



# Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre

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## Annual Report 2015 - 2016



### Introduction

The Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre in Hecate Park in Cowichan Bay, BC is an interpretive centre overlooking the Cowichan Estuary, a 400 hectare estuarine ecosystem in the unceded territory of the Quw'utsun people which provides vital habitat for resident and migratory birds, Pacific salmon, shellfish and a diversity of intertidal life. The Centre offers interactive educational opportunities for all ages to learn about the estuary, its marine and bird life, its natural and cultural history, and the Cowichan & Koksilah watersheds of which it is a part. Our indoor classroom has both freshwater and inter-tidal aquariums and a touch tank. There are microscopes, a wildlife viewing telescope, interactive displays and maps. Outdoors visitors can climb the wildlife viewing platform and explore the estuary's increasing biological diversity on interpretive trails. The estuary was degraded over a number of decades. Environmental monitoring, management and restoration activities are now having a positive impact. Public education and awareness are critical to the estuary's ongoing recovery.

## The Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre Year – April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016

The Centre is an inviting open space with a wildlife mural, three-dimensional eelgrass meadow, and a number of interactive displays. The fresh water aquarium is home to Coho salmon fry and our aquarium and touch tank have a range of both colorful and camouflaged intertidal creatures. We have a video station that plays a series of short videos of local First Nations elders, biologists, conservationists and historians talking about the historical, cultural and biological importance of the estuary. A three-dimensional wall model of our watersheds is complimented by an interactive touch screen map which provides information on many aspects of the Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds. In April 2016 we will open the first phase of our Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds exhibit focused on the salmon cycle.



### Visitors

Since opening on April 21, 2012 we have had over 16,000 visitors. We now host about 5,000 visitors each year, with a good mix of tourists and local residents. New temporary displays and creatures in the touch tank bring many visitors back for repeat visits. We are open to the public Wednesday through Sunday in the summer and Thursday through Sunday afternoons from September to June. We are also open holiday Mondays and will add more open hours as we grow our volunteer team.

### School Watershed & Marine Biology Programs

We have developed marine school program curricula for different grades and ages linked with the Province's "Prescribed Learning Outcomes". We also partner with the Cowichan Watershed Board to deliver a Cowichan River and Watershed program focused on grades four and five. This year we had over 1,000 students participate in school program offerings.



Our school programs are a popular educational resource for both public and private schools within School District 79. We also provide programming for S.E.A. Programs, a residential ocean learning program for students from Calgary, giving us the opportunity to provide hands-on learning for to up to 1,000 additional students each year.

We also host Professional Development Days for teachers to increase access for those wishing to integrate river, ocean and estuary-related knowledge into classroom.

For pre-school aged children Kerrie Talbot, one of our dedicated volunteers who is a retired librarian, hosts regular story-time events in the spring and fall with up to 20 children and parents in each week. She also brings in guest story tellers and is looking forward to offering Mother Goose pre-school programming in 2016.



### Summer Science Camps

In 2015 we held four week-long full-day summer science camps for school aged children 5 to 8 years old and 8 to 12 years old, as well as a Youth Leadership Program.



Campers participated in beach seine netting, bird surveys, canoe expeditions through the estuary, and explorations aided by microscope and telescope. In this photo above campers meet a jelly up close and learn about marine and intertidal life from biologist Jared Bates.



### Community Education and Events



The Nature Centre regularly hosts and participates in community events that increase outreach and access to environmental education. Throughout the early spring we hosted local bee advocate Ted Leischner's pollinators and bee habitat display. On May 16<sup>th</sup> we once again hosted International Low Tide Day, which this year was combined with a celebration of the

Cowichan Community Land Trust's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with cake, music, a book and plant sale, and contributions from other local groups, including a solar energy table and demonstrations by One Cowichan,

At Kil-pah-las beach there was a beach seine and the annual Low Tide critter count. The photo on the left below shows Cowichan Valley Naturalist and dedicated Nature Centre volunteer Eric Marshall talking with local children about a ghost shrimp.



We also offered film nights throughout the year, including a June 2015 showing of “Found in the Forest”, a documentary about the public Environmental School in Maple Ridge, BC, where teachers, researchers and parents work together in a unique learning environment that challenges conventional educational models. In February 2015 we joined with Transition Cowichan to show and discuss “The Wisdom to Survive”, a film on climate change and the ways we can respond, locally and globally, by engaging both our heads and hearts while at the same time staying open to the beauty that surrounds us.

We also, once again, organized and participated in the Great Canadian Shoreline Clean-up for BC Rivers Day in September.

### Citizen Science

The Nature Centre continues to partner with Bird Studies Canada to complete monthly bird surveys identifying and counting shore birds found along a designated stretch of shore in Cowichan Bay. Volunteers, who go out monthly in all weather, also identify, count, and report any dead birds found on the beach. This citizen-based science initiative began with training in bird identification for volunteers who come out to count birds in all weather. Bird survey dates are on the Nature Centre website. No experience is required to participate.



