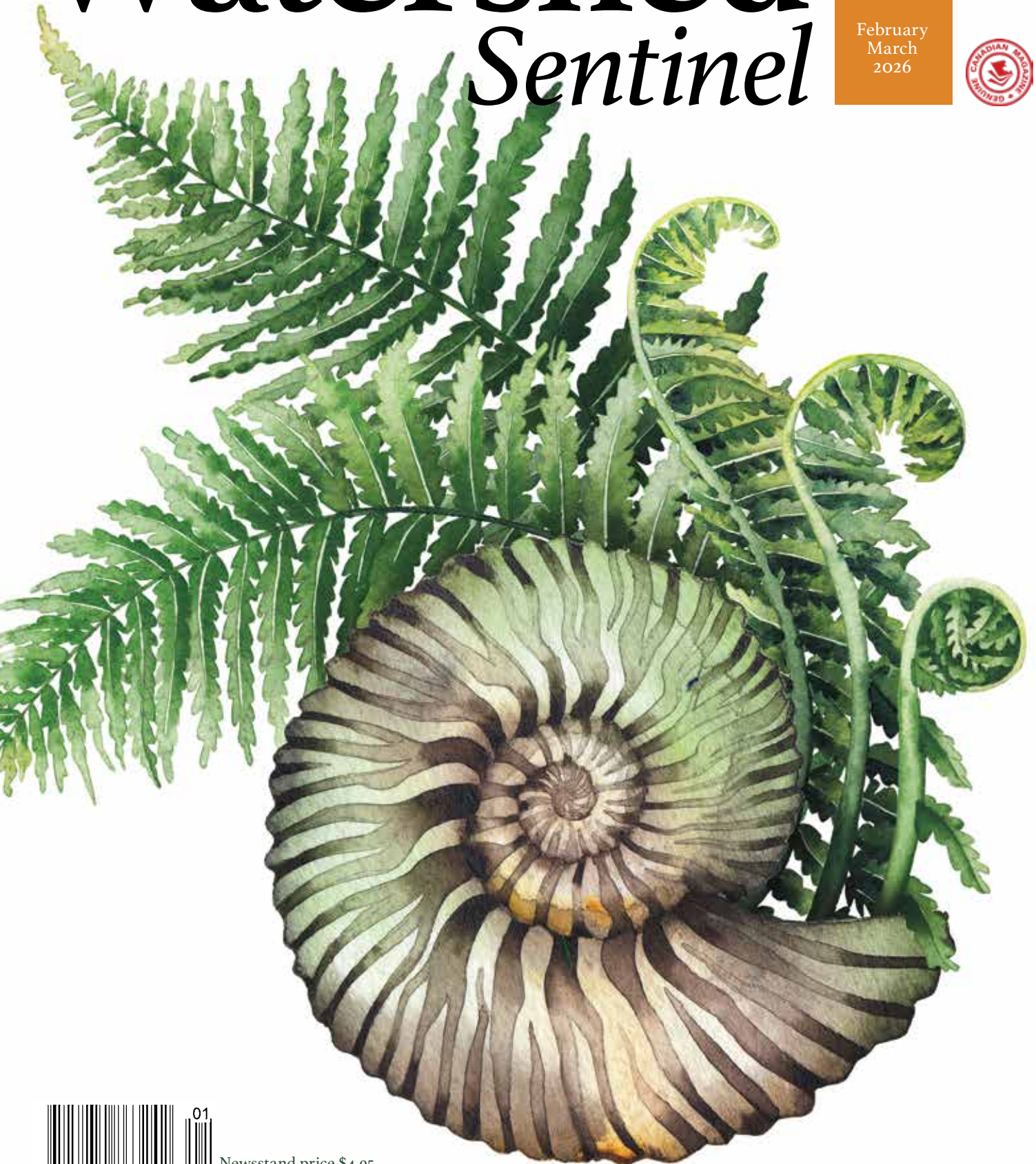


# Watershed *Sentinel*

The  
Re-  
Wilding  
Issue

February  
March  
2026



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Environmental news for BC & beyond

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My favourite moment of the whole year, as a parent, was hearing the children sing “we’ll be known by the company we keep” around a fire the night of the first overnight. The fire was blazing, the stars were sparkling, the eyes of the kids, parents, mentors and apprentices sparkling - and I took in the moment of belonging to such an incredible community that I will hold dear to my heart forever more.



# Going to School in the Forest p. 30



Photos ©Thriving Roots Wilderness School

# Watershed Sentinel

February | March 2026  
Vol. 36 No. 1

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### Pulp Friction

Crofton's embattled pulp mill closes after 68 years, marking the end of an era for the estuary and the community.



### Rewilding

Caring for Mother Earth is more than stopping the damage. It's restoring and rewilding the land and ourselves. These stories explore how communities are consciously creating and nurturing new relationships with marine and terrestrial species.

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Cover Credit  
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## Editorial

Zoe Blunt

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**Next Issue Copy Deadline:**  
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## When News Breaks

Sometimes the news breaks us, when we realize with horror that this culture has passed a turning point, a continental divide, and it's likely there's no coming back.

The shift may not be obvious in the moment, but it will become clearer as the chasm grows. The polycrisis isn't coming; it's here. When leaders forsake the rule of law, when people forget that they belong to the land and not the other way around – that's the beginning of the end.

Sometimes the most effective resistance looks more like retreat: taking shelter in a safe place where we can regroup and heal. It's the same with the climate crisis – there will be pockets of refuge where our wild cousins can hole up and escape the worst of the coming storm.

The most important task we have is to protect those refuges for our sanity and for the future of the natural world. Every little patch of land, every tiny body of water is precious and worth protecting. That's where future generations of love and resistance will grow.

–Zoe Blunt, Sayward BC, January 2026

## At the 'Shed

**Welcome, new subscribers!** Congratulations on choosing the best independent environmental journal in the province. Our readers are some of the most well-informed people in the country. Thank you for being part of bringing these stories to the world.

**Thank you, long-time subscribers.** You make it all possible, and we're so grateful for your ongoing support. We've pledged to reduce costs by sending more email reminders instead of paper letters – you can help us conserve resources by replying to the first note when you get it (Or – get ahead of us by renewing before the expiry date on your address label). You can even sign up for an evergreen auto-renew subscription!

**Don't miss the 10th annual Herring Fest:** Our Hornby Island friends invite you to celebrate these amazing fish with a Herring Ball, art show, movie night, and special chartered tours. We'll be there! Save the dates: March 4-8, 2026. For more information, see [www.conservancyhornbyisland.org](http://www.conservancyhornbyisland.org)

**Murrelet Mountain correction:** Pacific Wild reached out to clarify that the incredible work documenting marbled murrelets at Tsitika Mountain was carried out by independent researchers led by Royann Petrell. The team observed 300 of these tiny birds in a single day! Huge thanks to Petrell and her team, and to Pacific Wild for supporting their ongoing research. Read the updated story at [www.watershedsentinel.ca/article/murrelet-mountain](http://www.watershedsentinel.ca/article/murrelet-mountain).

Growing gap in emissions reporting

## Military CO<sub>2</sub>

**Analysis of military emissions** data reported to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change reveals that the top three military spenders – US, China, and Russia – are either failing to submit any data or providing only partial data. Military emissions remain exempt from mandatory UNFCCC reporting, leaving a major gap in the data that shapes international climate policies. Military emissions are estimated at 5.5% of global emissions.

—[www.ceobs.org](http://www.ceobs.org)  
November 6, 2025

Global demand to decrease

## Low-Coal Goal

**Projections say global coal** demand will drop over the next few years, according to the International Energy Agency. Renewables are expanding faster than expected in key Asian nations while “structural declines” in Europe are pushing coal demand down. The decline in US coal demand will be slower than expected due to measures under the Trump administration that support the use of coal. However, the IEA’s prediction of more US coal use in 2027 is dwarfed by an even larger projected drop in China’s coal use.

—[www.carbonbrief.org](http://www.carbonbrief.org)  
December 17, 2025

Trillion-dollar investment at risk

## AI Bubble Impact

**If the AI bubble bursts**, companies, workers, and investors around the world will feel the impacts, according to Sundar

Pichai, the CEO of Alphabet, which owns Google. Over a trillion dollars has been invested in AI technology in a short time, potentially causing over-inflated values for companies and stocks. Along with data centres’ “immense” energy demands and increasing climate-change emissions, experts fear “irrationality” in the AI market will lead to a crash similar to the dot-com collapse in the early 2000s.

—[www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)  
November 18, 2025

Simple, appropriate tech in Finland

## Sand Battery

**Polar Night Energy** and utility Lahti Energia have partnered for a large-scale “Sand Battery” project for the latter’s district heating network in Vääksy, Finland. Polar Night Energy’s technology heats dense materials that retain and then discharge heat. The project will cut fossil-based emissions in the Vääksy district heating network by around 60% each year by reducing natural gas use by 80% and decreasing wood chip consumption. It follows a similar thermal energy storage project completed this summer that used soapstone as its storage medium.

—[www.energy-storage.news](http://www.energy-storage.news)  
November 26, 2025

France seeks captive whale refuge

## Orca Sanctuary

**The French government** has taken a step toward securing a safe future for the country’s last two captive orcas, Wikie and Keijo. It will be working with The Whale Sanctuary Project to explore relocating the orcas to a proposed Nova Scotia sanctuary once it opens, potentially as early as 2026. France has already banned

the use of cetaceans in live entertainment and captive breeding. The Whale Sanctuary Project has confirmed that it will still be able to welcome several belugas from Marineland in Niagara Falls, even if Wikie and Keijo arrive first.

—[www.animaljustice.ca](http://www.animaljustice.ca)  
December 12, 2025

Court strikes down logging plans

## Yellowstone Win

**A lawsuit by conservation** groups led a federal court to strike down US Forest Service plans to log 16,500 acres of pine forest just outside Yellowstone National Park in Custer Gallatin National Forest. The court found the agency violated the *Endangered Species Act* and other laws, and the project will require new analysis on protecting threatened grizzly bears and Canada lynx. “This ruling makes it clear that agencies can’t just rubberstamp massive logging projects and promise to sort out the details later,” said Kristine Akland of the Center for Biological Diversity.

—[www.biologicaldiversity.org](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org)  
December 11, 2025

Guided missiles vs. electric buses

## Mineral Wars

**Critical minerals** that are key to a future energy transition are being diverted to make the latest military hardware, according to a new report from the Transition Security Project. The Pentagon is stockpiling minerals like lithium, graphite, and rare earth elements to use in an emerging arsenal of military technologies such as “AI-driven autonomous warfare platforms,” the report says.

—[www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)  
December 4, 2025

# Letters

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## Better Broom Bashing

The latest *Sentinel* [December 2025] contains an article concerning the problem of broom on Vancouver Island. While most of it was informative and well-written, the writer is sadly mistaken with the instructions as to how to remove broom.

In particular, his endorsement of ripping it out of the ground is the exact opposite of what is advised now. The problem is that such treatment disturbs the soil, and the numerous seeds that have been produced over the years and dropped will find the conditions perfect for germination.

Instead, the plant should first be stripped of all seed-heads and flowers with the removed product contained in a bag or bowl and taken away when you finish.

