



# Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre

1845 Cowichan Bay Road, Cowichan Bay, BC

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## Annual Report 2019



### Introduction

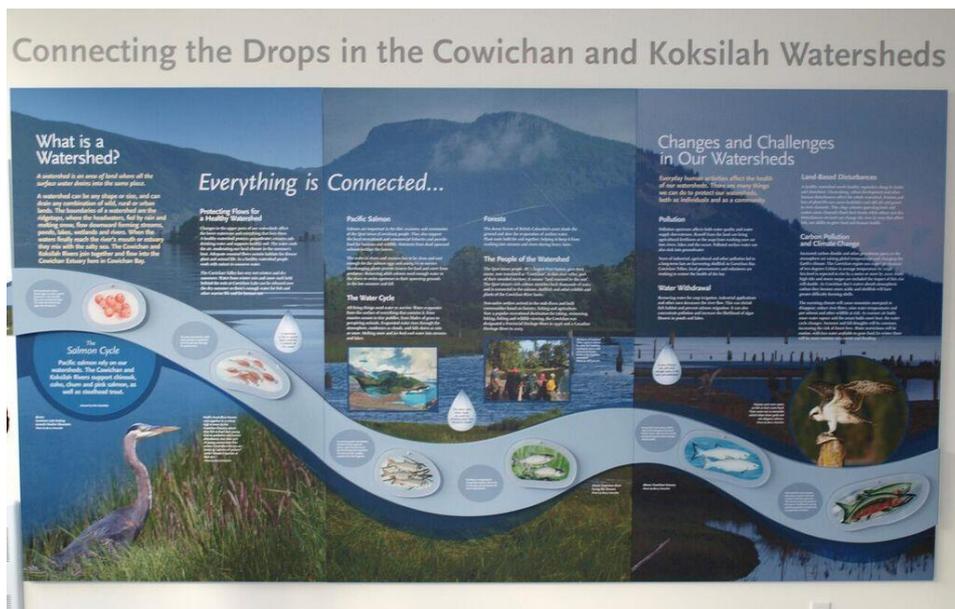
The Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre in Hecate Park in Cowichan Bay, BC is an interpretive centre overlooking the Cowichan Estuary, a 400-hectare estuarine ecosystem in the traditional and unceded territory of the Quw'utsun people, who have cared for these lands and waters for thousands of years. The estuary provides vital habitat for resident and migratory birds, Pacific salmon, shellfish and a diversity of intertidal life. The Centre offers interactive educational opportunities for children, youth and adults 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 intertidal aquariums and a touch tank. We have microscopes, a wildlife viewing telescope, interactive displays and maps. Outdoors visitors can climb our wildlife viewing platform and explore the estuary's increasing biological diversity on our interpretive trails. The estuary was degraded over a number of decades. As part of our work, we offer volunteers, school and youth groups opportunities to engage in hands-on restoration projects. Awareness-raising, conservation, restoration, and environmental monitoring are all critical to the estuary's ongoing recovery. We are making a difference.

## The Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre Year – January 1 to December 31, 2019

The Centre is an inviting open space with a wildlife mural, three-dimensional eelgrass meadow and a number of interactive exhibits. The freshwater aquarium is home to Coho salmon fry and our saltwater aquarium and touch tank have lots of Shiner Perch and many colorful and camouflaged intertidal creatures.



Our “Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds” exhibit, created in partnership with the Royal BC Museum (RBCM), focuses on the water cycle, an interactive story of the salmon cycle, how everything in a watershed is connected, and the challenges we currently face from climate disruption in our watersheds.



The exhibit now also includes an eight-by-five, three-dimensional map of the lower Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds on which we project animated and beautifully illustrated stories of the watersheds' history, biodiversity, challenges, and ongoing restoration efforts. This includes an illustrated and narrated history of the estuary from the last ice age to the present day that is popular with visitors. Co-created with RBCM, this project was also supported by 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 businesses and private donors.

