



Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre

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Annual Report 2018 – 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. 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 and school 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 – April 1, 2018 to March 31, 2019

The Centre is an inviting open space with a wildlife mural, three-dimensional eelgrass meadow and a number of interactive exhibits. The fresh water aquarium is home to Coho salmon fry and our salt water 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 watersheds exhibit now also includes an eight-by-five, three-dimensional map of the lower Cowichan and Koksilah Watersheds on which are projected 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 which 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 showing local First Nations' elders, biologists, conservationists and historians talking about the historical, cultural and biological importance of the estuary, marks 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 29,000 visitors. This year we welcomed 5,659 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 different grades and ages, linked and kept up-to-date with the Province's prescribed learning outcomes. We also partner with the Cowichan Watershed Board to provide hands-on watershed learning for grades 2/3 and grades 8/9 students. This year we had 1,158 children and youth participate in the Centre's program offerings during the school year.



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. This year we delivered 44 learning programs with participants ranging from pre-schoolers to young adults and hosted two local Nature Kids groups.

We also 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 her drop-in nature program "Sea Squirts", which ran for the months of November 2018 and March 2019, gave 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".



We are grateful for the support and expertise of Yogi and Cathy from Seaquaria in maintaining the health and well-being of all the intertidal creatures in our aquarium and touch tank.

Spring Break & Summer Nature Camps

In 2018 we held a drop-in Spring Break Camp and five week-long full-day Summer Nature and Science Camps for school-aged children 5 to 7 and 8 to 11 years-old. A total of 64 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 and creating nature-related arts and crafts along the way.



July 4th we also offered our annual Youth Leadership Day to 11 young people between 14 and 18. The Cowichan Valley Naturalists provide two summer camp bursaries and the Nature Centre has a camp bursary fund 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.

Family & Community Education and Events

The Nature Centre regularly hosts and participates in community events that increase access to environmental education and raise awareness about sensitive ecosystems. On April 22nd we celebrated Earth Day and our 6th “B’EarthDay” with a party at the Nature Centre in the afternoon and a benefit concert with glorious music from the Cowichan Camerata String Orchestra at Sylvan United Church in the evening which raised \$850.

On May 4th a 35' roughed out cedar canoe being carved under the leadership of Master Carver Joe Martin made a special stop in the Cowichan Estuary right beside the Centre on its way by trailer to Xwaaqw'um (Burgoyne Bay) on Salt Spring Island. This gave our community an opportunity to learn about, and even participate in, Salt Spring Island's first Coast Salish Dugout Big Canoe Carving in over a century.



May 19th we once again were part of hosting International Low Tide Day with a beach clean-up in the morning 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.



Restoration and Conservation

On June 2nd volunteers came out to the Centre for a day of tying native eelgrass rhizomes, harvested by SeaChange Marine Conservation Society's divers, so they could be replanted in a nearby intertidal area where eelgrass beds were being restored. Native eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) is a critical component of estuarine ecosystems, supporting salmon, birds, and a wide range of invertebrate life.



Through the year we also offered a number of presentations and film showings. In October, as part of the local Wild Wings Festival celebrating the return of the Trumpeter Swans, we hosted Somenos Marsh Society biologist Dave Priekshot who presented "Wild Fins", an update on monitoring and restoring salmon habitat in the Somenos Watershed.

On November 21st retired marine biologist and Nature Centre volunteer Eric Marshall presented "Humpback Comeback" on the recovery of Humpback Whales in the North Pacific after whaling in BC waters had reduced their population by almost 90%. Humpback numbers in the North Pacific are now close to the level they were before whaling began. They're now seen regularly in the Salish Sea for the first time in many years. It was great to learn about this important species and the science behind their recovery.

And on March 14th Marine Naturalists Tasli Shaw and Gary Sutton from Ocean Eco-ventures, talked to us about the lives and habits of Bigg's Killer Whales - the west coast whales that hunt

marine mammals and are becoming increasingly more abundant in the Salish Sea.

