

Bowker Creek memories

By Don Descoteau - Victoria News - November 23, 2007



Bowker Creek Initiative volunteers Sherryll and Gerald Harris stand up to their eyes in vegetation, during a weeding session alongside Bowker Creek earlier this year. Removing the weeds as a way to restore native plants is just one project volunteers are busy with on the creek.

by Soren Henrich photo

Imagine lolling on the edge of a bountiful Bowker Creek, feet dangling into the slowly meandering water before you jump in to cool off.

For all but the most senior Greater Victorians, such daydreams are a flight of fancy, given the largely hidden creek's relegation to an afterthought over the years due to urban sprawl.

Lifetime resident Robert Gillespie is one of few who remember the creek in all its glory, when swimming holes and ice skating were commonplace.

“When I was a kid and I looked down Bowker Creek, it was full of life,” the 77-year-old District of Saanich councillor recalls of his childhood and teen years in the Cedar Hill neighbourhood.

“I remember it was wide open, very clean, full of vegetation for the muskrats. It was wild with water cress, you could pick it yourself and take it home and eat it.”

Perhaps the most colourful memory Gillespie has of the creek and what it represented was the extra income he derived from it as a young trapper.

“When I was 13, 14, 15, I found out there was still muskrats down there,” he says, adding that his father made extra cash trapping the water-borne rodents during the Depression.

“It was in the war years. We’d get about \$3.50 or \$4 per pelt – my father showed us how to skin them – then take them down to the Hudson Bay Company or Arctic Fur, that was a fair amount of money at the time.”

From skating on the frozen creek when it would flood over Shelbourne Street at Cedar Hill X Road, to wandering through farmers’ fields admiring the life along its banks, Gillespie and many other youth at the time spent much of their formative years near the creek.

It wasn’t long before the overflow of septic fields in the growing residential area spelled the end of clean water and swimming in the creek.”

While the creek was long threatened with extinction by neglect and disrespect, a new attitude has slowly come to the fore, one that sees the value in this historic community watershed.

Through the focused efforts of volunteers from such groups as the Friends of Bowker Creek, and a commitment to restore the creek by the three municipalities it runs through (Saanich, Oak Bay and Victoria), the waterway has been making a comeback.

Crews regularly yank weeds to help animal and plant life flourish. The water is getting cleaner, but it’s an ongoing battle with increasingly swollen storm drains emptying contaminants into the creek every winter and the bed drying up most summers.

The picture is nonetheless encouraging, Gillespie says.

“It has been quite a change in the last 10 years because younger people are coming forward and really taking an interest in working with nature and having a healthy community.”

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Record your creek tales

Gerald Harris of the Bowker Creek Initiative is gathering colourful stories of life around the creek from oldtimers and younger residents.

He and other volunteers are compiling the Bowker Stories documentary, a short film that already has about three hours’ worth of conversations on tape.

The hope is that more memories will be added during this Saturday’s Bowker Creek Communi-Tea

Celebration at Sundance elementary school, 1625 Bank St., from 1 to 4 p.m. Organizers of the family and neighbourhood event aim to celebrate the watershed's historical, environmental and social importance and hear community suggestions and ideas.

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