Then, using a sharp blade, cut the main stem a centimetre or more below the soil surface, below the first root ‘hair.’ The above-ground part of the plant will die, and the remainder of the plant below will not regenerate. This is, frankly, a slower process, but it will, in time, reduce the number of plants.

One big advantage of this method is that it can be done at any time of the year and there is no need to remove the cut plants from the area. Ripping the plant out produces more plants, not fewer.

Please feel free to check with another source more qualified than I am. I have been working at this for about 25 years at Swan Lake Nature Sanctuary in Victoria, even though, surprise – some broom is still around. Seeds can remain dormant for many years.

—*Michael Rooksby*  
*Victoria, BC*

## Best Broom Bashing

I was a bit alarmed when I read Ben Wickham’s essay [WS, December 2025] about removing Scotch broom in the Nanaimo environs. He writes, “The most successful method ... is to strike when it’s in bloom” (yes) and then “rip it out of the ground.” No! Only the smallest of broom plants should be pulled, standing directly above the plant with your feet astride it, pulling straight up and covering the hole with surrounding dirt, grass, or moss.

Wickham contends that larger plants can be cut at the stem. Yes, with these cautions: use sharp loppers and try to cut the base of the stem below ground, then cover the hole with the surrounding materials. Any light getting through to the stump will produce hydra-like plants that are even more difficult to remove in subsequent years unless that original stump is thoroughly extinguished and well-buried.

Wickham states that the stump “lacks the reserves to survive an ever-warming winter.” Not true! Broom does not care about climate change; it just blooms earlier every year, and sometimes right through the winter where I live.

I do appreciate Ben Wickham’s restoration efforts with native plant seeds – always enjoyable after a hard season’s work removing broom. We are doing that in Drumbeg Provincial Park on Gabriola. After decades of broom removal, finally the satisfaction of rehabilitation with native seeds and plant plugs!

For a complete and simple guide to effective Scotch broom removal, please always refer to [www.broombusters.org](http://www.broombusters.org).

—*Susan Yates*  
*Gabriola Island, BC*

## Carney, Smith, and Eby

BC Premier David Eby was left completely in the dark, as was all of BC, about PM Carney and Alberta Premier Danielle Smith’s collusion to propose a new pipeline through BC to its west coast.

This would require at least a partial repeal of the North Coast oil tanker ban, new or expanded port facilities in Prince Rupert or Kitimat, and reduction of regulations put in place over decades, after numerous oil spills damaged the environment for marine mammals and all wildlife in the water and shoreline and on land.

Does Carney forget that he served for four years as UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance, specifically appointed to support the transition to a net-zero economy? Does he care about the future ability of his four children, and in fact all the world’s children, to survive in a warming climate due in great part to polluters like Canada?

Canada is failing woefully and will fail even more if this proposal were ever to come to pass. In the short term, Mark and Danielle win some brownie points in their respective parties and supporters in “the rest of the country.”

—*Anicca de Trey*  
*Comox, BC*

## The Watershed Sentinel welcomes letters

but reserves the right to edit for brevity, clarity, legality, and taste.

Anonymous letters will not be published.

Send your musings and your missives to:

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[editor@watershedsentinel.ca](mailto:editor@watershedsentinel.ca)

or online at [www.watershedsentinel.ca](http://www.watershedsentinel.ca)

Quiet change to regulations

## Cloned Meat

With the stroke of a pen, Health Canada is opening the door to unlabelled cloned meat entering the consumer market. The proposed regulatory update will exclude cloned animals from the definition of “novel foods,” removing the requirements for both pre-market safety assessment and mandatory labeling.

—[www.newswire.ca](http://www.newswire.ca)  
November 6, 2025

BC First Nation ends forest spraying

## Herbicide Ban

Lheidli T’enneh First Nation has prohibited the use of all herbicides, including glyphosate products, on its territory in northern BC. An open letter signed by the chiefs calls on government and industry to respect the ban and protect Indigenous people, the environment, and future generations from “toxic chemicals.”

—[www.ckpgtoday.ca](http://www.ckpgtoday.ca)  
November 25, 2025

Bigger tankers in Burrard Inlet

## Dredging for Oil

Vancouver Port Authority is leading a proposal to dredge Burrard Inlet to accommodate larger ships, such as oil supertankers accessing the TransMountain Terminal in Burnaby. Dredging can stir up silt loaded with pollutants like heavy metals and PCBs that harm fish, wildlife, and people. The proposal has support from the Province and the federal government, but so far it lacks permits or a budget.

—[www.vancitylookout.com](http://www.vancitylookout.com)  
December 17, 2025

Proposed resort threatens wildlife

## Ktunaxa Says No

New research by Ktunaxa Nation and others shows the proposed Zintion Resort near New Denver, BC would likely destroy a crucial wildlife corridor and fragment small populations of grizzly bears, wolverines, and other wildlife. Researchers combined Ktunaxa traditional knowledge with computer models and peer-reviewed research to analyze the cumulative impacts of development, roads, and human incursion. The study, published in the *Journal of Environmental Management*, concluded the controversial resort is not appropriate for the area.

—[www.y2y.net/blog](http://www.y2y.net/blog)  
November 5, 2025

Fish farms hide data from the public

## Secret Sea Lice

Over the past year, salmon farming companies in BC have reduced or stopped publishing lice numbers on their websites. MOWI last updated its reports in October, while Cermaq now states they only report to DFO. Farms must keep below three motile lice per fish March through June. One of Grieg’s final public updates in September showed 32 motile lice per fish at one of their farms.

—[www.watershedwatch.com](http://www.watershedwatch.com)  
December 3, 2025

BC loses millions to oil and gas

## Water Giveaway

A new report warns that BC charges oil and gas companies almost nothing for water, while fracking industry consumption reaches record levels and a drought

threatens northeast BC. Rates similar to Nova Scotia’s would have raised an additional \$142 million last year that could be used to restore watersheds damaged by industry. In 2024, fracking operators in BC got 2.9 billion litres free of charge.

—[www.thetyee.ca](http://www.thetyee.ca)  
December 11, 2025

Wet’suwet’en protectors avoid jail

## Blockaders Free

A hereditary leader and two allies had their sentences suspended on appeal, following convictions for blocking pipeline workers and disobeying an injunction on Wet’suwet’en territory in 2021. Three Indigenous land defenders led by Sleydo’ (Molly Wickham), a wing chief in the Gidimt’en Clan, appealed their jail sentences for criminal contempt last year. The appeals court ruled that the RCMP violated Charter rights with “grossly offensive, racist, and dehumanizing” treatment.

—[www.cbc.ca](http://www.cbc.ca)  
October 17, 2025

Drax chipped ancient coastal trees

## Old Growth Fuel

A multinational corporation has been turning BC old growth trees into pellets to be exported and burned for electricity, researchers say. In 2024, “renewable energy” pellet manufacturer Drax took in 90 truckloads of unmilled coastal old growth logs from three cutblocks in the Skeena region. This data was confirmed by satellite and by firsthand observation at Drax’s Burns Lake facility. In November, Drax announced the closure of its Williams Lake plant due to “lack of fibre.”

—[www.stand.earth](http://www.stand.earth) & [www.nsnews.com](http://www.nsnews.com)  
November 9, & November 27, 2025

# Conference of Profits

## Real solutions nowhere to be found at COP30

by Indigenous Environmental Network and Climate Action Network

**The 30th meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP30) in Belem, Brazil wrapped up its proceedings early with “little of substance” accomplished, according to the Indigenous Environmental Network.**

On November 30 2025, Climate Action Network International gave Canada its “Fossil of the Day” award. “The new government of Mark Carney has flushed years of climate policies down the drain,” the network noted. “In addition to backsliding on policies tackling Canada’s climate-destroying pollution, his Environment Minister, Julie Dabrusin, has chosen inaction and silence where leadership was urgently needed.”

Over the last four years, approximately 5000 lobbyists representing fossil fuels, rare-earth minerals, mining industries, and climate-change scammers have gained access to these global climate meetings, successfully stonewalling any meaningful and actionable agreements.

These lobbyists represent approximately 90 of the most powerful and profitable corporations that have exerted their influence for the last five years at COP negotiations. These corporations, which include many of the world’s most profitable private and publicly owned oil and gas majors, produced the equivalent of 33,699 million barrels of oil in 2024 – enough to cover the entire country of Spain with a one-centimetre blanket of oil.

“There are powerful actors at COP30,” says human rights lawyer Alberto Saldamando, “locking Mother Earth into a dependence on market-based schemes, techno-fixes, and financialized commodities, under the illusion that profit-driven forces can solve the escalating impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, and social and environmental injustice. This is not working and will not work.”

Despite overwhelming evidence and calls from rational people calling out the grift, this year’s COP seemed to include even more outlandish climate (non) solutions. The proponents of geoengineering once again infiltrated and forced negotiations to include these game-over-for-the-planet, industry-supported proposals.

The past failures of carbon pricing and the collapse of those markets didn’t stop them from being further embedded in future policy and recycled promises.

The Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF) will continue the failures of the UN’s decades-old REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), and REDD+, an expanded version that included the enhancement of forest carbon stocks. The TFFF will not stop the violence and blatant violations of the lives and rights of Indigenous peoples in the global south.

While business-as-usual approaches are well disguised as the path forward for a clean and renewable energy future,



Marina Silva, Brazil’s Minister of the Environment and Climate Change

“COP30 negotiators do not understand that climate change cannot be solved under a system that rewards extraction,” noted Thomas Joseph Tsewenaldin, Carbon Pricing Educator with the Indigenous Environmental Network.

The conference ended with a hastily written Outcomes Report that includes little of substance and only passing mentions of Indigenous rights. The lukewarm, non-binding outcomes of this report will do nothing to address the lack of progress in phasing out fossil fuels, which are driving planetary collapse and human rights violations.

A “Just Transition Mechanism” was approved by the majority, and while it includes the rights of Indigenous Peoples and alludes to a green economy that is fair to all, it so far has no funding to take it beyond the realm of good intentions.

Adapted from [www.ieneearth.org](http://www.ieneearth.org) (Nov 22, 2025) and [www.climatenetwork.org](http://www.climatenetwork.org) (Nov 18, 2025)

# Roundup Retraction

## Safety claims about popular herbicide are indefensible

Commentary by Warren Bell

**Several years ago one of my patients, working as a landscaper, was splashed in the face with Roundup herbicide just over his left eye.**

Within six months, an open sore developed there, subsequently diagnosed as lymphoma – the same kind of cancer that Dewayne Johnson, a California school groundskeeper, developed after a very similar accident.

Mr. Johnson won a \$21 million legal action against Monsanto. He is still alive.

My patient died within two years.

Corporations never admit wrongdoing. They defend their products and their behaviour, even in court. When they lose, they say, “We strenuously reject the guilty conviction. We always work hard to do everything right. We only sell products that are safe, and behave honestly to the highest standards.”

That’s a legalistic smokescreen, of course. Despite this tactic, the noose has been tightening around the neck of the world’s most widely-sold herbicide (plant-killer) for decades.

Bayer (which owns Monsanto and the patents on Roundup and its active ingredient, glyphosate) refuses to admit what is proven: that glyphosate – and the particular formulation called Roundup – *does* cause cancer. Monsanto actually knew this but lied for decades to con-

vince scientists, regulators, and people who bought and sold and used it that it was 100% safe.