The completion of the watershed exhibit, complemented by our video station with local First Nations' elders, biologists, conservationists, and historians talking about the historical, cultural and biological importance of the estuary, marked a point of maturation for us as an interpretive centre, and a bigger shift to further expanding programs for children and youth.

## Visitors

Since opening on April 21, 2012, we've had over 33,000 visitors. This year we welcomed 4,500 visitors, including a good mix of local residents and travelers from all over the world. New exhibits and displays, as well as new visiting intertidal creatures in the touch tank, bring many visitors back for repeat visits to learn more about this special ecosystem. We are open to the public Thursday through Sunday afternoons, plus holiday Mondays, and are busy with school programs and workshops throughout the week.



## Education Programming

We have developed hands-on nature conservation and science-oriented school programming for grades and ages from pre-school through grade twelve, linked and kept up to date with the province of BC's prescribed learning outcomes. This year we delivered 47 school programs to 890 children and youth during the school year at the Centre, and an addition 186 school children and youth from grades 5 through high school in riparian restoration and water conservation programming as a part of our "Conserving & Protecting Cowichan Fresh Water for a Climate Resilient Future" project. (See more on pages 4 & 5)

Our school programs are a popular educational resource for both public schools within School District 79 and local private schools and home school groups. We also provide programming for Semesters at Sea, a residential ocean learning program for students from Calgary, host local Nature Kids groups, and host Professional Development Days for teachers to assist them in integrating river, ocean and estuary-related knowledge into their classrooms.

### Sea Squirts Pre-School Program

Kerrie Talbot, a dedicated Nature Centre volunteer and retired pre-school teacher and library assistant, has been hosting regular story-time sessions for children and parents since 2012. This year she offered her drop-in nature program "Sea Squirts", in March 2019, giving parents with pre-school children and infants an opportunity to come together, learn about nature in fun and engaging ways, and support the development of early literacy skills through nature stories.

This program was funded in part by "Our Cowichan Communities Health Network".



## Spring Break and Summer Nature Camps

In 2019 we held two days of drop-in Spring Break Camp with 16 children attending. In July and August, we held five week-long full-day Summer Nature and Science Camps for school-aged children 5 to 7 and 7 to 9 years-old, plus two single-day camps. A total of 79 campers participated in watershed adventures, beach seines, mud digs, bird surveys, expeditions through the estuary, and explorations aided by microscope and telescope as they learned about the diversity of intertidal life up close and about how all life in a watershed is interconnected, getting their hands and feet in the mud having fun and creating nature-related arts and crafts along the way.



In support of children and youth, the Cowichan Valley Naturalists provides two summer camp bursaries, and the Nature Centre also has a bursary fund for children and youth for all our summer programs. We are always happy to accept your donations to that fund. Keeping our camps accessible to children and youth who might not have easy access to learning in nature is important to us. With support from Canada Summer Jobs, we were grateful to have a great team of summer student leaders in Karlie Castle and Connor Wardrop this year.

## The Climate Connection - riparian restoration & water conservation a 26-month Eco-Action Project

Climate change is affecting ecosystems around the world. Yet climate impacts often require specific place-based solutions. We were pleased to receive Eco-Action funding from the federal Ministry of Environment and Climate Change this year for a 26-month project, "Conserving & Protecting Cowichan Fresh Water for a Climate Resilient Future" focused on hands-on engagement with local youth starting in the summer of 2019. This first year the project included a youth leadership and team-building training (see below), as well as engaging 165 youth in hands-on riparian restoration in both the Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds and 21 additional young people in water conservation projects in the Koksilah Watershed.



**Youth Leadership & Team-building:** July 2<sup>nd</sup> 15 young people between 10 and 17 participated in the project's Youth Leadership and Team-building Day which was led by Quw'utsun' Elder Philomena Williams and trainers Laura Cuthbert and Kim Lagimodiere.



