

Gorge Waterway Initiative

2017 Annual Report



Lkwungen Traditional Dancers welcomed visitors to the annual World Oceans Day festivities at the Gorge Waterway Nature House.

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 2017, GWI members provided input to the Town of View Royal about a redevelopment proposal at Christie Point, the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure regarding a berm proposal for the Highway 1 Admirals-McKenzie Interchange Project and the City of Victoria regarding the Vic West Neighbourhood Plan. Members attended many outreach events with the GWI display, reaching over 1,400 people with conservation and stewardship messaging. GWI participated in the Urban Sanctuaries Project with other regional partners working to promote awareness of the three migratory bird sanctuaries in the region.

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

Highlights

Water Quality

In 2017, CRD staff conducted the following sampling activities in the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet to assess the impacts of stormwater on the environment and public health:

- sampled 55 of the 145 stormwater flows that discharge into the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet for bacterial levels in summer and winter;
- collected sediment from 11 stormwater discharges;
- assisted Esquimalt staff in locating an upstream source of contamination in Gorge Creek;
- conducted investigations in two other stormwater catchments to find the source of stormwater contamination; and
- assessed the health of the Colquitz Creek watershed through intensive monitoring and collection of benthic invertebrate data.

CRD staff monitors the mouth of Colquitz Creek twice a year for bacterial levels and collects continuous hydrometric data.

In 2017, staff sampled seven additional locations in the watershed weekly for five consecutive weeks in the summer (August/September) and fall flush (October/November). Concentrations of bacteria, nutrients and metals were measured on each visit. Benthic (bottom-dwelling) invertebrate community samples were collected using the Canadian Aquatic Biomonitoring Network (CABIN) method at two locations in early September. Results from all sampling will be analyzed, shared with municipalities and made publicly available in 2018.

Land & Water Use

View Royal requested a referral from GWI for the revised development plan for Christie Point on Portage Inlet. Following a presentation to GWI by the project proponents, GWI provided detailed comments to View Royal about this proposal, expressing support for the Green ShoresTM approach being proposed by the developer, but recommending that View Royal turn down the proposal. This recommendation was based on the high density, disturbance

to birds and wildlife that construction would impose, and the massing and height (6 storeys) being proposed for a development in the middle of a bird sanctuary. Although the development proposal received council approval, the project was put on hold later in 2017.

The GWI continued to consult with Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure about the McKenzie Interchange Project adjacent to Cuthbert Holmes Park. When sediment spills from this project entered Colquitz Creek, GWI and community members' concerns prompted MoTI to require increased environmental oversight on this project.

The consultant hired to do this gave a presentation to GWI members at a special meeting to discuss remediation and additional protection measures at the construction site. GWI also provided comments on the berm proposal presented by MoTI at an open house. Suggestions included increasing native plantings and committing to control invasive species at the site post-construction. GWI also expressed concern that the overall height and breadth of the berm was unacceptable in such close proximity to the salmon-bearing Colquitz River.

Members have ongoing concerns around this construction site and remain vigilant for any further damage to the creek and riparian areas.

The 2017 Gorge Swim Fest was cancelled at the last minute due to contamination entering the Gorge Waterway from Gorge Creek. The Township of Esquimalt spent several weeks investigating and finally locating the source of the contamination – a sewer-stormwater cross-connection higher up in the watershed. Esquimalt staff gave a presentation to the GWI explaining how they solved the problem and the lessons learned. Esquimalt staff continue to deal with ongoing cross-connection challenges in the Gorge catchment area. The upside of having to cancel the Swim Fest was the awareness raised among the general public of the problem of contamination in urban creeks, and what we can all do to help prevent this in future.

Craigflower Manor Historic Site on Portage Inlet is now managed by the Victoria Highland Games Association, currently fundraising to build a Scottish Community Centre on the site. VHGA members presented their vision for this new facility to GWI and led a site tour. GWI members offered assistance to design improvements for the foreshore that would incorporate Green Shores principles to improve and enhance wildlife habitat, and still maintain water views from the property.

The City of Victoria staff consulted with GWI during development of the neighbourhood plan for the Vic West neighbourhood. GWI continued to support the City of Victoria in its efforts to regulate vessel anchoring in the Gorge Waterway.

Urban Sanctuaries Project

GWI members continued to promote public awareness of the Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary (MBS).

The Canadian Wildlife Service provided signs that were put up in the five municipalities bordering the MBS to let people know the extent of this significant urban sanctuary.

GWI worked with regional partners to promote the Urban Sanctuaries Project (www.sanctuaryproject.ca) including a well-attended Speakers Series event at the Robert Bateman Centre that focused on birds of Vancouver Island.

In July, the capital region was officially dedicated as a NatureHood by the Lieutenant-Governor in recognition of the outstanding opportunities for connecting people with nature in our unique urban setting.

GWI members, in partnership with other members of the Urban Sanctuary group, installed reef balls in the Gorge Waterway to provide substrate for settlement of native Olympia oyster larvae.

*Reef balls were placed in the Gorge Waterway, part of an initiative to increase populations of the Olympia oyster *Ostrea lurida*, a federally designated Species of Special Concern.*

Elk and Beaver Lakes

CRD staff conducted regular water quality sampling in EBL in 2017 to supplement historical data from the Ministry of Environment. In addition, staff monitored for the visible presence of blue-green algae. When present, water samples were taken to determine if any species present were toxin-producers. In Beaver Lake a blue-green algal bloom began in July and persisted through December, and beaches were closed throughout that period.

CRD contracted Hemmera Envirochem to conduct a fish survey in EBL. Out of a total of 640 fish captured, no native fish species were observed. Most of these fish were introduced many years ago, and rainbow trout are re-stocked annually. Survey results showed that yellow perch were the most abundant (61%) followed by largemouth bass (13%), bullhead (10%), carp (7%), smallmouth bass (5%), rainbow trout (3%) and pumpkinseed (1%). These results along with gut analyses suggest that the abundant yellow perch are also a likely major food source for other piscivorous fish.

Community Outreach

The GWI display was brought to many community outreach events in 2017, including, Earth Day at the Royal BC Museum, Vic West Fest, two Oceans Day events, Canada Day on the Gorge and International Migratory Bird Day. Approximately 1,400 people were reached through these events.

In addition, the GWI display and InfoSheets were on display at the Gorge Waterway Nature House throughout the year.



GWI Partners

Community Members

- 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
- Portage Inlet Protection Society
- Portage Inlet Sanctuary Colquitz Estuary Society
- SeaChange Marine Conservation Society
- South Island Aquatic Stewardship Society
- South Island Sea Kayaking Association
- Victoria Canoe and Kayak Club
- Victoria Golden Rods and Reels Fishing and Social 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

Gorge Waterway Initiative

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Migratory bird sanctuary signs have now been installed in all five of the municipalities that border the Victoria Harbour MBS. (Credit: Jacques Sirois)

Focus for 2018

In 2018, GWI will focus on:

- Continuing to provide input to review processes for developments along the waterway
- Mapping and developing an inventory of shoreline, intertidal and subtidal habitats focusing on tidal marsh, eelgrass, kelp and Olympia oysters and identifying key areas for restoration, as funding allows
- Planning and initiating bird 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