How did Bayer/Monsanto get away with claims of Roundup’s complete safety for so long? They used a trick employed by stage magicians all the time: misdirection. The company pinpointed an enzyme, called EPSPS, that exists only in plants and some bacteria and fungi,

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### Glyphosate – and the particular formulation called Roundup – *does* cause cancer.

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claiming it is the only thing glyphosate really affects. Scientists, regulators and the general public believed this tall tale that the herbicide was completely harmless to humans and to anything else besides plants and microbes.

Monsanto’s own studies, and studies it shaped, all declared Roundup/glyphosate completely safe, but dozens of independent studies have demonstrated that it isn’t. Now, an influential and seemingly independent study supporting Roundup’s safety has just been retracted – 25 years after it was published – because of “serious ethical concerns regarding the

independence and accountability of the authors of this article and the academic integrity of the carcinogenicity studies presented.”

Previously hidden Monsanto documents, published during a recent historic trial about cancer caused by Roundup, show that seven Monsanto employees were praised by their boss for “their hard work over three years of data collection, writing, review, and relationship building with the papers’ authors.” The seven were offered special polo shirts with the Roundup logo as a “token of appreciation for a job well done.”

The paper, of course, was based only on studies created by Monsanto. After the retraction, Bayer said, unsurprisingly, that “glyphosate can be used safely as directed and is not carcinogenic.”

Now we know. Corporations like Monsanto and Bayer say and do whatever increases profits delivered to shareholders who generally know and care little about what corporations actually do. This is wrong. The rules that allow this must be changed.

Warren Bell is a long-time family physician in Salmon Arm, BC with a consuming interest and involvement in community and global affairs.

A version of this article was originally published in the *Salmon Arm Observer*.

# Pulp Friction

## A heron's-eye view of the Crofton mill

by Zoe Blunt

**After decades of protests, environmental violations, government fines, and civil claims, it's the end of an era.**

Crofton's embattled pulp mill is shutting down after 68 years, leaving 350 workers without jobs and destabilizing dozens of businesses in the region.

"The Crofton mill has been challenged for some time now," Domtar's paper and

packaging president Steve Henry admitted in December 2025. "Unfortunately, continued poor pricing for pulp and lack of access to affordable fiber in BC necessitates the closure."

The Crofton mill was once part of a recycling system of sorts; it was designed to turn waste from sawmills into energy, pulp, and paper. But a wave of sawmill closures has decimated BC's pulp and

paper industry and broken the cycle. In 2003 the Province scrapped its appurtenancy rules that required timber to be milled where it's harvested, and logging tenures (tree farm licenses) are no longer mandated to maintain or supply sawmills. The Crofton mill was so starved for feedstock it was reportedly importing wood chips from the US.



But as one chapter ends, another one begins. With the loss of the mill comes the possibility that the estuary may eventually heal from decades of abuse.

## In the beginning

We can only imagine what the Chemainus River estuary was like in our grandparents' time. The river delta on Vancouver Island's east coast was an incredibly rich place. Where it reaches the ocean, the blue-green river slows and meanders across wide shoals into a small bay protected by a string of small islands just offshore. The Halalt First Nation village of Xulelthw was surrounded by shallows teeming with crabs, oysters, clams, mussels, ducks, and eelgrass. These in turn supported salmon, bears, herons, eagles, and people across the region.

In 1957, BC Forest Products built its pulp and paper mill on the edge of the estuary. Village sites and ancestral burial grounds were paved over with no regard for the people who once lived there.

For decades, the mill dumped toxic effluent that contaminated the river mouth, decimating fish and wildlife. Shellfish harvesting has been banned since 1973, and fishing is permanently banned in many parts of Stuart Channel. The seabed itself is tainted with some of the most dangerous and persistent chemicals on earth: dioxins, furans, and heavy metals – compounds that accumulate over time instead of breaking down.

Dioxins in particular are byproducts of using chlorine to bleach paper, and they are linked to cancer, reproductive problems, neurological damage, impaired immune systems, and hormonal changes.

BCFP and the mill's subsequent owners – Fletcher Challenge, Catalyst, Paper

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The herons had **dangerously high** levels of dioxin, which damaged their eggs.

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Excellence, and now Domtar – were well aware of the problems. Over the years, they had plenty of warnings.

## Residents revolt

*Watershed Sentinel* has been reporting on pollution from kraft pulp mills, including Crofton, since 1990. The collapse of a great blue heron colony was the catalyst.

The heron rookery on Shoal Island next to the Crofton mill was large and well-established, but it was in trouble. “Biologists were quite suspicious about what was happening with the heron population,” recalls Delores Broten, founder and executive editor of *Watershed Sentinel*. “That year [1987], 59 active heron nests at Crofton did not produce a single live chick, which was shocking.”

Nearby ospreys, bald eagles, and cormorants were also failing to reproduce, and scientists suspected mill pollution was the cause. Their fears were confirmed in 1991 when the BC Aquaculture Research and Development Council reported that herons had dangerously-high levels of dioxin, which damaged their eggs and prevented their chicks from developing.

The loss of the iconic heron nursery, coupled with closures of once-abundant fishing and shellfish harvesting in the area, provoked residents to demand change.

Their demands culminated in new federal regulations about the use of chlorine in pulp and paper mills. By 1994, most

mills – including Crofton – were required to switch from elemental chlorine to chlorine dioxide in order to reduce dioxin contamination. This was a major grassroots victory – and not just for Crofton.

Greenpeace was lobbying in dozens of countries to protect ecosystems by eliminating all forms of chlorine from pulp and paper production. Local groups like Reach for Unbleached and MillWatch took up the campaign in BC, and their legacy lives on. To this day, *Watershed Sentinel* and other environmental journals are printed on chlorine-free paper.

But the victory was bittersweet. Dioxin remains in the silt and sediment at the bottom of the estuary, and no one is cleaning it up. The mill's dioxin pollution was not limited to ocean effluent; it was also in the air, along with the toxic byproducts of burning hog fuel for energy to run the mill. A plume of pollution from the mill's smokestack affected thousands of nearby residents.

Rather than switching to cleaner technology, however, the mill's owners at the time, Norske Canada, proposed burning tires and coal along with hog fuel, which predictably sparked more public anger from those living downwind.

Among those in the path of the plume were rock legend Randy Bachman and his family on Salt Spring Island. Recognizing that locals needed to level up

Continued on Page 10 ⇨

↳ Crofton continued

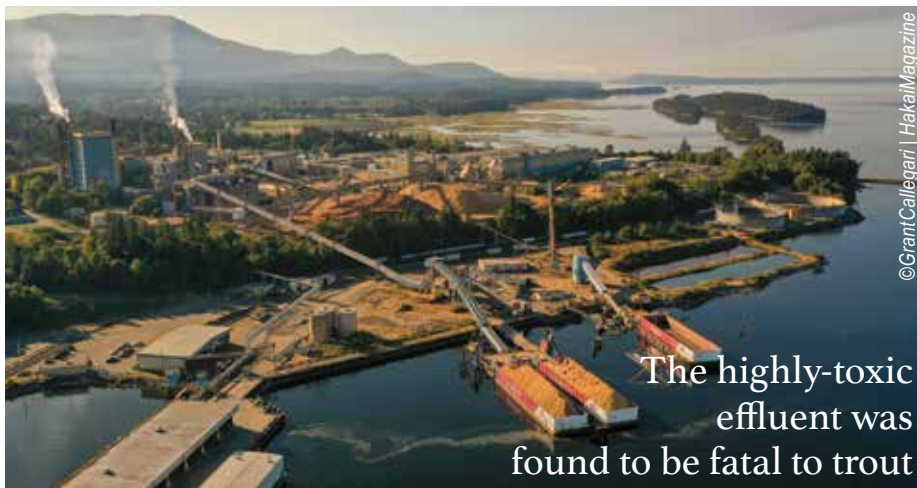
against the multinational corporate giant, Bachman recruited fellow rock stars Neil Young and the Barenaked Ladies to perform a benefit concert for the Crofton Airshed Citizens Group. The 2004 concert raised \$250,000, enough to cover reams of independent research and environmental tests.

Airborne emissions experts used computer modelling to map wind currents and identify areas where higher concentrations of pollutants were settling. Alarmed by the results, locals pressed their demands for real-time dioxin monitoring at the mill's smokestack. Broten recounts how a German company offered to donate a state-of-the-art monitoring device. She says the mill owners approved the system, as did the BC environment representatives, but the federal Ministry of the Environment official chose to veto the project, leaving downwind residents frustrated.

## Death and lawsuits

In its final decade, the Crofton mill was rocked by tragic accidents, environmental violations, and lawsuits. Two unrelated industrial accidents in 2016 and 2017 killed two workers. After investigating, WorkSafeBC ordered Catalyst to pay \$75,000 for each death.

Airborne sulphur dioxide emissions were detected in 2017 and 2018, and more fines were laid. 2021 brought a series of illegal wastewater discharges, including one incident that spilled up to a million litres of highly-toxic effluent found to be fatal to trout. The mill's owner – now Paper Excellence, which acquired Catalyst in 2019 – was forced to pay \$25,000 after the Province found it failed to properly inspect and maintain its equipment.



These are only the major infractions. But they are dwarfed by the shadow of the Halalt First Nation's \$2 billion lawsuit against Catalyst in 2016. Halalt is no longer pursuing the civil suit, but the underlying claims have yet to be addressed.

The claim held the Crofton Mill and its owners directly responsible for polluting the Chemainus River and damaging fish spawning habitat with erosion, waste, and sediment.

Halalt band member Herman Thomas said that the mill's waste discharge resulted in toxic "sludge" that built up between the foreshore and Willy's Island, cutting off access. "The estuary was rich," Thomas told the Cowichan Valley Citizen in 2016. "The estuary now is dead. I believe that the pulp [mill] was the cause of that because of the sludge."

"For our nation, I think it's time for the feds and Province to be accountable for the last 60 years of degradation to our [territory] and our loss of our salmon stocks over the last 20, 30 years," said Halalt Chief James Thomas.

More recently, in December 2024, the Halalt First Nation launched a class action lawsuit to protect its reserve, the Chemainus River, and the estuary. The lawsuit names forestry companies Mosa-

ic, Island Timberlands, and TimberWest along with three levels of government, alleging they "conducted their forestry operations in a careless and reckless manner." It says overlogging and poor debris management is causing riverbank erosion and uncontrolled runoff.

The ongoing mismanagement has caused gravel, silt, and debris to accumulate in the lower river, damaging salmon spawning habitat and contributing to floods that destroyed homes on the Halalt reserve and elsewhere, residents say.

## New initiatives

It's possible that Domtar will try to sell the mill, or that it could become a worker-invested partnership like the Harmac mill, but prospective purchasers will certainly be wary of the toxic baggage and legal liabilities it carries.

Nevertheless, a new chapter is waiting to begin.

The Halalt First Nation has established the Chemainus Watershed Initiative, which is now in its second phase of working with industry, citizens, and governments to restore the river and the estuary after 150 years of logging and industrial development.

# Data Insecurity

## Residents question the cost of a new data centre in Nanaimo

by Sidney Coles

**As British Columbia accelerates efforts to attract data centres to the province, a proposed facility in Nanaimo is drawing scrutiny from environmental advocates who say the water and power demands of the digital economy are colliding with climate reality.**

The project, planned for a 5.75-acre site on East Wellington Road, would introduce a modular, high-tech data centre into the semi-rural North Jingle Pot area, which was recently rezoned for industrial use. Critics warn that its water consumption, electricity needs, and cumulative ecological footprint raise serious ques-

tions – particularly in a region already experiencing drought conditions, declining snowpack, and grid vulnerability.