The Conserving and Protecting Cowichan Fresh Water project also co-hosted a community conversation on water conservation in the Koksilah Watershed with the Cowichan Watershed Board and local regional district Area E Director Nicholson at the Hub in Cowichan Station. This community conversation also kicked off a series of water audits with householders and gardeners living in the drought challenged Koksilah Watershed throughout the summer. One of the audited properties was chosen for water conservation Permacultitz led by permaculturists Jason Greenwood and Sierra Robinson working with a team of youth who created a giant water-saving hügelkultur garden bed.

**Eco-Action Project Goals:** The Nature Centre's goals for the project over the next two years are: 1) to continue to engage the local community, especially young people across cultures, in leadership and team-building, 2) raise community awareness-raising about the need to care for our water and our watersheds, 3) do practical hands-on water conservation and riparian restoration projects, and 4) help build bridges between Indigenous and settler youth with the support and guidance of Quw'utsun' Elders, honouring their Indigenous knowledge and wisdom.

Protecting freshwater ecosystems and our drinking water in the face of ongoing climate disruption is increasingly challenging. We believe that coming together as a community and engaging local people in making connections and strengthening partnerships will amplify the creation of local solutions and help our community protect its rivers and water supply into the future.

In addition to our principal funder, Environment and Climate Change Canada, we would also like thank these supporters, partners, and sponsors:

Cowichan Tribes, the Cowichan Watershed Board, the Cowichan Community Land Trust, the BC Conservation Foundation, the Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society, the Pacific Salmon Foundation, the Cowichan Valley Regional District, including Areas D and E, the Municipality of North Cowichan, the Cowichan Valley Naturalists, the Cowichan Lake and River Stewardship Society, the Outdoor Education Society – Story Trails, Sh-hwuykwselu Busy Place Streamkeepers, BC Nature Trust, SeaChange Marine Conservation Society, the Earth Guardians – Cowichan Valley, School District 79, and Polster Environmental Services.

This project was undertaken with the financial support of:  
Ce projet a été réalisé avec l'appui financier de :



Environment and  
Climate Change Canada

Environnement et  
Changement climatique Canada

## CENC B'EarthDay & the Great Blue Heron Hair-off

On February 24<sup>th</sup> we celebrated the “Return of the Great Blue Herons”, with story-telling, poetry, live music from Paul Ruszel, and a visit from Grandfather Heron at our spring Beer and Burger Fundraiser at the Cowichan Bay Pub, all part of launching long-time supporter Jim Wisnia’s “Great Blue Heron Hair-off” campaign to raise funds for a live heron web cam and nature education.



On April 22<sup>nd</sup> we celebrated Earth Day, the Centre’s 7<sup>th</sup> “B’EarthDay”, and the culmination of Jim’s “Heron-Hair-off”, with Jim, assisted by Lyn, making good on his promise to supporters of a public shearing of his hair. The Heron-Hair-off raised \$7,600, getting us another step closer to offering a live on-line viewing of our beloved herons’ nests in their Wessex Ravine Heronry, as well as supporting our children’s programming. Thank-you Jim! We had a fun-filled party at the Nature Centre, with music generously provided by the Muddy Buddies and cake by Thrifty Foods.



## Low Tide Day

June 8<sup>th</sup> we once again were part of hosting International Low Tide Day in Cowichan Bay, with a beach clean-up followed a beach seine, the annual Low Tide mud dig and critter count, plus music and food at Kil-pah-las beach in Cowichan Bay.



**Eelgrass Restoration** June 25<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> volunteers came out to the Centre to tie native eelgrass rhizomes, harvested by SeaChange Marine Conservation Society's divers and replanted to restore a nearby intertidal area at the far end of Khenipsen Road. Native eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) is a critical component of estuarine ecosystems, supporting salmon, birds, and a wide range of invertebrate life. Thanks to Cowichan Tribes Chief Seymour and MP Alistair MacGregor for joining us!



### **Family & Community Education and Events**

The Nature Centre regularly hosts and participates in community events and celebrations to share information and raise awareness about sensitive ecosystems.