Photos: Humpback, Eric Marshall



Bigg's Whales, Gary Sutton

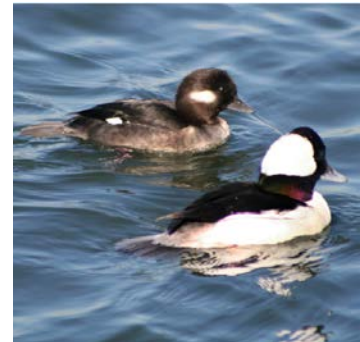


January 3rd, our free family holiday afternoon movie was "Growing Up Wild" about five young animals from different parts of the world learning to tackle their first challenges, figure out how and where to find food and to recognize danger. We had a full house for this fun family event to start off the New Year.

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.

The Nature Centre partners with Bird Studies Canada to complete monthly bird surveys identifying and counting water and shore birds found along a designated stretch of shoreline 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 has been ongoing at the Centre since 2013. Bird survey dates are on the Nature Centre website. Orientation is provided and no experience is required to participate.



We also continue to 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, now with upwards of 100 nests, and 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.

The Climate Change Connection

Climate change is destabilizing ecosystems around the world. Yet climate impacts often require specific place-based solutions. In June 2018 our eelgrass restoration day was the last in a series of climate adaptation days funded by a 2017-18 Eco-Action grant from the federal Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. We have applied for further funding to engage youth in leadership training, water conservation awareness-raising and riparian restoration to continue addressing the climate challenges in our watersheds.



Volunteering & Staffing



Donna & Ken “Volunteers of the Year” with Haley

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, as well as updates to support our seasoned volunteers, whose contributions are so essential to our work.

Nature Centre Coordinator Haley Guest continued to host monthly volunteer learning circles, where volunteers take turns sharing knowledge and learning activities. This year included Gail and Steve doing a session on how to engage visitors at the microscope station, Ron educating us on local invasive species and Pamela offered an interactive approach to teaching about the Cowichan Watershed, among many others.

Haley also took the lead in expanding our team of contract educators to include bird biologist Miki Tamblyn, plant biologist Elodie Roger and geographer and former park interpreter Pamela Williams which is allowing us to update and develop new program offerings. Elodie has built relationships with teachers at local French immersion programs and increased our capacity to deliver programs in French. In partnership with Canada Summer Jobs, we were once again lucky to have a great team of summer students in Mariah and Emerald who provided leadership for our summer science camps.



August 6th we held our summer volunteer BBQ. December 8th was our Volunteer Appreciation evening, where we recognized Donna Zipse and Ken Bendle as our “Volunteers of the Year”. Thank-you Donna and Ken, especially for your loving care for our resident intertidal creatures, including through a 4-day power outage! We also said a fond farewell to Haley as she headed off to lead an educational program in an elephant sanctuary in Cambodia, and welcomed our new Nature Centre Coordinator, the talented Alicia Taylor.

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 also an ecosystem at risk from development and industrial activities.



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, and opened our doors in April 2012.

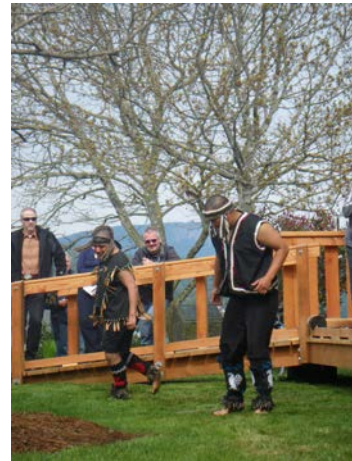
In 2018 we began the journey to fledge from the Land Trust and become a separate charitable non-profit, the Cowichan Estuary Nature Centre Society. We formed a society in March of 2018 and on February 4, 2019 we became a registered charity, working toward a full transition as of April 2019, the end of the Land Trust's fiscal year.

Our initial 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, 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 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, its changing tides and eelgrass meadows. It's just a short walk to the shore. The Centre officially opened 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 nativescape 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. This coming year we especially look forward to offering local youth more opportunities to learn leadership and teambuilding skills while working on riparian restoration in our watersheds.