### Rapid expansion of data centres

Data centres are the physical backbone of the digital world massive bunkers housing servers that store, process, and transmit enormous volumes of information. Sometimes described by the industry as “carrier hotels,” they host networks of data streams that power everything from banking and health records to social media and artificial intelligence.

Over the past decade, the energy demand of data centres has increased dramatically. Rack density – a measure of how much power is required to run servers – has risen from roughly five kilowatts per rack to as much as 100 kilowatts, driven largely by AI and accelerated computing. According to the International Energy Agency, data centres already account for about 1.5% of global electricity consumption – roughly 415 terawatt-hours annually – and that figure is projected to more than double by 2030. The agency estimates that data centres will be the single largest driver of new electricity demand worldwide over the next five years.

Canada has become an increasingly attractive destination for this infrastructure. Cooler average temperatures reduce cooling costs, hydroelectricity is marketed as low-carbon, and federal privacy protections under the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act* appeal to companies seeking alternatives to US surveillance regimes. British Columbia now hosts 26 data centres, most concentrated in Metro Vancouver. Nanaimo’s proposed facility is part of this broader expansion.

### The Nanaimo proposal

The Nanaimo data centre is being developed by Nanaimo-based Townsite Planning, Inc. on behalf of the landowner, 2779022 Ontario Inc., which operates

*Continued on Page 12* ⇨



under the business name Maplecolo. The East Wellington site was rezoned in 2023 to High-Tech Industrial (I-3), with “data centre” added as a site-specific use under Nanaimo’s Official Community Plan.

The City of Nanaimo says the centre won’t be used for for artificial intelligence. Maplecolo markets its communication services as “quantum-safe,” using cryptographic systems designed to protect sensitive information from future cyber threats. Industry leaders frequently describe such facilities in military terms – “mission critical” infrastructure requiring constant power, security, and redundancy.

The project would be built in phases, with up to ten modular units constructed over time, depending on market demand and electricity supply. While it has not yet received a development permit, environmental advocates say the scale and implications of the project have not been adequately examined in the context of Nanaimo’s water and energy constraints.

### Water use in a changing climate

At full build-out, the data centre is expected to consume between 55,000 and 69,000 litres of potable water per day, primarily for cooling equipment.

The City of Nanaimo has sought to contextualize this figure, noting that it represents approximately 0.19% of the city’s total daily water use and about one per cent of all commercial and industrial consumption. Staff compare it to other local water users: a shopping mall can use roughly 100,000 litres per day, while a food processing facility may consume more than 80,000.

But environmental groups argue that such comparisons miss the point.

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## “When you add energy-intensive projects on top of climate stress, the risks compound.”

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Nanaimo’s drinking water comes from the South Nanaimo River watershed, whose headwaters originate on the eastern slopes of Mount Hooper in the Island Mountain Range, and the water supply is highly dependent on consistent precipitation and mountain snowpack.

Those conditions are becoming less reliable. In recent years, reduced snowpack and longer dry seasons – exacerbated by logging in the watershed – have heightened concerns about summer water scarcity.

Nature Nanaimo, a local environmental organization, warns that industrial water extraction for cooling could reduce flows into the Nanaimo River, with downstream impacts on salmon habitat, water quality, and public access. Wetland disruption from land clearing could also increase erosion and runoff, degrading the watershed’s ecological integrity.

“Wetlands destruction carries another cost in flooding, the loss of animal habitat, and declining ecological diversity,” the group said in a submission to the city. The developer has responded by stating that the facility will use a re-circulating, closed-loop cooling system designed to minimize water loss, replenishing only what evaporates. City staff say they are working with the proponent to ensure the design aligns with Nanaimo’s conservation objectives.

Still, critics argue that even “efficient” systems add stress to already constrained ecosystems – particularly when viewed

cumulatively. They maintain that current levels of resilience may not stand up to future climate scenarios, and that decisions made now will shape how communities absorb climate shocks in decades to come.

### Power demand and public cost

Beyond water, the project’s electricity requirements have raised concerns about grid reliability and public cost.

Data centres require uninterrupted power and must receive provincial approval to connect to BC Hydro’s transmission grid. That approval is not guaranteed. BC Hydro plans to launch a bid system for data centres in January 2026, which will require projects to compete for the ability to connect to the grid.

If approved, the Nanaimo facility would qualify for BC Hydro’s Innovation Rate, a reduced industrial electricity price available to customers consuming more than 70 gigawatt-hours annually. Under the program, qualifying data centres receive electricity discounts of up to 20% for the first five years.

Environmental advocates in BC question why energy-intensive private infrastructure should receive discounted power at a time when the Province is warning of future electricity shortages and urging households to conserve.

Data centres are designed to operate without interruption, relying on diesel backup

generators during outages – a feature that raises additional concerns about emissions and local air quality.

### Habitat, noise, and impact

During a development permit review meeting, city staff raised questions about noise, lighting, fencing, and habitat disruption. The developer committed to protecting 20% of existing trees and to engaging an acoustical engineer to reduce projected noise levels by 4-5 decibels.

For critics, these concessions do not address the larger issue: the normalization of energy- and water-intensive infrastructure in ecologically sensitive areas, approved incrementally rather than assessed as a whole.

“We’re dealing with enormous cumulative impacts in our territory,” one regional environmental advocate said during a public hearing. “When you add energy-intensive projects on top of climate stress, the risks compound.”

Nanaimo’s data centre debate arrives as the Province grapples with how to balance economic development, climate commitments, and infrastructure limits. While BC has permanently banned cryptocurrency mining from connecting to the provincial grid, other forms of high-intensity computing continue to receive policy support.

The Nanaimo project represents relatively small resource beans compared to the \$70-billion data centre celebrity Kevin O’Leary has proposed near Grand Prairie, Alberta. Named “Wonder Valley,” the project would be the largest data centre in the world. Last January, the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation submitted a cease-and-desist letter to Alberta Premier Danielle Smith, arguing they had not been consult-

ed about the proposed use in its traditional territory, where the centre is slated for development.

In the letter, they state they only learned about the Province’s support for the proposal through media statements Smith and O’Leary made jointly on Fox News. Primary concerns for SLCN are water extraction from its primary water source, the Smoky River. The Wonder Valley Fact Sheet says its 24 million m<sup>3</sup> yearly need for water will only use 0.2% of the river’s total annual flow.

AI expert David Rolnick at McGill University told CTV news that water is not the only concern with the project – the Wonder Valley centre would raise Canada’s total GHG emissions by 5%.

Under former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, power generators – the kind needed to fuel large-scale data centres – were required to have net-zero emissions by 2050. Last November, Mark Carney signed an agreement with Danielle Smith that suspends the federal government’s clean electricity regulations, opening up the potential for data centers to expand the use of natural gas, coal, and nuclear reactors to power them.

As BC woos big tech infrastructure, Nanaimo’s experience may serve as an early test of whether the province is prepared to reckon honestly with the physical costs of the digital economy – or whether those costs will continue to be absorbed quietly by rivers, forests, and public utilities.

Sidney Coles is a freelance journalist, writer, and manager of creative projects.

## Data Centre Opposition Heats Up

Data center proposals are increasingly a hard sell in the communities where they’re being built. *Inside Climate News* had perhaps one of the best headlines of the year with “A new unifying issue: Just about everyone hates data centers.”

### Reported recently:

- The \$7 billion-plus Stargate data center in Michigan is meeting significant opposition, and the state’s Attorney General has asked the utility commission to delay approval of two contracts to allow the energy utility DTE to provide power to the project.

- In rural, and often conservative, Pennsylvania, Talen Energy faces resistance to its contracts with data centers as residents worry about its impacts on electricity rates, the environment, and farmland.

- The firm Data Center Watch found that at least 16 data center projects worth a combined \$64 billion have faced delays or have been entirely blocked by local officials due to opposition.

- Following the example of cities like Dublin, Singapore, and Amsterdam, officials in states like Georgia, Illinois, Tennessee, Missouri, and Idaho are embracing the “pre-emptive data center moratorium” as a way to slow-roll or block new developments.

- As data center developers look to Latin America, weighing locations such as Chile and Brazil, opposition has emerged as residents learn about relaxed environmental permitting and limited transparency on development impacts.

—from [www.latitudemedia.com](http://www.latitudemedia.com)  
December 3, 2025

# The Politics of Betrayal

## A MOUthful of greenwashing

Commentary by Stephen Earle

**December's Memorandum of Understanding between Alberta and Canada is a bitter mouthful of greenwashing; a concoction sufficiently noxious to repulse all but the most gullible.**

Among other things, the MOU supports increasing tar sands oil production while simultaneously reaching “net-zero emissions” from that production, constructing the massive Pathways carbon capture and storage project, and getting the private sector to build another bitumen pipeline to the coast, primarily for export to Asia.

According to the Pembina Institute, production of Alberta tar sands oil emits more than four times as much CO<sub>2</sub> as most other oil production in North America. While there are some ways to reduce the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> required to get the tar out of the ground and into a pipeline, they are expensive and experimental. Most are decades away.

The oil companies, while still making record profits, are asking for handouts from both levels of government to develop and implement new extraction methods. Unless you believe in magic, increasing tar sands production while getting to net-zero CO<sub>2</sub> is a laughable and reckless contradiction.

The Pathways Alliance says that their project involves 400 km of new pipeline to transmit CO<sub>2</sub> from the Fort McMurray tar sands operations to Cold Lake, where – hopefully – it will be permanently

stored underground. Pathways is projected to cost around \$20 billion and eventually could sequester about 10 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year.

The project is cited in the MOU as a vital link in reducing the carbon footprint of tar sands production, but in fact it will only be sufficient to offset about 12% of the current annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. And these are only the emissions from the work done to get the tar out of the ground. These emissions do not include the 550 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year (equivalent to the combined personal emissions of 39 million Canadians) when the fuel is actually burned.

And then there's the pipeline to the Pacific coast with giant tankers filled with diluted bitumen – stuff to make an oil spill from hell – sailing along 150 km of pristine coastline before reaching the open sea.

We could see a tanker every day or two, depending on the size. I don't know which of those options scares me the most, but I support the First Nations in demanding that this must never happen, that the north coast oil-tanker ban must remain in place.

No matter how it is transported, tar sands bitumen will be refined in some other country and then burned. The resulting emissions will add massively to the global climate crisis.

This MOU is toxic, just like the tar sands. Its sole purpose is to increase the politi-

cal standing of Danielle Smith and Mark Carney in the minds of Alberta voters.

Dr. Steven Earle is Professor Emeritus in Earth Science at Vancouver Island University, and the author of two books on climate change and two Earth Science textbooks. He lives on Gabriola Island.

### The MOU Is a “License To Lie”

A clause in the Canada-Alberta MOU threatens to roll back anti-greenwashing rules. *Competition Act* rules were toughened to great acclaim in 2024, following complaints about false and misleading oil and gas ads. The amendments ban highly-polluting industries from making environmental claims without scientific evidence. Among others, Pathways Alliance erased claims about “net zero emissions” tar sands from its website.

