

Gorge Waterway Initiative 2015 Annual Report



GWI interpretive sign in Esquimalt Gorge Park

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 2015, GWI members reviewed activities undertaken over the past 5 years towards achieving the goals and objectives of the stewardship strategy developed in 2005. The GWI provided input to several developments along the waterway including a park management plan and a strategy to regulate boat anchoring in the Gorge. Regular meetings provide an important forum for the exchange of ideas and information about issues affecting the waterway and surrounding watersheds. The GWI welcomed four new groups to the steering committee: the Gorge Swim Fest Society, South Island Aquatic Stewardship Society, South Island Sea Kayaking Association and Victoria Golden Rods and Reels.

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

In 2015, CRD staff sampled 34 of the 145 stormwater flows that discharge into the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet. Twenty-seven of the discharges had elevated fecal bacterial counts, and a high public health concern rating was assigned to 7 of these based on the level of bacterial counts and potential for the public to come in contact with the discharge. Sources of the bacterial contamination are aging sewer and stormwater infrastructure and sewer-stormwater cross-connections as well as animal waste. Two cross-connections have been narrowed down by CRD staff, who are working with Esquimalt staff to determine the exact location so that repairs can be done. The CRD is also working with Victoria staff to identify another source upstream of Banfield Park.

The CRD is working with Island Health Authority (IHA) to conduct a study of stormwater impacts on high-use beaches during the rainy season. Marine bacterial levels indicate a number of beaches in the region have conditions that exceed Health Canada guidelines for recreational use during and after winter rainfall events. These include the marine environments at the mouth of Gorge Creek and Cecelia Creek. Staff are working with IHA to develop public education and notification strategies and will conduct further sampling in fall 2016 to determine the sources of contamination and observe how rainfall levels influence the data.

The urban setting of the Gorge Waterway makes it vulnerable to contaminant spills from multiple sources. For example, a barge tipped near the Selkirk Trestle spilling several crushed cars into the waterway in August. Contaminants from roads and residential properties enter the waterway occasionally through the stormwater system. GWI members continue to be instrumental in alerting appropriate authorities about spills in and around the Gorge, helping to improve response times and minimizing negative environmental impacts.

Land & Water Use

District of Saanich staff presented the Draft Management Plan for Cuthbert Holmes Park to the GWI steering committee. GWI provided a coordinated response to the plan with suggestions to highlight the sensitive Colquitz River mudflats and estuary and the Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary in the plan and future park signage. Suggestions also included addressing the issue of boating, off-leash dogs and attendant wildlife disruption in the lower reaches of the river. Saanich Parks committed to inclusion of these topics in future public outreach and signage.

City of Victoria staff presented an overview of the Burnside Gorge area, requesting input about strategic directions for creating a Local Area Plan for this neighbourhood. GWI provided information about sensitive marine and shoreline habitats and ecosystems in this neighbourhood, recommended more green space especially along the shoreline where trees can provide important ecological assets such as bird roosting and soil erosion control. GWI provided a letter of support for Victoria's application for a License of Occupation at the Selkirk Water area of the Gorge Waterway. This will give the City authority to create a bylaw for regulating anchoring in the Gorge, an issue of significant concern for many community members.

Access trails adjacent to the boats anchored off Banfield Park are causing erosion and degradation of the shoreline. GWI members support Victoria's initiative to create zoning that will allow regulation of boat anchoring in this area of the waterway.





Chief Andy Thomas of the Esquimalt Nation welcomed people to the World Oceans Day celebration at the Gorge Waterway Nature House on June 6th.

Land and Water Use (cont.)

GWI members reviewed progress since 2010 towards achieving the goals and objectives set out in the Gorge Waterway Stewardship Plan established when the GWI was formed in 2005. Completion of the Point Ellice Shoreline Restoration project, working with Esquimalt and Songhees Nations to create a new interpretive sign for the Craigflower Bridge, outreach and education at several public events every year to raise awareness of issues affecting the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet are some of the accomplishments achieved as a group. GWI member groups contributed thousands of hours of volunteer time in clean-up and habitat restoration projects, and provided educational programming for children, students and the general public through a variety of programs and events. Members conduct regular bird surveys throughout the Migratory Bird Sanctuary, and this year Nature Canada designated the region as a NatureHood in recognition of the urban sanctuaries in the area that support significant wildlife populations. A summary of the GWI achievements 2010-15 is available on the GWI website.

Community Outreach

GWI members hosted information displays and the interactive Gorge watershed model at many community events including Earth Day at Highrock Park, Vic West Fest in Banfield Park, Selkirk Waterfront Festival, Oceans Day festivals at Fishermen's Wharf and at the Gorge Waterway Nature House, Canada Day Picnic in Gorge Waterway Park, Gorge Swim Fest in Banfield Park and the Elk/Beaver Lake Forum at the University of Victoria. GWI held a successful Speakers Series event on the Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary. The GWI coordinator gave presentations to the South Island Sea Kayaking Association, the Victoria Canoe and Kayak Club and led a walk for the Victoria Natural History Society to highlight the GWI and its projects around the Gorge. This year the steering committee started the process of updating the GWI display used at public events.

The GWI continues to support the Gorge Waterway Nature House in Esquimalt Gorge Park. Thousands of children and their families have learned about the ecosystems of the Gorge Waterway and surrounding watersheds through the educational programming offered there by the staff and volunteers of World Fisheries Trust. The CRD provided financial support to complete an extensive rebuilding of the interactive Gorge watershed model, an integral part of the educational programming at the Nature House and at other public events in the region.

GWI Partners

Community Members

- Burnside Gorge Community Association
- Colquitz Salmonid Stewardship and Education Society
- 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

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Focus for 2016

In 2016, GWI will focus on:

- Completing the new table top outreach display
- 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 activities that engage the community in stewardship of the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet

Pictured above: GWI interpretive signs and shoreline restoration projects were highlights of the Gorge Waterway tour provided for Victoria Natural History Society members in March 2015.

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