In 2019 the BC Nature Conference was held in the Cowichan Valley. We had the privilege of participating in workshops, hosting a tour of the Nature Centre and sharing an information table with the Cowichan Valley Naturalists. In September we had a table at the “Charged-Up Festival of Climate Solutions”, and we also had fun putting together a Nature Centre activity table for the BC Rivers Day celebration and traditional salmon BBQ on the Cowichan River on Saturday, September 28<sup>th</sup> co-organized and hosted by Cowichan Tribes and the Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable. The next day our fall Beer & Burger fundraiser at the Cowichan Bay was also organized around a watershed theme in stories, poems and music, the latter again with musician Paul Ruszel.

On November 7<sup>th</sup> marine naturalists Tasli Shaw and Gary Sutton gave us an amazing lecture and slide show, “Hear Them Roar”, to a full house of Cowichan Valley residents curious about our annual sea lion visitors! Both California and Steller sea lions arrive on the breakwater in the Bay sometime in October to be well placed to feed on migrating salmon and usually depart by Christmas time. The larger Steller sea lions roar and are light brown when dry. The California sea lions are darker in colour, somewhat smaller, and bark rather than roar.



### **Citizen Science**

The 400-hectare Cowichan Estuary, with its marshes, mudflats, and tidal rivers, is a designated Important Bird Area (IBA) that provides habitat for up to 230 resident and migratory bird species, with regular monitoring of Trumpeter Swan, Pacific Great Blue Herons, and Iceland Gulls.

Since 2013 the Nature Centre has partnered with Birds Canada to complete monthly bird surveys identifying and counting water and shore birds found along a designated stretch of shoreline in Cowichan Bay. Volunteers also go out monthly in all weather to identify, count, and report any dead birds found on the beach. Orientation is provided and no experience is required to participate.

On Saturday, October 5<sup>th</sup> Graham Sorenson of Birds Canada presented a waterbird identification slide show and workshop on the protocols for the Coastal Waterbird Survey and the Beached Bird Survey at the Centre, plus an outdoor bird count practice. In 2019 we also updated and reprinted our bird map for the estuary.



We keep a close 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). The Cowichan Bay colony remains one of the largest on Vancouver Island, with a 2019 nest count of 110 nests. The Heronry is regularly monitored by a Species at Risk Biologist for BC's Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations with the support of local volunteers.

### **Volunteers, Supporters & Staff**

Our volunteers and our regular donors are the 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, as well as updates to support our seasoned volunteers, whose contributions are so essential to our work.

In May 2019, Centre Coordinator Alicia Taylor presented to the Duncan Rotary Club on our work and in June a volunteer team from the club came and re-stained the Nature Centre building. We so appreciate the Duncan Rotary Club's ongoing support.



We're also extremely grateful to Cowichan's "100 Men Who Care" who chose us at the end of 2019 to receive a donation of \$11,200 to support accessible environmental education and restoration programming for children and youth. Thanks to Jim Wisnia for your winning pitch.

On December 20<sup>th</sup>, Larry Lenske, the Nature Centre Society's Treasurer, celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday with his own "Dare to Be Wild" fundraiser for the Centre. The Birthday celebration at the Hub in Cowichan Station included an amazing potluck feast, dancing to the marimba music of Machikichori, and dares which all helped Larry take his fundraising goal over the top!

He raised \$5,500 to support the operations of the Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre. General operations rarely hit the spotlight, but with Larry's dedication to keep our centre in the black, and the support of his friends and community, we are gratefully launching into 2020 with this extra support.

To keep things interesting Larry accepted some swimmingly cold "dares" and, since he surpassed his \$5,000 goal, the next day on winter Solstice at 3pm, Larry made good on his biggest dare and dove into the chilly waters of the Bay, swimming 170 metres (500 feet) from the kayak launch at the Cowichan Marine Gateway to the beach at the Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre. Thanks to Larry and everyone who came out to cheer him on!