Polls show the new amendments were extremely popular, with 93% approval among Canadians “Why then was it so important to include a promise in the MOU to gut these rules in the *Budget Implementation Act*?” Leah Temper and Samantha Green ask in *The Hill Times*. If implemented, this federal rollback of false-advertising laws could irreparably harm public health and the environment.

—*The Hill Times*, [www.hilltimes.com](http://www.hilltimes.com)  
December 31, 2025

# More Letters

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## Salmon and Sinixt

I was shocked to read “Salmon Coming Home” [December 2025]. There’s dead silence on one key element – whose land is this taking place on? The Upper Columbia River basin is Sinixt territory, not Ktunaxa, not Secwepemc, not Sylix/Okanagan.

Like the Pelly Banks First Nation discussed in the very next article, the Sinixt were declared extinct for the purposes of the Indian Act in 1956. And, like the Pelly Banks Dena, Sinixt continue to exist and to uphold their responsibilities to their ancestors, lands and water.

Just because the Sylix, the Ktunaxa and the Secwepemc are claiming Sinixt territory through the BC Treaty Process does not make it their territory. And UNDRIP does not give colonial governments the authority to decide who are Indigenous Peoples and who are not.

The Autonomous Sinixt have been working since the late 1980s to resurge and reclaim their rightful place in their homeland (see [www.sinixt.org](http://www.sinixt.org)).

These salmon release events are part of neighbouring Nations attempts to lay moral claim to territory that is not theirs. So, it’s incumbent on everyone to ask: what is this dog and pony show for?

—KL Kivi  
New Denver, BC

## From the Editors:

Recommended reading on Sinixt people and salmon restoration: “Coming Home,” WS, October 2023, [www.watershedsentinel.ca/article/coming-home](http://www.watershedsentinel.ca/article/coming-home).

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## For Our Proofreaders

A couple of things for your proofreaders in “Toxics and Salmon” on page 12 of the December 2025 issue:

In the title, “toxins” is a name for a special kind of toxic substance. It means one that is produced by a living organism. For most poisonous substances, a proper name would be “toxicant” or “toxic substance.”

In the second paragraph, there is a symbol, LC50, with the “50” as a subscript. I am surprised to see that, since the format changed about 1970. It is all on one line now: LC50 (meaning “lethal concentration for 50% of the organisms”). I was primarily responsible for that standardization, by a paper I published in 1970.

—John Sprague, PhD  
Salt Spring Island, BC

## Lodgepoles and Fire

As autumn weather descends, I think about what can be done over the winter to reduce the risk of wildfire in our 20-acre forest. The Wilkie Way area was first logged in the late sixties, and we marvel at how it has transformed itself into a thriving Coastal Douglas Fir ecosystem.

Over the decades, I learned a lot and helped a bit, removing hundreds of dead trees under 10 inches in diameter and using them for firewood or leaving them to build soil and humus. Letting in sunlight allows arbutus, broad-leaved trees, mosses, and wildflowers to flourish.

The logging disruption sixty years ago was also favourable for the growth of lodgepole pine trees, and we have dozens that now stand 80 ft tall, waiting for fire. Unlike firs, pines are pyrocentric. When they experience drought, they close their stomata, retain water, and produce terpenoids, a naturally flammable substance.

Scientist Harriet Rix in her brilliant 2025 book *The Genius of Trees: How they Mastered the Elements and Shaped the World* describes how trees have shaped fires for millions of years. To quote ecologist Oliver Rackham: “Trees and other plants are not flammable by misfortune, but by adaptation.”

Controlled burns work in some forests, but are ineffective and downright dangerous in others, particularly in a warming climate. In our forest, I cut all pine saplings, and, with care, drop mature ones for firewood, and I hope others consider doing the same.

—Rick Laing  
Salt Spring Island, BC

# Draining the Basin

Oversight stripped, science silenced, treaties ignored



Commentary by Jon Auger

**Danielle Smith’s government did not stumble into a water crisis. It engineered one by design, dismantling safeguards quietly while insisting loudly that nothing fundamental had changed. Bill 7, the *Water Amendment Act 2025*, was passed without meaningful consultation with Treaty 6, 7, and 8 First Nations, despite rewriting how water moves through their territories.**

That exclusion is not a side issue. It is the operating principle. As Treaty 8 Chief Sheldon Sunshine told *Alberta Native News* (Dec. 12 2025), “I was really taken aback when Bill 7 was introduced.”

What followed was not confusion but alarm. “The impacts are so significant to our people, it’s truly unimaginable that they would go ahead and do that without proper consultation,” Sunshine said.

At the structural level, Bill 7 collapses the Peace-Slave and Athabasca river basins into a single administrative unit covering roughly half the province. The government has offered no hydrological rationale beyond geography. The real effect is legal: once amalgamated, transfers between these systems are no longer inter-basin transfers at all. A line that once triggered scrutiny is erased.

That erasure enables ministerial approval of so-called “low-risk” transfers, a term left deliberately undefined in statute. What once required legislative debate can now be decided behind closed doors. In an October 30 press conference, Environment Minister Rebecca Schulz dismissed the old protections as “slow, cumbersome and delaying water getting to where it is needed.” Accountability, in this worldview, is inefficiency.

Treaty chiefs immediately saw the danger. Chief Sunshine warned inter-basin transfers will have “severe impacts on every watershed, and the people and ani-

mals who depend on them for water.” He added, “We’re dealing with such enormous cumulative impacts in our territory when it comes to resource development, and then the impacts on the water from those developments are increasingly problematic.”

Science reinforces those fears. The Alberta Wilderness Association explains that each basin has unique properties, and moving water risks altering “chemical concentrations, pH, temperature, and introducing disease or invasive species.” Peer-reviewed research shows that once inter-basin transfers become normalized, ecological damage is locked in. Temporary decisions harden into permanent dependency.

Chief Sunshine suspects this framework is being laid in advance of energy-intensive mega-projects in northwest Alberta, including the \$70-billion Wonder Valley AI Data Centre Park on the traditional lands of the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, and a proposed nuclear plant near Peace River. He also pointed to drought conditions in northern Alberta, along with plans for a Peace River-to-Dawson Creek water pipeline to deal with drought in the Kiskatinaw River.

Industry is explicit about what it wants. A Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers vice-president complained that existing *Water Act* rules were “unnecessary inefficiencies for oil and gas projects that span major basin boundaries.” Bill 7 answers that complaint perfectly.

Chief Vernon Watchmaker of Kehewin First Nation in Treaty 6 named the pattern directly, saying, “Yet again, the Government of Alberta is stepping over First Nations’ sovereignty for short-sighted and incredibly risky moves to further the interests of industry.” He warned, “It

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## What once required legislative debate can now be decided **behind closed doors.**

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will be our peoples who will carry the burden of the Smith Government’s bad decisions.”

The government claims Bill 7 reflects a public engagement process conducted between October 2024 to June 2025. The Alberta Wilderness Association obtained records of that engagement through a FOIP request, and the documents tell a different story: strong cross-sector support for instream flow protections, water conservation objectives, and careful, case-by-case review of transfers. More than three-quarters of participants expected restraint and transparency. Those expectations were ignored because they would have slowed approvals.

### Acceptable damage

This contempt for limits is not new. It mirrors how Smith’s government handled coal mining on the Eastern Slopes and Grassy Mountain. When government scientists produced peer-reviewed evidence showing selenium contamination persists decades after coal mines close – that reclamation fails and fish populations are poisoned – the response was not to change policy. It was to delay publication, restrict media, and muzzle scientists.

When evidence threatens economic objectives, evidence is managed. Science becomes advisory until inconvenient. Monitoring replaces enforcement. Damage is treated as acceptable so long as it is downstream, delayed, and politically survivable.

In the Legislature, NDP MLA Brooks Arcand-Paul articulated the worldview Bill 7 rejects. “Water is our ancestor and it deserves our respect, not management and irresponsible bills like this one,” he said. “We are not masters over the environment. We live in coexistence with it.”

Danielle Smith’s government has chosen the opposite philosophy. Water is a throughput problem. Basins are accounting units. Treaties are obstacles to be navigated later. The benefits are immediate and concentrated. The costs are cumulative, irreversible, and conveniently deferred.

This is not modernization. It is controlled deregulation wrapped in soothing language. And when rivers run low, fish disappear, coal contamination spreads, and downstream communities pay the price, this government will claim no one could have known.

They knew. They were warned. They chose this anyway.

Jon Auger was born in Calgary and raised on a foothills cow-calf ranch with horses, clean water, and wide skies. Now retired, he writes to protect what raised him.

This article draws on a December 12, 2025 piece by Local Journalism Initiative reporter Jeremy Appel, originally published at [www.albertanativenews.com](http://www.albertanativenews.com).

Caring for Mother Earth is more than stopping the damage. It's restoring and rewilding the land and ourselves. It's restoring our connections to the natural world. Rewilding our instincts to protect what we love.

This requires that we apply what we are learning about the deep interrelationships between marine and terrestrial life, from microplankton to towering firs.

In these feature stories, humans are consciously creating connections with the natural world, nurturing forests, fish, and wild animals. Here we find science, philosophy, and spirituality converging, and the recognition that our great purpose is to eave behind a better world.



# Rewilding

# Fear and Fire

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## Growing among the aspen

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by Margaret Steele

**I first notice the aspen in the summer of 2019. Hundreds of tiny shoots, each one with its tip sheared off by the tractor cutting the field. The irony catches in my throat – it’s the beginning of fire season, and we’ve just mowed down a potential firebreak.**

When I bought the land in 1988, summers were hot but never scary. No one talked about “fire season” and “flying embers” wasn’t a term in anyone’s vocabulary. The neighbouring fields were green and well-tended. Mine was planted in alfalfa and managed by my soft-spoken neighbour Rick.

But Rick died in 2004, and I stopped cutting that field, assuming the vegetation would compost down and improve the soil. I didn’t know uncut grass takes ages to decompose. By the summer of 2015, the field was a thick mass of dried-out grass and weeds, the perfect tinder for a flying ember, a term in everyone’s vocabulary now with wildfires burning all around us – 200 hectares at Lynch Creek to the north, 4,400 hectares near Rock Creek to the west, and the massive Stick-pin Fire just over the border in Washington State, an out-of-control inferno that would eventually grow to almost 31,000 hectares.

The fear in our small community of Grand Forks is palpable, and when fiery embers blow across the Washington border, fear turns to anger at the unkempt fields: “What the hell is wrong with people?”

“Those overgrown fields are a bloody fire hazard!” “People are such idiots.”

My stomach clenches. I’m one of those idiots. My two acres of dry grass and weeds is less than ten kilometres from the Lynch Creek fire, a short distance for a flying ember. Embarrassed by my negligence, I post a note on our neighbourhood watch page: “If anyone is available to cut my two acres of dead grass, please pm me. It needs to be cut, baled and hauled away . . . and yes, why am I only thinking of this now is a good question.”

No one replies. Of course not, it’s too risky to pull a swather in a dry, overgrown field in the middle of summer. One strike on a stone and the whole field could ignite. There is nothing to do but wait. Wait and hope for rain.

By the end of August, the Lynch Creek Fire reaches 1,700 hectares. Several of us move our emergency bags to the door and pack family treasures in our vehicles. We huddle together in groups of three or four, feeling vulnerable and helpless as we watch the billowing plumes of smoke rise in the distance. Some days, smoke smothers the entire valley, grounding helicopters and leaving fire crews without air support as they battle the flames and build fire guards.