Your 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](#).

Gift Shop

We have a small gift shop that helps support the Centre's operations, primarily from selling t-shirts, water bottles, field guides, 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

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 and we don't turn visitors away.

In our first seven years (2012-19) the Nature Centre has been successful in obtaining grants to develop engaging nature and science-based education programs and exhibits. While operational funding can be harder to find, since our inception our ongoing operations (programming and overhead) have essentially broken even financially through careful management, ending this year with a modest \$4,700 operating surplus.

We are grateful to our 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 watershed, including: Environment and Climate Change Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (summer students), BC Community Gaming, First West-Island Savings, TD Friends of the Environment, Island Return-It, CVRD Area D Grant-in-Aid, Our Cowichan Healthy Communities small grant and Peninsula Coop.

Our fall Beer & Burger fundraiser was on September 23rd at the Cowichan Bay Pub, a part of BC Rivers Day celebrations, with stories and song focused on our local watersheds.



This Spring's fundraiser on February 24th celebrated the "Return of the Great Blue Herons", with story-telling, poetry, live music from Paul Ruszel, and a visit from Grandfather Heron - 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, planned to culminate with Jim cutting his hair off at our Birthday Celebration in April. Stay tuned.



Each of these events raised about \$2,500. They are a fun way to bring the local community together and they continue to be a success because of ongoing local support, including the generous donations of silent auction items by local businesses and individuals.

Going Forward

A key focus for us over the next two years is 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. We believe that feelings of love and connection, together with the knowledge gained through direct experience, are what inspire ongoing and effective action on behalf of our natural world, here in our community and in the wider world.

Despite being very actively engaged in providing programs for school classes on the shores of the Cowichan Estuary, especially throughout the spring and the fall, there are still many more classes within the local school district that we could reach. We are active in the watershed educators' group "Watershed Connection" and, working alongside the Cowichan Watershed Board and School District 79's Indigenous-focused Lands Program, we want to make the hands-on programming we offer more accessible and relevant to Indigenous, immigrant and low-income young people, including sending members of our team of nature educators out to schools as well as being able to subsidize transportation for youth to participate in programming on the estuary.

To do this work, expanding our annual donor program, and especially our base of monthly donors, is another priority for the coming year. We have a new database project in the works that will help us keep in better touch with our supporters.

Our goal is to raise an additional \$30,000 annually to expand the impact and accessibility of our programming for children and youth, and to also allow us to continue to do citizen-science and restoration projects. Education, restoration and citizen science all 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
Financial Report
April 2018 to March 2019

STATEMENT OF OPERATIONS	TOTAL	Operations	Programs	Interpretive Displays	Gift Shop	EcoAction
INCOME						
Donations	11,472	7,035	4,437	-	-	-
Fundraising	10,758	10,758	-	-	-	-
Grants	32,879	10,000	15,453	56	-	7,370
Programs	25,789	1,459	19,379	1,071	3,880	-
Total Income	80,898	29,251	39,269	1,128	3,880	7,370
EXPENSES						
Project & Program Costs	10,717	2,042	5,398	813	2,291	174
Personnel Costs	65,588	27,791	15,808	315	-	21,674
Facility Costs	9,279	9,279	-	-	-	-
Administration	4,959	4,185	-	-	511	263
Total Expenses	90,543	43,297	21,206	1,128	2,802	22,110
	(9,645)	(14,045)	18,063	-	1,078	(14,740)
Plus: Capital Asset Activity	(17,242)	(7,612)	-	(9,630)	-	-
Net Income	(26,888)	(21,657)	18,063	(9,630)	1,078	(14,740)

SURPLUS (DEFICIT)	Total Surplus	Operating Surplus	Invested in Inventory	Invested in Capital Assets
31-Mar-18 Opening Balance	261,093	14,942	2,616	243,536
2018-19 Annual Activity	(26,888)	(10,273)	627	(17,242)
31-Mar-19 Closing Balance	234,206	4,669	3,243	226,293