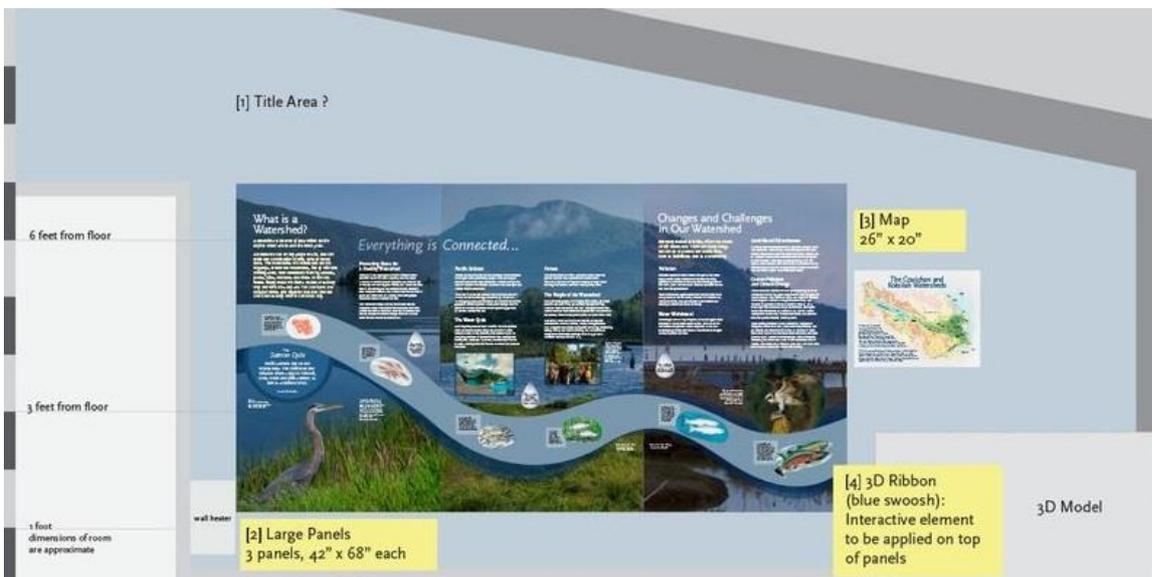
We continue to actively keep an eye on the Pacific Great Blue Herons, the fannini subspecies, nesting in the ravine near the Centre. Found only on the Pacific Coast between Prince William Sound in Alaska and Puget Sound in Washington State, they are listed as a species of concern under Canada's Species at Risk Act (SARA). Trudy Chatwin, Species at Risk Biologist for BC's Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations reported 94 active nests in 2015, an especially good year for Cowichan Bay's Herons, and 85 active nests counted in the spring of 2016. The Cowichan Bay colony remains the largest on Vancouver Island.



**Interactive Watershed Exhibit**

After a year and a half of working with experts from Royal BC Museum's exhibit design and production team, as well as with talented local artists, photographers and volunteers to create a permanent exhibit focused on the Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds, March 2016 saw us getting ready to open the first stage of the exhibit in April – wall-size interpretive panels telling the story of the watersheds with interactive components illustrating the salmon cycle. The next phase, an eight-foot three-dimensional map of the lower watersheds, on which we can project animated stories of its history, biodiversity and challenges at the touch of a button, is slated for completion early in 2017.

This ambitious project is supported of the Pacific Salmon Foundation, TD Friends of the Environment, Telus, the Cowichan Watershed Board, the Cowichan Valley Naturalists, the Cowichan Valley Regional District and many local business and private donors. We're excited to unveil the first phase, ready for viewing before the end of April 2016, and look forward to completing the full exhibit and providing new and engaging learning opportunities for school groups and visitors of all ages. Thanks to everyone for your on-going support.



## Volunteering & Staffing

Throughout the year the Centre had two part-time staff, Coordinator Meghan Loop and Aquaria Technician Jared Bates. Madeleine Southern continues to work with us on contract as a Marine Educator. In partnership with Canada Summer Jobs, this year we were once again lucky to have two summer students who provided leadership in our camp program. Together staff and our hard-working team of volunteers kept the Centre running.

Our volunteers and our regular donors are the real backbone and key to the success of the Estuary Nature Centre, allowing us to keep our doors open to visitors and offer accessible educational programming. When you stop in to visit, it is a volunteer who is there to answer your questions. Our school programs also rely heavily on volunteer support. We're eager to include more interested community members on our volunteer team and offer regular orientations for new volunteers and updates and knowledge-building events to support our seasoned volunteers, whose contributions are so essential to our work.

