INTRO TO MAY 26 ECOFORUM

Presented using the nautical map of Baynes Sound

Today I’m going to focus on Baynes Sound, though in our mandate, it’s only part of a more complex and diverse whole that includes Lambert Channel and the nearby coast.

Baynes Sound is exceptionally hospitable to living things: it is sheltered, tucked in beneath Cape Lazo and between Denman Island and Vancouver Island; it is shallow, with a broad intertidal zone; and it is soft bottomed, filled with silts brought down by the many creeks and rivers and from the bluffs of Quadra sands. It’s like one large estuary, with many wetlands and salt mashes as well as numerous small protective bays.

To further enhance its reputation for hospitality, Baynes Sound has two biological fronts, one at each end. A biological front is a natural structure which causes the flow of water to tumble and sweep nutrients from the bottom up to the surface and into the light. At the north end, currents flow over up over submerged sand bars near Goose Spit, and in the south, currents are compressed and tumble through the narrow space between Mapleguard Point and Repulse Point. These biological fronts churn out phytoplankton by the mega-trillion, creating a strong foundation for the plentiful food web in these waters.

In this way, abundance and resiliency are built into Baynes Sound. For millennia it has provided a diversity of plants and animals- including humans, the many habitats they have needed to live the lives they were intended to live.

Baynes Sound plays a central role in the lives of thousands of migratory birds, herring and salmon. It’s recognized as a nursery for newly hatched herring and a staging ground for waterbirds flying north to nest. So the Sound plays a key role in sustaining ecosystems far beyond its limits, especially here in the Salish Sea. When Baynes Sound suffers, so do the other connected ecosystems.

**Now we come to the hard part, to where we are now,** where we recognize that our extractive, human centred approach has harmed this marine ecosystem. We can list the many ways-logging and mining in the watersheds, diking and draining wetlands, using waterways as sewers, over fishing, putting industry into sensitive habitats, and more. We have, over a very short time, dismantled and degraded the habitats that knit together this ecosystem and now we witness the loss of the plants and animals that relied upon them.

**Now Baynes Sound is vulnerable and many of its inhabitants live precariously:** fewer animals in less viable habitat, with little margin between “here” and “gone”- if the remaining herring spawning grounds are damaged – where will these last fish go? What will happen to all the animals who relied on them?

This vulnerability is increased by the effects of climate change. With the increasing heat or dryness or lack of oxygen, habitats cannot not function as they once did, and need increased protections and less exploitation to maintain their current functions.

Within this changing and unpredictable situation, Baynes Sound must deal with a yet-to-be-contained contaminated site of coal mining waste, a poorly regulated shipbreaking industry, antiquated or failing septic systems in Royston, Union Bay, Ships Point and Denman Island... a large real estate development which intends to dredge a marina in the coal waste and discharge treated effluent down a salmon creek...except that treatment can’t remove the hormones which could harm the salmon eggs... a long plume of Noro virus flowing out of the Comox Marina and an intensifying shellfish growing industry and a dwindling herring stock, the last stock on the coast which hasn’t collapsed.

Not everyone will view these things as a problem, and some problems may not become apparent until the impacts become more pronounced. Support for the well being of Baynes Sound is impeded by a lack of ecosystem monitoring and a lack of knowledge about the cumulative effects of human activities in these waters, whether through shellfish aquaculture, fishing, or real estate development. We know we *don’t* know what’s going on, but the downward trend in local animal populations pressures us to identify the reasons for those long term impacts.

**There is no coherent marine use plan for this area.** There are twenty-nine different plans bearing on these waters, but an ecosystem-based, area-based master plan, co-created with First Nations, is essential to get consistency and coherence, and to slow this death by a thousand cuts that results from disorganization and ignorance. There is dis-integration here, instead of integration. The K’omoks First Nation and DFO are working on a plan for shellfish aquaculture management, but a plan that covers all activities for this whole ecosystem is needed. Now that the BC government is developing Coastal Marine Strategy for the first time, this may be more possible.

**This is where the Ecosystem Forum fits in**: we’ve chosen to use this marine ecosystem as the frame, the lens through which we view all the activities we’re examining. We ask: How is this impacting the well being of Baynes Sound? How can it become compatible with a healthy ecosystem? We bring people together to deal with problems in a more welcoming, direct and informal way, to exchange information between our various solitudes. We aim to be a catalyst for solving Baynes Sound’s problems in a more effective, more informed way.

About a year ago, folks attending our forum voted to direct the Steering Committee to find the funding to complete a Study of the State of the Baynes Sound/Lambert Channel Ecosystem, which would produce recommendations to guide ecosystem-based management of these waters. The intention was to introduce those recommendations to local decision-makers and encourage them to apply those ideas in the planning process. We learned from David Ellis and David Stapley how the Comox Valley Conservation Partnership had produced a similar study with recommendations in 2013 and used it to successfully influence local governments to work together to guide development and protect more critical habitat.

But nothing has come of this directive, yet. In the meantime, the Steering Committee has supported the K’omoks First Nation’s Area-based Aquaculture Management Pilot project, which we believe will be extremely beneficial. Still, the need remains for a shared overall marine use plan and a well informed, broadly supported study to guide its development. Something to think about as problems keep emerging.