### **Celebrating our Volunteer Team**

August 21<sup>st</sup> we held our annual summer volunteer BBQ, and December 3<sup>rd</sup> was our Volunteer Appreciation evening, where we recognized Carol Blackburn and Ron Wall as our "Volunteers of the Year". Thank-you Carol and Ron, for sharing your knowledge and your steadfast commitment to volunteering! We also recognized the work of our Centre coordinator Alicia Taylor as she prepared for a year of maternity leave starting in January.



Throughout 2019 Alicia also hosted our regular volunteer learning circles, with volunteers and guest presenters taking turns sharing their knowledge with our team. Local biologist Cheri Ayers, who led many hours of restoration work in the estuary this year, supported by Cowichan Tribes, our restoration lead, Sierra Harvey, and a great team of youth volunteers, was one of our guests.

### **Our Supporters' Donations Make All the Difference**

If you love nature and value nature education please support the Nature Centre by making a donation. Consider becoming an Estuary Nature Centre supporter by making a monthly gift to the Centre. You can also apply to become a member of the Society for \$20. Charitable receipts are issued for all donations of \$20 or more, including memberships. Donations can be made to the Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre through [Canada Helps](#).

## Our History - The Journey to Create the Nature Centre & Become the Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre Society - a Registered Charity

The Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre was 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 and an ecosystem at risk from development and industrial activities.



Initially working under the Cowichan Land Trust, a non-profit society and registered charity that holds conservation covenants, we received development funding from the West Coast Community Adjustment Program (WestCCAP) and Island Coastal Economic Trust (ICET), and raised money through local fundraising events, supported by partnerships with the Cowichan Valley Regional District, Cowichan Tribes, the Cowichan Valley Naturalists, and the Rotary Club of Duncan. We opened our doors in April 2012.

In the spring of 2019, we become our own separate charitable non-profit, the Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre Society, making the full transition from under the wings of the Land Trust on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019. Our fiscal year now aligns with the calendar year.

Our development project included a 1,000 square foot nature classroom, our first Green Shores restoration of eroded shoreline at the west end of Hecate Park, and outdoor interpretive signage and maps that show the diversity of life in the estuary's rich intertidal zone. A path through the park along the waterfront leads to our 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, its changing tides and eelgrass meadows. It's just a short walk to the shore. The Centre officially opened Earth Day weekend April 21, 2012, with music, First Nations dancers and a crowd of about 250 people.

The surrounding greenspace has been expanded by CVRD Parks to include the Cowichan Bay Marine Gateway to the west with a naturescape play area, picnic shelter, public kayak launch and parking area.



We look forward to many more years of offering visitors, school groups, and families opportunities to learn about the Cowichan Estuary and the Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds through our hands-on approach to environmental education, balancing science and stewardship to inspire those who come our way to love, care for and protect the natural environment, including increasing opportunities for youth to learn leadership and teambuilding skills while working on riparian restoration in our watersheds.

## Gift Shop

We have a small gift shop that helps support the Centre's operations, primarily from selling t-shirts, water bottles, field guides, nature books, including some beautiful children's books, small and large animal puppets, colouring books and cards. We also have some beautiful pieces of local art for sale. We accept cash, cheques and INTERAC for debit for purchases.



## Financial Report

You will find our 2019 Year End Financial Statemet at the end of this 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. Each donation really makes a difference. Our doors are open to the public four days a week and we don't turn visitors away.

Over the years the Nature Centre has been successful in doing community-based fundraising and in obtaining grants to develop engaging nature and science-based exhibits and education and restoration programs. Over our first 7 years (2012-2018) we built a solid structure of both interpretive elements and people – an operational committee, volunteer teams, a supporter-base, and community partnerships, operating on an essentially break-even basis through careful management. This year, as we fledged from the Cowichan Land Trust to become our own charitable non-profit society, with the support of our donors and some significant successful fundraising, we were able to grow our bursary fund, as well as begin to establish an emergency fund to support our ongoing resilience. We want to thank all our supporters who contributed to the success of our fundraising efforts this year.

