

REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

Hello Everyone –

Over the last few weeks, “water” has emerged as an important theme within the activities of the Chemainus Biodiversity Education Project. Whether in the form of rain, out of a tap, or flowing as a river, we are paying attention to what there is to learn right in our backyards about the fundamental role that water plays in supporting biological diversity and related health of people and ecosystems.

Part of our intrigue with water relates to the recent contributions of Sarah Dickie who spent the summer as a research assistant with the POLIS Project. As part of her work, Sarah explored the importance of water to Aboriginal communities in BC, looking into issues faced by Halalt First Nation as an example (See Page 3).

Fear of water in the form of rain was certainly on our collective minds as we set up our Aug. 8 display at the Chemainus night market and again as we set out for a morning bird walk with Lauren Melzack on Aug. 21 (See stories on Page 4).

The highlight of the month was a special walk along the Chemainus River in collaboration with Halalt First Nation. An invited group of local naturalists, consultants, biologists and cultural experts were officially welcomed to Halalt territory to learn and share together about the biological and cultural importance of the river, and the threats being faced by the watershed and the Halalt community.

The river walk was a primer for “Honour Our River Day,” an event to raise awareness of the river’s importance being planned for Sept 14 and open to the wider community. For more information contact halalt@shaw.ca.

As project coordinators, we respect and support the sentiments shared by Herman Thomas of Halalt, which were also reflected in comments by Dr Nancy Turner and Elder August Sylvester in previous newsletters – that our children and grandchildren will thank us for respecting and caring for the diversity of living things in our communities. Water, in its many forms, is vital to everyone and key to a healthy future. We fully support and encourage efforts to work together in this spirit.

Sincerely, CBEP coordinators
Kelly Bannister, Kathy Wachs
Karla Ryan and Mark Kiemele



Herman Thomas of Halalt First Nation and Sarah Dickie of the POLIS Project on the Chemainus River. More about Sarah on Page 3.

Visionary people... together

Herman Thomas of Halalt First Nation sent us this letter after the Chemainus Biodiversity Education Project walk along the Chemainus River on Halalt lands on August 16.

Concerned readers – You are a visionary people. We the Halalt people are not a selfish people, nor are we a radical people. We are, like you, concerned about decisions being made regarding our Children’s Future.

We must stand together to create positive change. Decisions regarding water from any source must entail modern up-to-date studies extending from today to the year 2050.

The decisions made must be based on First Nation Constitutional Rights such as our medicines, wildlife and sacred sites that must be protected. This is a legal obligation and is our Right.

Halalt shall continue to jointly work together with all parties that Speak for Water, working towards a common cause, ensuring our Children's Future – a future that our Grandchildren will be saying they are so glad we, who are gone from this good earth, had Protected Water.

On behalf of Chief James Thomas,
Herman Thomas, Halalt First Nation

– See *Many lessons learned...* on Page 2 –

Many lessons learned at Halalt

The dozen participants on our biodiversity river walk on Aug. 16th not only learned about the importance of the Chemainus River to the people of Halalt First Nation. We also gained a sense of community history, politics and land use planning related to the river.

Herman Thomas welcomed the group and started by sharing a challenge – that it is often difficult for people to understand the river, and the significance of the changes in the river without a historical reference point.

Band administrator Leslie Kitson and housing coordinator Caroline Thomas also shared their perspectives on the many changes the Halalt people have seen along the river in recent decades.

“People who have moved here recently think it is a beautiful place. They don’t realize all the changes that have happened,” Herman Thomas explained. “Our elders remember when the waters of the river were deep and swift. The Chemainus River used to be like the Cowichan River. Now it is more like a creek.

“The river was healthy. There were easily a million fish in the river. The channels were deeper and some of them had 100,000 fish. Now maybe there are 100. In the estuary, from Willy Island to Tent Island, you could see 500 ducks, now you might see 10.

“This was a rich country. The river was deep, healthy. It provided all those fish what they needed to come from the ocean, lay their eggs, and die there to be part of new life. Just in our brief lifetime, our river has gone from that richness in water and wildlife to being poor.”

The Halalt community is located on an aquifer, which is connected to the Chemainus River. The aquifer is the source of Halalt’s drinking water. Participants learned about Halalt’s opposition to the Municipality of North Cowichan’s proposal to extract water from the aquifer to supply the growing town of Chemainus. The application is under review by BC’s Environmental Assessment Office.



Plant identification with Kelly Bannister, Lorrie Wood, Kathleen Johnnie and Bev Vreeswijk on the river walk



Dave Bodaly (second from right) co-led the river walk on which we learned about plants as medicines and the interconnectedness of plants, fish, animals with the river. We walked along a traditional fishing trail and heard about the growing importance of giving children and youth first hand experience in the outdoors and cultivating a respect for nature in this digital age.

“People have to be visionary. I don’t mean that monetary vision of a bigger tax base for development. They have to consider the Life of Water. The municipality could have access to the water if they can first prove the longevity of water for our children who are not yet born.”

Our Halalt hosts spoke about how the local environment has changed dramatically in the last 25 years. “The Municipality should have to prove there is water in place using a 25-50 year plan starting from 2007. They are using old statistics. A new plan is needed based on the current status of water and resources.

We were told there is “no beginning” to the Chemainus River. It is believed to start back around Nanaimo Lakes. A lack of snow means lower water levels, especially in summer, which affects the salmon, the river habitat and the aquifer itself.

