

Hurrah for the new park! Whatever one thinks of each of the several issues concerning its acquisition, the reality of a "done deal" was cause for celebration. So, at the shortest of notices, I, along with twenty or so others, took advantage of the Gabriola Ratepayers and Residents Association's offer on Monday, September 26, to go look at our new pride and joy.

With a bit of extra warm clothing, a flashlight, and a compass—we were due to start at 4:00 in the afternoon and it gets dark early these days—I showed up at the WI Hall just in time to join the convoy of hulking great 4-wheel-drive trucks heading out for the wilderness.

Trucks! A convoy of trucks! Ah well! It really wasn't a time for griping; it was getting late in the day; and we weren't, I hoped, going to use much gas. It meant of course spending time on manoeuvring the vehicles at the ends of logging roads; watching that our exhausts didn't set fire to the grass; and at one spot, apologizing to hikers for enveloping them in clouds of dust as we passed by; but we did get home before dark.

We drove out from North Road and Bertha to the main T-junction in the park, where you have to decide whether to turn east or west. Here there was talk of the need for signposts and maps, and we followed the road to the western boundary marked by the tall, dark green of unlogged forest and, we were told, a bit further on by a padlocked gate. Very often at this time of year, the northern side of the park picks up wisps of mist noticeably quicker than on the other side of the hill to the south where the sun still has some strength. Here on the north side, the alder and hemlock saplings flourish, and the salal and sword ferns look fresher, while on the south side, there's more than a touch of savanna with dry grasses, deer trails everywhere, and scattered, very lanky Douglas firs, seeding the land with the next generation.

Back the way we'd come, admiring through the dust how well the arbutus (the strawberry trees of old) are doing this year in contrast to the struggling cedar saplings, which, as always when derived of moisture and shade, were turning an unhealthy brown here and there. Out along the eastern road that eventually leads round to North Road or, if you keep going southeast, to one or other of the appendages to Hess Road.

We stopped to look at a patch of wetland. Patches like these, although not all as big, are common up here, even though there is no surface water once the rains of winter have stopped. You spot them from afar from the lie of the land, or by old dead alder trees, victims perhaps of age or the changed water table after the clear-cut logging. Some of the living old alders in the park have trunks five-feet around. There are rushes (marsh grass), and if you look to the heart of the patches, sedges (Kellogg's), and often a Scouler's willow or two. These wetlands, with their perched water tables, are pockets of poorly drained silt and clay. There was talk from our guide of putting an Army-Corp-of-Engineers-style dam here. We weren't all sure why. Wetlands have an intrinsic value of their own; and, as somebody pointed out, man-made reservoirs are ugly.

The bedrock on these uplands is sandstone, often with a veneer of glacial till. There's nothing a farmer or gardener would call soil at all. The mix of sand, silt, and stones at the surface stays moist so long as it rains, but it quickly becomes droughty in the summer. It sheds water in unseen rivulets that flow beneath the surface on the top of the glacial hardpan and bedrock.

Much of the rain leaks away as groundwater through the fractures in the sandstone down to the underlying bowl of shale of the Spray formation, and from there, when the aquifer is full, over the edges of the bowl, following the old silted routes of the glacial meltwater, down to places like Hoggan Lake and the wetlands along South Road at the top of Brickyard Hill.

On we went to the highest point of the park—the aptly-named “look-out”; aptly named that is for the time being while the trees are still young. By standing on an old stump, you can see the Strait of Georgia and bits of Namaimo harbour. We sampled this year's crop of evergreen huckleberries (the Oregon grape and red huckleberries had all dried out) as photographs were taken and speeches about parking lots made. Again, here in the centre of a wilderness park, we weren't all sure why. Are they going to clear cut it too to maintain the view through the windshields?

The blackened logging stumps were interesting, and we had time to look at them while people chatted. Some showed very rapid growth in their youth, a post-logging generation no doubt, and a lifespan of around 60 years—the rings of the rotting wood are not easy to count with precision. Others showed two such cycles, a rapid-growth early phase diminishing to almost no growth at all as the competition for light and soil moisture grew fierce; then a second period of rapid growth following the felling of neighbours. These “double-growth” stumps were about 120 years old. These cycles of growth are nothing new. In the past, it was fire that did what the loggers do today. Thick-barked, fire-resistant Douglas firs and arbutus (which can grow from its roots as well as from seeds) were present then, just as they are now.

Suppressing both fires and loggers will change the ecology of the park. But time was growing too short to discuss such matters, and it was time to leave. An interesting hour and thanks to Randy Young for organizing it. I was surprised to learn that park “issues” are perhaps not yet behind us. There was talk of signposts, maps, parking lots, brochures, facilities, GPSs, interpretive centres—of managing a land that has done without management for thousands of years. Where, I thought, was the joy of discovering for oneself? the feeling of satisfaction of making it home after being lost for a bit? the pride at being able to wander the park, navigating with the aid of the sun, a watch, and your memory? the pleasure of unthinkingly following the trails of the deer? the relief at being far from any traffic? the satisfaction of knowing that there are still wild places, even on this island, where all that is not human has a chance to just be itself? From whence is to come the curbing of the urge to prove yet again that, for the time being, we humans rule the planet?

Dare one hope, I wondered as I drove home, that the park will remain “undeveloped”, and that the children of tomorrow will in their turn be able to explore, discover, roam, and ramble, just as we all could on the day that it became ours.

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