Eventually, the hot, dry days of summer give way to fall. The fire guards hold, the rains come and the flames are gradually extinguished. The air smells fresh again

and, as temperatures cool, morning dew bathes the land. It’s as if the earth remembers to breathe and so do we, exhaling in relief that we made it through the 2015 summer of fire.

As I unpack the car and move my emergency bag to the basement, I promise myself I’ll hire my neighbour Don to cut the field the following year. The decision brings some relief until I realize that may not prevent a fire from spreading. A dry field, even when cut, is still vulnerable to flying embers. The landscape needs moisture and I wonder if installing an irrigation system is the best solution, even though it doesn’t seem sustainable in the long run, especially if droughts worsen and water tables continue to drop. And there’s the bigger question of whether it’s ethical to pump groundwater simply to keep a field green to protect it from fire.

With so many uncertainties, I feel I’m missing something obvious. The field was never a natural grassland. It was forested land before being cleared by settlers in the early 1900s and planted with alfalfa. Trees were felled, often with the help of dynamite, until the land gave way to the plough and human dominance.

For decades the sub-irrigated field produced a healthy crop without surface irrigation. But, over time, as water tables dropped, the field became a dried-out mass of thirsty brown.

*Continued on Page 20* ➔

During the winter of 2015, I start re-searching eco-restoration and the water cycle. I ask myself why I didn't do this a decade earlier. Given the state of the natural world, accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, soil erosion and ecosystem collapse, action is crucial. What we do or don't do on the land in the next few years really matters. I find myself wishing my friends had bought the neighbouring properties so we could work together and have more impact.

Meanwhile, unknown to me, natural processes are at work underground. The tall aspen along the edge of the field are spreading their roots in all directions. When the snow melts and the ground warms, small shoots surface in the field from subterranean buds along the root systems.

When Don cuts the field in the summer of 2016, the mower rips off their tiny tips. I don't notice any of this at first. In fact, it takes three more years before I realize what is happening. But, the aspen aren't deterred. Despite being nipped off each year, the saplings sprout more shoots and continue to grow. They function as a single organism, with the older trees in the forest providing water and nutrients to the emerging saplings.

By the time I finally see them in the summer of 2019, there are hundreds of tiny shoots in the field. I bend down for a closer look and come face to face with the tiny saplings, each one with its tip ripped off by the mower. The irony is unavoidable – it's the beginning of fire season and we've just mowed down a potential firebreak.

I wonder what would happen if we stopped mowing the field so close to the forest edge. Would the aspen continue to spread, possibly all the way to the road,

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## How can anyone own part of an interconnected living system of roots, vegetation, soil, and water?

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a distance of nearly one hundred metres? Would a small aspen grove be more resistant to fiery embers than a grass field or a coniferous forest? And does it even make sense to re-wild a two-acre field, given the enormity of eco-restoration required worldwide? Two acres is a tiny patch of ground, hardly significant at the scale of an ecosystem. But sometimes you have to start where you find yourself . . . just as the aspen did.

I decide to send out my own exploratory roots. The following year, when Don cuts the field, he leaves a ten metre strip from the edge of the forest to allow the aspen sprouts to grow. Five years pass and each year he leaves more and more room.

Today, in 2025, there are hundreds of saplings in the field, many of them over five metres tall and some sprouting as far as twenty metres from the forest edge. I plunge my hand into the soft soil beneath the trees. It is cool to the touch despite the summer heat. It has more tilth and feels more like a moist sponge than the dry, flour-like soil in the open field. When the rains come, the moisture seeps deeper into the ground and the pungent smell of damp earth lingers long after the clouds vanish.

The emerging aspen grove becomes a welcoming presence on my morning walks. In spring, black-capped chickadees flit among the branches, breaking the silence with their eager mating calls. Even the trees seem eager for spring as swollen buds open to the light, revealing

tender green leaves that are soft to the touch. In summer, chatty pine siskins and red-breasted nuthatches keep me company as I sip my tea in the dappled shade. In autumn, the slightest breeze turns the grove into a quivering blaze of gold. And in the white silence of winter, I strap on my snowshoes and crunch my way among the naked trunks, laying down tracks alongside those of rabbit, grouse, deer and squirrel.

This small grove may indeed become a firebreak one day. Only time will tell. I may not be here to bear witness but, as the landscape grows and changes, something grows and changes in me too.

What starts as a question about safety from fiery embers becomes a curiosity about the water cycle and, from there, a discovery of connections. Observing the trees as the seasons pass, I notice relationships I was previously blind to. My eyes open to the kinship between the emerging aspen shoots in the field, their older siblings at the forest edge and the towering tree on the hillside that must be the oldest of them all.

I bushwhack my way up the hill, passing charred coniferous stumps from fires long ago. I stand at the base of the old aspen and gaze up the length of her trunk. Over a hundred feet tall, she's lived on this land longer than the thirty-six years I've been here. She makes me wonder about my place in this ongoing cycle of relationships that started long before I was born and will continue long after I

am gone. I think of Rick paying for my share of the crop, reminding me I own the land. But he was wrong about that. How can anyone own part of an interconnected living system of roots, vegetation, soil and water? A living system that shrugs her shoulders at arbitrary property boundaries and fence lines.

If I am not an owner, then who am I in relation to this place? What does it mean to be in “right relationship” in this interconnected web of life where fire is part of the natural cycle of renewal?

Can I say I’m in right relationship if I intervene by creating a firebreak? Or if I interrupt the natural process of plant succession where aspen is a pioneer species that moves in after a disturbance and then

gives way to a climax species of conifers? Already, seeds from Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir are sprouting among the young aspen saplings. Over time, their evergreen canopies will crowd out the aspen, interfering with their ability to photosynthesize and causing them to wither and die. And then the aspen grove will become a coniferous forest again, just as it was a hundred years ago before the land was cleared for farming. I don’t want that to happen. I want to weed out the conifers

and allow the aspen to spread but I ask myself if that is my decision to make.

I sit with the question over the winter alongside increasing signs of climate chaos, ecological collapse and monster fires. In the past, when fire came to the land, it cleansed the landscape, clearing the forest of dead and diseased trees and opening up the canopy to allow new growth. But the massive fires ravaging the planet today are not the regenerative fires of old. Today’s out-of-control beasts burn down to the mineral layer of the soil, destroying microbial life and killing root systems.

Our ecosystems didn’t evolve to withstand these intense infernos. Humanity didn’t evolve to withstand them either but, as part of the interconnected web of life, we are compelled to respond. To start where we find ourselves. To deepen our roots. To strengthen our kinship with the living world and to persevere, not knowing what the future may hold.

Margaret Steele has written extensively on affordable housing issues. In recent years, her focus has shifted to writing about the land she lives on in the Granby Valley north of Grand Forks, BC.

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## What we **do or don’t do** on the land in the next few years **really matters.**

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# The Forest Community

Where land and people shape a new kind of governance



by Hazel Volk

**On Vancouver Island, the Cumberland Community Forest Society shows what is possible when a community takes conservation into its own hands.**

Formed 25 years ago in response to logging near the village of Cumberland in the Comox Valley, the group has secured 545 acres of forest in five separate purchases along the south side of the village. While its primary mission remains buying privately owned timberlands to look after them, it achieves this by bringing together hundreds of people around a shared goal: caring for places they love.

The Cumberland Forest stands in the Nanaimo Lowlands, a strip of land sheltered by surrounding mountains. This rain shadow microclimate is warmer and drier than the rest of the island, and home to a rich, distinctive biodiversity of plants and animals. Wetlands, creeks, rocky ridges, and forests are part of this ecosystem, providing important habitat for many species. Birds, cougars, bears, beavers, black-tailed deer, amphibians, coho salmon, sculpin, and countless invertebrates have all been spotted here.

Over a century of logging has wiped out most of the ancient trees, with only

a few still standing. Protecting this second-growth is critical to give the forest the necessary time to mature and rebuild complex habitats, including a layered forest floor that many species rely on. More than 50 species considered at risk of extinction or extirpation in the Comox Valley now have the chance to survive here.

By remembering and sharing the story of the region's deep-time geology, ecology, and pre-colonial history, the CCFS brings people together around a shared sense of responsibility, pushing back against the colonial legacy that continues to shape landscapes along the island's east coast.

As radical as this sounds, the CCFS doesn't label itself as an activist organization in the traditional sense, but as a transactional one. As executive director Meaghan Cursons puts it, "Many of our founders were activists ... people with a vision of an incredible future of protected forest lands. But there was an awareness of the context of privately managed forest lands, and that nobody was going to do this for us, that it was not going to happen through legislation or a regulatory path."

Cursons says their path has been "to find the way to gain community control over stolen unceded landscapes, to pull them back into community, and then do the hard work of figuring out how to manage land."

What was initially pragmatic became a broad and diverse movement, involving conservationists, families, mountain bikers, runners, herbalists, hikers, artists, school groups, adventure racers, photographers, and more – all of whom now see the Cumberland Forest as an integral part of the village's culture and community life.

The secret of this success? Daring to do things differently. Creating a sense of belonging for every demographic through science, art, culture, sport, history, and heritage, building deep connection and trust. No matter their age, background, skill level, or physical ability, everyone finds a way to show up for the forest through guided walks, lantern walks, children's theatre, trivia nights, science nights, races, and the beloved Fungus Festival. These events not only engage the broader community in acts of repair through helping to raise funds to secure and protect more land, but also bring people together in a celebratory and joyful way.

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**“Organizing around watersheds would give people a more relational and concrete *sense of place.*”**

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With over 100 volunteers, the CCFS is never short of helping hands, whether for fundraising or hands-on citizen-led conservation projects like bat counts, toad patrols, stream-keeping, and biodiversity surveys.

### **Community engagement**

This level of community engagement takes years to build and the courage to dream big. Cursons describes herself as “an interdisciplinary conservationist” and speaks to the importance of moving beyond the generational scarcity nonprofit mindset that celebrates minimal spending, and resourcing the organization properly. She insists on the importance of hiring paid staff for crucial roles like volunteer coordination and donor management, which are essential for building long-term capacity and efficiency, generating returns beyond the initial cost.

“But building a conservation organization is still more than recruiting donors or volunteers for a series of ‘actions.’ It’s about building community” Cursons explains. “That means exploring this work through the lens of joy and play. Dressing up for parades, creating plays in the forest, and weaving art out of invasive plants, all of this builds the community needed to make the rest of our work, from counting bats to caring for the creek, possible” she says.

“When you build a sense of relationship, balance, harmony, then people feel part

of something. They see themselves reflected in the work.”

Moving into this more reciprocal mindset of community-building, the CCFS has earned the trust not only of local government but also funders that see the potential of what is being built here. As the Cumberland community has grown around its forest, Cursons sees a similar opportunity for other groups to grow their own sense of movement and identity around watersheds. “Within every watershed there are artists, gardeners, athletes,” she notes.

What has worked for the CCFS can be replicated elsewhere. If we begin to think of community as a “watershed power block,” an engaged community coming together around a shared vision, we can influence local policy through a new kind of governance structured around ecological realities rather than political borders, where decisions are shaped accordingly.

