

Contribution to the conversations on planning for The 707 Community Park
April 25, 2009:

FIRE CONTROL

While "leaving it alone" is, in my opinion, an admirable strategy, there are some management areas where this is not possible, and others where it might not be the most desirable option. This note deals with the first of these.

The forests of Gabriola belong to the Coastal Douglas-fir zone, and historically in this zone, fire has been a major part of the ecology. Its virtual elimination in past decades has, and will, result in major shifts in the ecology of the forests. One readily-observable sign of this shift is the presence of many mature specimens of grand fir (*Abies grandis*) in the Douglas-fir forest of Drumbeg Park. Unlike the thick-barked Douglas-fir, the grand fir has a thin, resin-blistered bark that makes it very susceptible to damage by fire.

In fire-adapted forests, fuel accumulation is prevented, so surface fires tend to be of low intensity, the damage is often relatively short-lived, and the net effect on the ecology is benign or beneficial. The Snunéymux^w almost certainly deliberately set fire to the forest so as to create openings in which deer, berries, and other food resources could flourish.

When fire is excluded from our type of forest, surface fuels accumulate and fire-vulnerable species proliferate. Eventually this will result in an intense ground fire that will rapidly spread via fire ladders, such as the grand firs, to the canopy. The destructiveness of such a fire will be far greater than the "natural" low intensity fires of years gone by.

The traditional practice of considering wildfire to be excluded at all costs may be, in the long run, damaging to the forest ecosystem and may actually increase the threat to human safety, habitation, and property. Each fire successfully suppressed will simply ensure that the next fire will be bigger. Eventually, the fire control methods will fail. An important part of managing the forest will therefore be development of a fire management plan that is closely integrated with the fire management plan of the community as a whole.

Reference: Forest Ecology by J.P. Kimmins