Caroline Thomas shared her experiences working with an up-Island First Nation. And she said: “It’s shocking to hear what’s happening in the world – environmental changes and predictions of aquifers drying up in many places. It’s a scary prospect we are facing. What is the plan for where water will water come from afterwards?”

A challenge for us all

The following challenge was presented to the river walk participants: *Do what you can to educate your community to be more thoughtful about change – the meaning of environmental changes and the need for political changes that are thoughtful about the next generation. Water is at the heart of all issues for Halalt.*

Honour Our River

Our Biodiversity Project, and POLIS, are honoured to be taking part in the *Honour Our River* celebration at Halalt First Nation on Friday, Sept 14.

Residents of the many communities around the Chemainus River are invited to attend the event to learn more about the river's watershed, its habitat and the effect of human impact on all the species that live in and along the river.

High on the invitation list from Chief James Thomas are area schools. Halalt has a impressive history of working with school groups from Chemainus and other communities. The memory of releasing salmon fry into the river stays with children a lifetime.



Chief James Thomas



School children regularly visit the river to release salmon and learn about the river. Above, children from Naut'su maut Lelum at Chemainus First Nation got help from Chief Thomas (centre) earlier this summer.

We have inherited a solemn obligation to protect our land and resources for our future generations. This includes the future generations of all nations and all cultures. We are innately connected to the universe. We relate to every part of nature through our souls, whether it is the fish we eat, the air we breathe, the mountain we climb, the grass we walk on or the water we drink.

All are one, and we are part of the whole. From the Halalt First Nation commentary to BC's Environmental Assessment Office on the proposed river well project.



The Chemainus River estuary is where many Halalt families work as shellfish harvesters.

There will be a salmon barbeque, river walks, information booths and other activities. Communities invited include the neighbouring First Nations of Penelakut, Lyackson and Chemainus as well as residents of Westholme, Chemainus and Thetis Island.

The Biodiversity Project will be sending out information about *Honour Our River* day in early September.

Introducing Sarah Dickie

Sarah is a Sto:lo (Fraser river) and Slavey-Dene (north-eastern BC, muskeg area) person who came to Victoria to pursue a degree in history at UVic. As a summer research assistant, she explored the topic of water and Aboriginal communities.



Sarah Dickie and her grandmother

“Water preservation and water purity are very serious issues affecting the health of fish and mammal life that are essential for the continuation of an indigenous way of life in my communities.”

Sarah's opportunity to learn about the Chemainus River and the water issues faced by Halalt inspired her to think about the many similarities in issues and threats facing Aboriginal communities across the province.

These are not just related to water quality and quantity, but also to broader rights and responsibilities. Water is clearly a complex cross-cultural, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder topic that requires taking a watershed level perspective.

Sarah is compiling web-based information and resources on the topic so Aboriginal communities and others who are interested can better learn from each others' experiences.

Walking for the birds – Aug 21

Do you see that Spotted Towhee on the hemlock branch? There's an Oregon Junco running along the trail up ahead. A Fox Sparrow over there! Those are the sounds of Winter Wrens and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. Is that a Northern Flicker?

This was just some of the chatter livening up the Echo Heights forest on the morning of Aug 21 when 14 bio-enthusiasts took a walk with local birder Lauren Melzack.

Despite the less than ideal drizzly weather and the not-so-abundant birds, participants appreciated thinking about biodiversity from a feathered perspective.

“When it comes to birds, you just never know what you are going to come across, or even if you will find any birds,” warned Lauren at the onset.

A self-proclaimed “bird nut,” Lauren recently moved to Chemainus from South Carolina and owns Creature Comforts pet shop in the “secret garden” off Willow St. She has a masters degree in environmental studies and a keen interest in migration patterns.



Lauren Melzack



All eyes on the birds

On bird-watching etiquette, we learned that most of us rely on our vision to identify plants and animals. But bird identification is as much an exercise in listening as it is seeing. Most of us laughed when Lauren pointed out how difficult it is for a group of people to walk quietly through the woods, but we proved Lauren's correct – tuning into sound is not an easy skill. Or maybe it's just hard not to chat when walking alongside interesting and knowledgeable people!

The group also filled out their cultural understanding related to biodiversity, such as First Nations respect for frogs.

“If you sincerely look after the frog, the frog will sincerely look after you,” explained Kathleen Johnnie who is referrals/impact assessment coordinator at the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group and a member of the Penelakut Tribe (Kuper Island).



A red-legged frog at Echo Heights

For anyone who was not able to participate in the project bird walk, Lauren leads bird walks on most Thursday and Saturday mornings at 8 am. Contact her directly for details creature-comforts@hotmail.com or 246- 2855.

Chemainus night market on Aug. 8



Market-goers enjoyed chatting and looking at the project photo album at our display table at the Chemainus night market (above). The market was a successful way of sharing some of our project's aims and activities with the wider community. We are grateful to everyone who contributed resource materials and helped in creating the display. A special thanks to Rochelle Robotka, Tom Wachs, Dianna Hardacker and Nick Schintz for assistance. We are grateful to Gillian Miller for help finding us a location and the Chamber of Commerce for waiving the fee.

The Chemainus Biodiversity Education Project is a pilot collaboration between the community and the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance (University of Victoria).

Web site – www.polisproject.org/projects/biodiversityeducation
Email – bio-variety@shaw.ca