

Echo Heights medicine has a purpose and must be protected

Editor's note: The following letter by a respected elder of the Penelakut First Nation was written to North Cowichan's mayor and council and shared with the Chemainus Courier.

I was walking in Echo Heights last month with the university professor, Dr. Nancy Turner. I'm still thinking about that day. We didn't even get very far along the path because there was so much to talk about. Everywhere I looked I saw medicine. People need to know about this. If we don't say something now, maybe it's going to be too late. Here is what I'm saying to you.

There's so much medicine in that one spot alone. We didn't even go far, only 100 yards and there was so much medicine. I can find all those medicines on Kuper, but not close together, not all in one place like that. I usually have to walk a long ways to find the medicines I need. Some are hard to find. It takes me a long time. Echo Heights is a good place to take our children on a walk to learn. We have to organize a walk through there taking teachers from Kuper. They can learn a lot, all in a short distance.

There's more medicine in that one little area where we went to walk than I've ever seen all in one place. Only people who understand the medicine at Echo Heights know the value of it. Why should we cut down the pharmacy? That's the Indian peoples' pharmacy, Echo Heights is. But money is easier to understand than trees.

That cedar is used for colds, so is balsam fir. Good strong cure, I use it all the time. I use it on all my children. You don't take more than you need. Just a little handful is usually enough to cure a cold. You can kill a tree by taking too much. The old people say you never overdo it. Always take just enough. The prayers that go with taking medicine are important. My grandfather said you can never pray enough. If you don't know how to pray, you may as well not be that medicine man. That medicine is the one that's going to save the life of who you are thanking it for. If that tree doesn't live, that means you're doing something wrong. We have to be careful how we skin the tree. And we have to look after our pharmacy.

There's strong medicines up there for fighting cancer, like the cherry. Alder is one of our penicillins. Maple is another. You can mix plants to make the medicines stronger. All that takes a lot of time to learn. Not many people know about Indian medicine. You have to study a long time to learn about medicine. My grandfather took a long time to teach me so I know it's important.

Letters to the Courier

The Chemainus Courier invites letters from our readers. We reserve the right to edit for legal, grammatical and space reasons. You can email your views and opinions to us at chemainuscourier@shaw.ca, mail us at Box 598, Chemainus, V0R 1K0 or drop them off at 9845 Willow Street.

When I was a little boy, my grandfather told me "Some day you'll be buying this." He had a cup in his hand with water in it. We were at a natural spring that boils out of this ground. I was maybe eight years old. I laughed. I said "Grandpa, don't talk like that." He said, "You listen. I'm telling you something. It's coming. Someday you'll be buying this water. You won't be able to scoop it out of the ground."

We aren't taking our water from the ground to drink anymore. And we see changes in the water table already since all the houses were built up on that hill. If more trees are cut down at Echo Heights, we don't know what is going to happen to the water. Everything is connected.

Everything there at Echo Heights has a purpose. Food, medicine, ceremony, spiritual purposes. Everything there is important. All that medicine, I couldn't get over it. I kept saying "there's not much here we can't use. This place is so important."

I told the story about Indian people. That Indian people were turned into things to keep our medicines here. A rock was kept there at Echo Heights. It was an old man. He was turned by a trickster into a rock. So he chose which rock he wanted to be. And he chose a medicine rock.

That was to keep our medicines here with us. We have to think like that. This forest is alive. We can't abuse it.

That's what I have to say.

**August Sylvester
Kuper Island**

Goodbye ole Chemainus Elementary

It was a sad day in the quiet recess of summer when I was informed that the old Chemainus Elementary School site was on the Sale Block, and in fact an offer had already been received.

I knew the sale was inevitable given Cowichan Valley School District 79's policy on closed school sites, but the process in which this sale was handled was very disappointing. It was disturbing being informed by the School District treasurer that the Municipality had already decided not to purchase the site. Also disturbing is the School District's desire to apply all the proceeds of the sale

to Cowichan Place in Duncan.

About two years ago, Chemainus Secondary Parent Advisory Council made a presentation to the Municipality's Parks and Recreation Commission, requesting the Municipality consider purchasing the old Chemainus Elementary site for a community centre whenever the site went up for sale. This idea was discussed by a number of Chemainus residents during the Official Community Plan process a few years back and the Council decided a formal presentation at the Municipality would emphasize the importance of this community site and the need for input from residents. The Parent Advisory Council highlighted the advantages as the site is next to the high school fields, gym and facilities, and is centrally located.

When I called the Municipality to inquire as to how, when and why their decision was made, the Mayor informed me that it was his recommendation to Council to not purchase the old elementary school site. He said I represented just a few residents in Chemainus who wanted to see the old elementary site as the new Community

Centre.

Because the Council meeting was in camera, I could not be informed of the details. But the Mayor assured me the democratic process was followed. The majority in Chemainus was happy with the plans for the Fire Hall site and consultation is still possible in the Fall when preliminary drawings would be ready. I responded that the old elementary site would long be sold by then and further commented that, as an active parent in the school and sports community, it was my reading of many mainstream families in town and by the negative reaction in the community newspaper, that a number of residents in Chemainus were not happy with the plans at the old Fire Hall and why wasn't the Chemainus Elementary site at least discussed at the last community meeting.

The Mayor informed me that no one raised the issue of the old elementary school site at the May 10 meeting, and it was not the Municipality's obligation to advance this idea at a community meeting. I disagreed. Unfortunately, I had to be out of the province the day of the community meeting, and also had no current information on the site. In fact, the Parents Advisory Council was informed April 18 by two School District board members at a meeting that the sale was not yet being considered.

It is very disappointing that this important community site in Chemainus was not openly discussed at recent community meetings, and it is now lost to private development and, most likely, expensive housing.

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