She suggests that organizing around watersheds would give people a more relational and concrete sense of place, bringing awareness of where our drinking water comes from, what other life forms rely on it, and how land development and pollution affect its quality. Rooted in ancient land-based ways of being and knowing, yet deeply relevant today, this approach could encourage a deeper shared sense of responsibility, allowing governance to grow alongside the ecosystems that sustain it.

# Potlatch Uprising

A **declaration of love** for migratory salmon



by pawa haiyupis and Zannia Kidd

**“We need to be one. We don’t need this fish farm stuff to separate us. I know it’s so easy to take money. Money is a big thing in this world today, but that fish means more to me than that.”**

—Tsu Tsii In (Alton Watts)

In November 2025, hundreds of First Nations hereditary leaders, matriarchs, fisher families, and allies gathered in hupačasath and čišaaʔath territories (Port Alberni) for a landmark Migratory Salmon Potlatch.

The gathering was hosted by Hupačasath *Hawil* (Hereditary Chief) Tsu Tsii In (Alton Watts) and *Hiškʷiiʔath* Elder/Artist Aniičačist (Tim Paul). The Potlatch purpose was to deal with the complex topics of getting fish farms out of coastal waters and restoring a natural balance for Salmon, and for hereditary leaders to sign a united declaration for Migratory Salmon.

On Saturday, November 1, the first day of the two-day Potlatch, we completed our protocols and ceremonies to bless the floor and help the spirit world align with

the physical world. People clapped their hands and cheered after every speaker, and sometimes even after the dances. The children were buzzing, cheeks red from running, playing, and laughing, plus an abundance of Halloween candy.

In case you are new here, this is not the typical Potlatch etiquette. We were raised to sit still, be quiet, and we never clapped. Usually, a Potlatch deals with business such as weddings, giving names, or acknowledging the acceptance of a chieftainship by bringing nations together,

singing, dancing, drumming, feasting, and making collective decisions.

This celebration is different. We felt Grandmother Salmon and our Ancestors also clapping their hands and fins, cheering loudly with us in the spirit world. We were restoring the natural balance and putting things back in order, to live in a principled way where there is abundance, enough for everyone, in perpetuity.

Host Tsu Tsii In wanted to bring everyone together to share meals, enjoy the seafood resources which still remain, and share songs and dances to build good energy for migratory salmon.

And the Nations showed up! Leaders gathered from far and wide, including members as far as the Winnemem Wintu tribe from northern California (who removed dams on the Klamath River to bring back their salmon), the Sylx Nation from the Interior, the Tsilqot'in, and Nations from all over Vancouver Island.

The Kwakwaka'wakw Nations showed up with over one hundred people drumming and singing as they entered into the Potlatch. Their message of hope is powerful; they removed salmon farms from their waters and are being richly rewarded with an abundance of salmon returning to their parent streams. Even the orcas are returning.

Joyful cheers continued through the second day as each of the hereditary chiefs and matriarchs signed the declaration.

As Tsu Tsii In and Aniičāčist added the declaration's final signatures (for now), a celebratory dance erupted. In unison, everyone joined the dance floor singing and dancing with tears of joy. The room was vibrating with love for our relative the Salmon and for our ancestors.

“This is a big step because what this does is it puts different nations in the front, standing up and being counted,” said Ho'miskanis Don Svanvik, who signed on behalf of the 'Namgis Nation.

The declaration calls for signatories to “Relentlessly work towards the immediate removal of all open-net pen fish farms, which is within our control and works to help Salmon return in abundance.”

Over the days many speakers shared stories about stewardship and traditional leadership roles and responsibilities towards the salmon. Others spoke of the challenge of living in two worlds and the devastation caused by salmon farming, which sees families, communities, and Nations being divided.

Despite some First Nations disagreeing on the issue (like Ahousaht and Ehatesaht Nation), brave Hereditary Chiefs, leaders, and matriarchs from those nations still came together in ceremony and signed the declaration.

With so much harm from colonialism, our own people sometimes get caught in the web that continues that harm, making decisions that impact future generations by depleting the natural world. However, as one speaker said, our responsibility is to think beyond seven generations and include Salmon within that.

Salmon is Life on the coast. Beyond their role as stewards of the waters, ensuring a healthy ecosystem, migratory salmon fertilize our beautiful forests, which are suffering. Cedar trees are turning red since the notorious heat dome of 2021 and need nourishment now more than ever. But what can we do in a toxic environment?

I felt supported as an *ahousaqsup* (Ahousaht woman) standing beside the lone

hereditary chief and two of Ahousaht's *qwayats'iik* (law keepers). As well, it is momentous for Ahousaht First Nation, Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, and Ehatesaht First Nation, who all have fish farms in their *hahoulthee*, to get support from everyone in attendance at the Potlatch to remove the farms, and this is expressed in the signatures of the declaration.

The waves are going in a new direction now. A south easterly is rolling in. Brace yourself for the change.

How do we move forward? Getting organized and creating our local First Nations salmon laws in a collective way, because the tidal currents on the coast connect us to our neighbours and their neighbours. Salmon swim through all the territories. We are all connected. We have fish farms in our ancestral waterways polluting our neighbours' food sovereignty. Our inherent rights are collective rights, and the hereditary chiefs at the Potlatch who signed the declaration agree: “we don't have a right to cause the extinction of a species.”

No nation has the right to condemn salmon to extinction. It's time to work together, to create abundance not just for humans, but for all beings.

Hereditary or elected leaders are invited to sign the declaration. Please email [salmondeclaration@gmail.com](mailto:salmondeclaration@gmail.com)

pawa haiyupis is an environmentalist from Ahousaht Nation. She wrote the 2025 Migratory Salmon Declaration and is a consultant residing in unceded čuumčas territory (Port Alberni).

Zannia Kidd (Zan) values more-than-human relations and collaborating through shared work connecting people, place, and waters.

# Swallow Song

A **promise** of spring and renewal



by Ben Wickham

On a cool spring morning, as I walk hand in hand with my daughter, we look up, our attention drawn to the bright, quick chatter of the swallows overhead. They dart and swoop in the crisp air, catching insects on the wing and calling to one another as they stake claim to the skies.

Our walk to school is a ritual years in the making, but what we witness in the skies above is far older, older than our town, older than our species' memory of this place. Yet there may come a day, perhaps soon, when the skies above fall silent, and we will have to find new signs to tell us that spring has come.

For as long as we've built homes, swallows have shared them with us. They nested beneath the eaves of Roman villas, in the beams of medieval barns, and in the roofs of the longhouses of the Snuneymuxw people whose unceded territory my daughter and I walk upon.

Their return each spring has been celebrated in song and scripture, a promise of renewal as old as language itself. The ancient Greeks saw them as messengers from the gods, symbols of hope and rebirth. Sailors tattooed swallows on their chests before long voyages, believing that if they drowned, the birds would carry their souls home.

Even here on Vancouver Island, half a world away from those stories, the intimacy continues. The barns, culverts, and ferry terminals of British Columbia are stitched with the same mud-and straw nests that have cradled swallow chicks for centuries. We build and they follow, drawn not to us but to the shelter our industry provides. They thrive in our clear-cut forests; in every human attempt to tame the wild, the swallow thrives. Until now, as our drive toward domestication and our talent for eradication puts the swallow itself under threat.

Long before ships and settlers arrived on Vancouver Island, the return of swallows was part of the story of this place. Their migratory paths align with human migrations that shaped this coast. Prior to colonization, the connections between people, the skies, and the waters were strengthened through observation and mimicry of the actions and cycles of the plants and animals. The local Snuneymuxw people would time their journeys with the return of salmon, the spawning of the herring, and the songs of the swallows in the air.

Swallows often built nests near human dwellings, fishing camps, and village sites. The argument could be made that these birds were not “wild” in the Western sense; they coexisted with people, seen as kin or messengers tied to the seasonal abundance of insects and salmon runs. The connection shifted through colonization, the swallows no longer regard-

ed as kin by the Europeans who made up most settlers to this region.

The swallows became curiosities, not signs of nature but omens of agriculture, evidence that the seasons had shifted and it was time to plant, clear, chop, burn, and change. The swallows adapted quickly to colonial architecture, finding roosts in the barns, houses, and bridges that accompanied a settling world. As the land changed, so too did the swallows, nesting beneath our eaves and rafters and feeding on the insects stirred up by our disruption.

Swallows are insectivores, feeding almost entirely on flying insects like flies, beetles, wasps, bees, and ants – those small, persistent companions that hover between partner and pest in our cultivated world. But, as with most bird species, the modern landscape has not been kind to them. The clearcuts, monoculture farms, and nitrogen-rich sprays that fuel industrial agriculture also strip the air of the life they depend on.

Pesticides, particularly those once thought of as miracles of progress, have left long shadows. As recently as the 1970s, DDT – dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane – laced our fields and waterways. It was a chemical that not only caused cancer in humans but thinned the eggshells of raptors and songbirds, driving landmark species such as the bald eagle and peregrine falcon to the brink. By some estimates, swallow populations now sit at around two per cent of their historical numbers.

Though DDT was banned and swallow populations show signs of recovery, the question remains, recovery to what? Have we built healthier, more diverse ecosystems for them to return to, or have they simply adapted to a diminished and simplified world? Their success might not be

a sign of restoration, but of resilience in a landscape increasingly flattened for our use and comfort.

As my daughter and I reach the school yard, the swallows trace their wild geometry overhead, stitching the air with arcs so rapid that our eyes struggle to follow. My daughter squeezes my hand as a pair loop above the roof, then lets go, running to join her friends. The morning fills with their laughter and the echoing cries of the birds above. I linger for a moment, watching the birds dip and dive through the bright air, and I think about this ritual, walking, releasing, watching, that mirrors their own. They leave and return, season after season, reminding us that home is not a fixed place, but a pattern, something that we make by coming back.

I know they might not always return in such numbers. The changes that we’ve set in motion, in climate, in landscape, in the very chemistry of the air, reach farther than their small wings can carry them.

Yet still, each spring, they appear, tracing the same invisible lines across a sky that has forgotten almost everything else. Perhaps that is the lesson they leave us: that persistence, even fragile and uncertain, can still be a kind of hope. A belief that things can return to what they once were, or failing that, that not all new things in our Anthropocene era are without beauty and grace. For now, their voices fill the morning, and as I turn home, I look up once more, listening, just to be sure.

Ben Wickham is a writer from Nanaimo, BC with a background in education and public service. His passions for writing and nature come from his father and mother respectively.

# Too Close for Comfort

How human contact is driving wildlife conflicts in BC



by Lynne Fedorick

**In November 2025, a school hike near Bella Coola, BC ended in trauma when a mother grizzly and two cubs emerged from the forest and attacked a group of 20 students and teachers having lunch on the trail.**

Eleven people were injured in the chaos. The attack stopped only when teachers used bear spray and bear bangers to drive the animals off. Three students and one adult sustained critical injuries, while seven others were treated at the scene. A search for the bears responsible led to the

capture of eight grizzlies who were DNA tested and released in a remote wilderness area. The search was called off, but fear and uncertainty remain.

## Warnings and worries

The incident has intensified concerns about the growing population of grizzlies on the north end of Vancouver Island, with a family of bears living near Sayward since summer of 2024, and individual bears spotted as far south as Campbell River. Although Vancouver Island's griz-

zly population is estimated at less than 20 bears, the Bella Coola attack signals looming issues with animals becoming more habituated to human presence.