We are grateful to supporters and funders this year who've helped us provide place-based nature education and opportunities for hands-on restoration in the estuary and its adjacent watersheds, including: Environment and Climate Change Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (summer students), BC Community Gaming, Pacific Salmon Foundation, the BC Conservation Foundation, Island Return-It in Duncan, CVRD Area D and E Grants-in-Aid, and 100 Men Who Care, as well as to Jim and Larry for their personal fundraising campaigns for the Nature Centre!

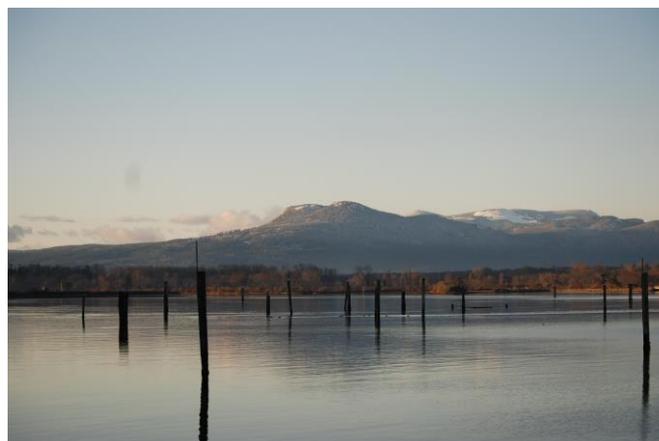
Our spring and fall Beer & Burger fundraisers also each bring in about \$2,500, thanks to the support of the Cowichan Bay Pub, our silent auction donors and bidders, and all the members of our local community who come out to support the Centre.

### **Going Forward**

We hope to continue to expand our school program offerings and increase access for children and youth of all ages to hands-on nature and science-based education. While our school programs are an important source of revenue for us, our primary commitment is to reach more young people and give them increased opportunities to learn about and fall in love with local ecosystems and the natural world. Working with the local watershed educators' group, "Watershed Connection", we aim to make the hands-on programming we offer more accessible and relevant to local Indigenous, immigrant and low-income young people. Our goal is to raise additional funds to continue to expand program accessibility through our bursaries, as well as being able to subsidize transportation for children and youth to participate in programming on the estuary, including participating in school programs, camps and citizen-science and restoration projects - all of which provide essential support for the protection and restoration of the biological diversity of our estuary and its adjoining watersheds. We continue to explore new opportunities to ensure the Centre is sustainable and self-supporting for the long-term.

The generosity of our supporters and donors makes a huge difference to what we can do.

Thank you so much for your support!



**Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre Society  
Consolidated Statement of Operations**

**2019**

**INCOME**

Donations	278,712
Fundraising	27,705
Grants	36,548
Nature Centre Activities	24,869
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>367,833</b>

**EXPENSES**

Project & Program	15,640
Personnel	55,286
Facility	8,362
Administration	4,730
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>84,018</b>
<b>Gross Operating Income</b>	<b>283,815</b>

Allocations	<b>(35,022)</b>
<b>Net Operating Income</b>	<b>248,793</b>

Capital Asset Activity	<b>(3,258)</b>
<b>Net Income (Loss)</b>	<b>245,535</b>

**Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre Society  
Consolidated Statement of Financial Position**

**31-Dec-19**

**ASSETS**

Cash & Investments	81,072
Other Current Assets	10,004
Fixed Assets	217,364
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>308,440</b>

**LIABILITIES**

Payables	8,145
Unexpended Grants	19,739
<b>Total Liabilities</b>	<b>27,884</b>

**NET ASSETS**

Operating Surplus	4,428
Reserves	58,764
Invested In Fixed Assets	217,364
<b>Net Assets</b>	<b>280,556</b>

<b>Total Liabilities &amp; Net Assets</b>	<b>308,440</b>
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