GWI members also took the model and display to schools, colleges and public markets during the 2014 season.

The GWI continues to support the Gorge Waterway Nature House in Esquimalt Gorge Park. In 2013 the Nature House was extensively renovated, thanks to the generosity of the Vancouver Island Construction Association, and operated throughout the year in 2014. Thermal windows, baseboard heating, renovated bathrooms, new flooring and electrical systems are some of the many improvements. GWI member World Fisheries Trust operates the Nature House and provides educational programs focused on the Gorge Waterway ecosystems to schools, community groups, day care centres and the general public.

Point Ellice Shoreline Restoration

GWI completed a major shoreline restoration project at Point Ellice House. Volunteers from service clubs, schools and the community attended regular work parties to remove invasive plants and replant with native vegetation. Native shrubs and perennials now create a diverse understory regularly used by river otters, birds and other wildlife. The GWI prepared and submitted a final summary report to the site managers and the BC Heritage Branch, outlining all the works completed and providing recommendations for ongoing maintenance of the restored site. The full report is available on the GWI website www.gorgewaterway.ca.



Volunteers spent more than 3,180 hours removing over 28 tonnes of invasive plants from the Point Ellice House shoreline since the GWI started the restoration project in 2008.

GWI Partners

Community Members

- Burnside Gorge Community Association
- Colquitz Salmonid Stewardship and Education Society
- Esquimalt Residents Association
- Friends of Cuthbert Holmes
- Friends of Swan Creek Watershed
- Friends of Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary
- Gorge Tillicum Community Association
- Gorge Waterway Action Society
- Habitat Acquisition Trust
- Portage Inlet Protection Society
- Portage Inlet Sanctuary Colquitz Estuary Society
- SeaChange Marine Conservation Society
- Victoria Canoe and Kayak Club
- Victoria West Community Association
- World Fisheries Trust

Local Government Members

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

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Focus for 2015

In 2015, GWI will focus on:

- Continuing to provide input to the review process for developments along the waterway
- Conducting public consultation on water quality objectives proposed for Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet and associated creeks, and identifying data gaps
- Depending on funding availability, mapping and inventory of tidal marsh, eelgrass, kelp and Olympia oyster habitats; conducting bird surveys, identifying areas for restoration
- Promoting activities that engage the community in stewardship of the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet

Pictured above: The Greater Victoria Green Team participating in the shoreline restoration at Point Ellice House. Photo credit: A. Evans

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