## Our History - The 2011 -2012 Journey to Create the Nature Centre

The Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre was originally conceived in February 2011 by a small group of local Cowichan Bay residents, including parents, educators, naturalists, fishermen and business people, who saw the Estuary as both a natural treasure, rich in tradition, history, and wildlife, and also an ecosystem at risk from development and industrial activities. Working under the auspices of the Cowichan Land Trust, a non-profit society and registered charity that holds conservation covenants, development funding was received from the West Coast Community Adjustment Program (WestCCAP), Island Coastal Economic Trust (ICET), and locally through fundraising events and local partnerships with the Cowichan Valley Regional District, Cowichan Tribes, the Cowichan Valley Naturalists and the Rotary Club of Duncan, which contributed both money and many hours of volunteer labour to help build the Nature Centre and the viewing platform.

The development project included a 1,000 square foot nature classroom, a Green Shores restoration of eroded shoreline at the west end of Hecate Park, outdoor interpretive signage and maps that show the diversity of life in the estuary and its rich intertidal zone.



A path through the park along the waterfront leads to the wildlife viewing platform with views looking up the Koksilah and Cowichan Rivers to the west, north toward Mt. Tzouhalem and east toward Salt Spring Island and the Salish Sea.

The Centre's indoor classroom, built on the eastern edge of Hecate Park has large windows overlooking the estuary's intertidal zone and eelgrass meadows and is just a short walk to the foreshore. The Centre officially opened April 21, 2012 with music, First Nations dancers and a crowd of about 250 people.



Since the Centre opened its doors the surrounding greenspace has been expanded to include the Cowichan Bay Marine Gateway to the west which includes a naturescape play area, picnic shelter, public kayak launch and parking area.

We look forward to many more years of offering visitors and school groups opportunities to learn about the Cowichan Estuary and the Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds. The Centre's hands-on approach to environmental education for youth and families is a balance between science education and stewardship that inspires visitors to care for and protect the environment.



## Financial Report

As a small centre we are careful with our finances. We are committed to offering accessible educational programs that are affordable within the budgets of families and the public school system, and to having admission to the centre accessible to all visitors, regardless of income. We suggest an admission donation of \$5, and our doors are open and we do not turn visitors away.

In our first four years (2012-16) the Nature Centre has been successful in obtaining earmarked grants to develop impressive educational programs and exhibits. Since its inception, ongoing operations (programming and overhead) have broken even financially, but only through extremely frugal management – something that is not sustainable over the long term. In order to be economically healthy the Nature Centre needs to bring in an additional \$30,000 annually in operational funding to continue to do citizen-science, and provide public education and school and summer camp programming – activities that provide essential support for the protection and restoration of the biological diversity of our estuary.

We are working on developing multiple revenue streams and exploring new opportunities to make the centre a sustainable and self-supporting place of learning. We've been holding two annual Beer and Burger fundraising events each year at the Cowichan Bay Pub, which are lots of fun and include live music and a silent auction. Expanding our annual donor program, and especially our base of monthly donors, is another priority. The generosity of our supporters and donors makes a huge difference to what we can do.

## Your Donations Make All the Difference

We encourage Cowichan Valley residents and others who value our work to support the Centre by becoming members: \$20-for individual membership, \$35-family membership, or \$100-supporting members, or to consider making a monthly gift to the Centre. Charitable receipts are issued for all memberships and donations. Donations can be made at [Canada Helps](#) - use the drop-down menu and select "Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre".

## Gift Shop

We have a small gift shop that helps to support Centre Operations, primarily from selling t-shirts, water bottles, field guides, books, small and large animal puppets, colouring books and cards. We also have some beautiful pieces of local art. We accept cash or cheques for purchases, and by the fall of 2016 we will be able to process debit purchases.



**Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre  
Financial Report  
April 2015 to March 2016**

<b>STATEMENT OF OPERATIONS</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>Operations</b>	<b>Programs</b>	<b>Interpretive Display Development</b>	<b>Store</b>
<b>INCOME</b>					
Donations, Fundraising, Dues	13,749	12,968	9	772	-
Nature Centre Grants	40,349	13,440	12,997	13,912	-
Nature Centre Activities	20,422	140	19,329	-	953
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>74,520</b>	<b>26,548</b>	<b>32,335</b>	<b>14,684</b>	<b>953</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>					
Project & Program Costs	15,583	1,086	3,313	10,684	500
Personnel Costs	36,052	15,263	16,790	4,000	-
Facility Costs	18,881	18,881	-	-	-
Administration & Other	3,182	3,138	44	-	-
<b>Total Operating Expenses</b>	<b>73,698</b>	<b>38,368</b>	<b>20,147</b>	<b>14,684</b>	<b>500</b>
<b>NET OPERATING INCOME</b>	<b>822</b>	<b>(11,819)</b>	<b>12,188</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>453</b>
Capital Asset Activity	(8,048)	(8,605)	-	557	-
<b>Net Income</b>	<b>(7,226)</b>	<b>(20,424)</b>	<b>12,188</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>453</b>
<b>OPERATING SURPLUS (DEFICIT)</b>					
Beginning operating surplus (deficit)	(1,027)				
Net operating income (loss) for the year	822				
Ending operating surplus (deficit)	<b>(205)</b>				