Grizzly attacks are still a rarity in BC's long history of human-bear coexistence. Bear biologists point out that as a rule, grizzlies are shy and usually go out of their way to avoid human interaction. However, the province-wide total of eight reported grizzly attacks in 2025 more than doubled the total reported attacks in 2024.

Biologists and conservation officers have long warned that human proximity changes bear behaviour and creates habituation, especially when no meaningful deterrents are used. Too often, human proximity results in animals that lose their innate fear of humans. Habituation becomes an even bigger problem when bears connect the presence of humans with food. This creates a conditioned behavioural response that drives bears to seek out humans as an opportunity for an easy, high calorie meal. It's at this juncture in our relationship with bears that things can end badly for humans and bears alike.

### When fear and fascination collide

In northern Vancouver Island and the Central Coast, wildlife tourism and recreation are booming. The increased presence of humans in traditional feeding areas puts grizzlies and other wildlife species at risk. Wildlife-watching tours seek out areas where patrons can get close enough to bears and other wild animals to get Instagram-worthy photo ops.

The waters surrounding Vancouver Island are among the most heavily trafficked marine wildlife viewing areas on the Pacific coast. Wildlife-watching tour operators crowd critical marine corridors; kayakers and drones hover near shorelines and whale pods for hours at a time. Record numbers of vessel strikes on whales and sea lions suggest these animals are becoming so accustomed to boats that they have lost their fear of them.

Humans used to avoid grizzlies. Now they seek bears out to watch them feeding. The bears, for their part, are becoming so accustomed to the presence of humans that they aren't hiding from them anymore. Increased bear, whale, and other wildlife sightings aren't necessarily a sign of healthy coexistence – instead,

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Biologists and conservation officers have long warned that **human proximity** changes bear behaviour and creates habituation.

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they often reflect desensitization to nearby human activities.

British Columbia has regulations designed to minimize wildlife disturbance and reduce conflicts between humans and wild animals, but enforcement is under-resourced and often falls short.

With around 200 conservation officers covering 3.1 million hectares, there are few resources for preventing conflicts between humans and animals. The end result is that conservation enforcement is almost always a reaction to harm that's already been done rather than prevention of conflicts between wildlife and humans.

Since the Bella Coola attack, urgent questions are being raised about wildlife management frameworks, including calls from some quarters to revisit policies like the grizzly bear hunting ban. But simplistic population-reduction solutions fail to address the complex dynamics of increasing human intrusion into wild spaces.

### A new measure of care

More humans than ever before are going into grizzly habitats for forestry, industry, and recreation. Logging roads and hiking trails are providing unprecedented access to areas that were once pristine wilderness. These access points make it easier for bears to meander their way into conflicts with humans. Their constant search for food can take them 30 km in a day. A 300 kg bear finds it much easier to wander down a logging road or trail than

traverse dense forest, and from a grizzly bear's perspective, these routes are perfect places to find food. Sometimes their curiosity is rewarded with goodies like roadside litter, game carcasses, and easy-to-access garbage cans, inviting further exploration into human-inhabited areas.

Humans have become a familiar feature of the environment for normally-shy grizzlies. These bears have a keen sense of smell and can detect scents up to a mile away. So even when grizzly bear tours (or individuals) stay the mandated 100 meters away, the bears are still well aware of their presence while they feed along shorelines.

The grizzly attack near Bella Coola is a shocking wake-up call that something is amiss in the relationship between humans and animals in the wild. If our love for wildlife is more than a love of photo opportunities, it must evolve into a form of respect that accepts necessary boundaries. At the very least, that means eliminating attractants, offering plenty of space, and avoiding wild animals entirely instead of seeing them as an opportunity to take a photo that could go viral. Above all, we need to understand that no matter what the species, wild animals owe us nothing – least of all a close-up photo or a video of a daring encounter on a trail.

Lynne Fedorick is a Canadian journalist and freelance writer whose work has been featured in a variety of international magazines.



# Going to School in the Forest

What happens when we combine nature and teaching? One school in Victoria is finding great success with its extra-curricular learning program. Thriving Roots Wilderness School invites participants to learn wilderness skills and connect with nature-based mentoring on the land.

Here's what students and parents have to say about it:



Our daughter went from depressed and anxious about being in “a cage” in private school, to waking up excited to attend [Thriving Roots] without fail. She felt so free, seen, and alive at school this year. The roses came back to her cheeks.



Photos ©Thriving Roots Wilderness School



The Forest Mentors of Thriving Roots have been providing an outstanding program for my Grade 1 kiddo. He loves going to school in the forest! Tuning into his senses, the freedom of movement, the fresh air, the mountain creek, and the endless trees.





“

Our children have demonstrated new and deeper understandings of our connection to the land and other species, more complex knowledge of plants, more developed negotiation and group work skills, and simply more calm and groundedness.

”

“

My daughter’s confidence has really grown in the past few years in this program. It has really helped her socially, in part because of the multi-age environment. Her knowledge of the outdoors becomes deeper each year, and her ability to express it and teach others is so amazing! The program lets her be her wild self.

”



“

Some of my favorite projects include making tea, a bow drill kit, and holiday wreaths, using the natural resources around me. I love the connections I get to make with my peers, mentors and the land during my time there.

”

# Herring Remember

What a keystone species teaches about our changing world



© Taylor Burk



by Hazel Volk

**Each generation's sense of normality is shaped by the world they inherit. The danger lies in not realizing what has already been lost.**

Melanda Schmid-Ochieng, executive director of Conservancy Hornby Island, speaks of herring spawns the way long-time locals remember them: miles of turquoise water, beaches carpeted in eggs, the smell of rotting roe. People stood along the shore in tall gumboots, knee-deep in eggs. Returning decades later to live year-round on Hornby, Schmid-

Ochieng was struck by how much had changed. Conversations with older locals and First Nations people show that what many call a “normal” herring season is a diminished version of what once existed.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada has also forgotten what normal is. Assessing herring using mid-20th-century data as a baseline, after decades of commercial fishing had already heavily impacted them, creates a false sense of sustainability. Like many working in the Salish Sea, Schmid-Ochieng believes baselines should go

back at least 100 years to a time when herring were abundant, before commercial fishing and colonial interference.

Despite their small size, herring can live up to fifteen years, and unlike salmon, their survival depends both on learning and instinct. While salmon rely on innate environmental cues and smell to navigate migrations, young herring follow older fish, learning routes and behaviours needed to keep their population alive. Much like humans forgetting what a healthy balanced ecosystem is, herring can lose

the “memory” of ancestral spawning grounds when older fish disappear, even if habitats stay healthy. Their decline affects shorebirds, migratory birds, salmon, seals, sea lions, whales, and other species that rely on herring to sustain their own breeding and life cycles.

Indigenous people in the area knew the role of herring in the food chain long before Western science recognized it. They used herring for food and medicine in ways that maintained local ecosystems in balance for millennia. The Douglas Treaty guarantees their rights to continue fishing and hunting as they always have.

The treaty may now be compromised by fisheries policies that have contributed to herring’s decline.

In response, hereditary chief Eric Pelkey of the Tsawout First Nation, along with four other hereditary chiefs in WSÁNEĆ Leadership Council, has taken a first step toward legal action against DFO. With the support of conservation groups, including the Herring Conservation and Restoration Society, Georgia Strait Alliance, and Ecojustice, they are seeking a legal opinion to assess whether DFO’s management violates treaty rights, and if a court challenge could change fishing policies in the Strait of Georgia.

Current practices are harmful. A genuine effort would require stopping commercial fishing until herring populations rebound to pre-industrial levels. Management would also need to recognize each population and spawning site’s uniqueness, rather than treating the Salish Sea as a single biomass. The Hornby-Denman area alone is estimated to have been the spawning ground for nearly 40% of all herring that have ever spawned in the Strait of Georgia, showing the need to protect local habitats from overfishing.

The problem is that fisheries operate year-round. Beyond the spring roe fishery, which targets herring as they migrate to spawn, winter fisheries in the Strait of Georgia go after resident herring populations that live close to their natal waters. These fish end up as bait, aquarium feed, fish meal, livestock and aquaculture feed, fertilizer, and food for human consumption.

Research shows that resident herring are critical for juvenile Chinook salmon, allowing them to grow fast and strong in their first months at sea. When these local populations disappear, predators and coastal communities lose an important resource, and the long-term survival of both Chinook and the species that rely on them is threatened.

To put it in perspective, this year’s Food and Bait and Special Use quota is 2,100 short tons, almost two million kilograms. And the total allowance across all commercial herring fisheries in the Strait of

Georgia, is up to 12,787 tonnes, or more than 11 million kg. These numbers show what happens when people become disconnected from the world around them: they take relentlessly, without any regard for the impact on ecosystems and communities they share space with.

This is why community engagement and education remain vital. Conservancy Hornby Island’s annual HerringFest, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this March, is part of that solution. Along with speakers, art displays, and boat tours, Chief Pelkey is sharing his knowledge and bringing people together to remember, through intergenerational and cross-cultural sharing, what makes a healthy spawning season, and to turn that shared memory into collective action for ecological renewal.

Don’t miss HerringFest on Hornby Island, March 4-8, 2026. For more information, see [www.conservancyhornbyisland.org](http://www.conservancyhornbyisland.org).



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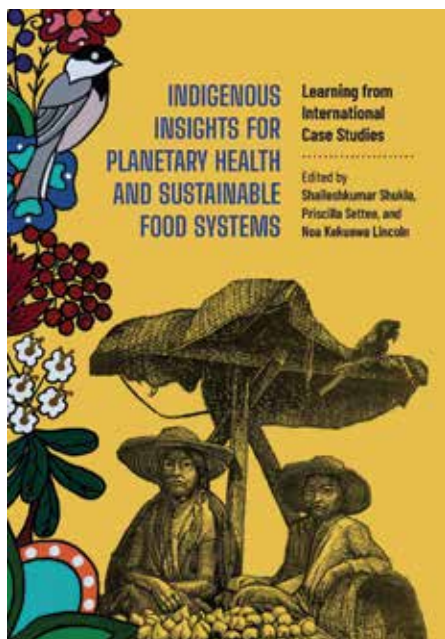


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The graphic features a white silhouette of a bird, likely a grebe, in the lower-left corner against a dark, wavy background. The background of the entire graphic is a light blue sky with soft clouds.

# Food and Sovereignty

## Sowing traditional knowledge and sustainability



Review by Alice de Wolff

The *Watershed Sentinel* doesn't often review books, but *Indigenous Insights for Planetary Health and Sustainable Food Systems* is an exception.

A follow-up to the indispensable resource *Indigenous Food Systems* (Settee and Shukla, 2020), *Indigenous Insights* is really a report from an international movement. Its activists, thinkers, researchers, elders, and young agrarians are working to make the connections between Indigenous sovereignty, decolonization, land ownership, traditional knowledge, food system sustainability, and the challeng-

### Indigenous Insights for Planetary Health and Sustainable Food Systems: Learning from International Case Studies

Editors: Shaileshkumar Shukla, Priscilla Settee, Noa Kekeuwa Lincoln  
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es of the climate crisis. It is a growing movement; 46 authors contributed to this collection, and their reports describe the efforts of thousands. Through 15 chapters, the contributors present case studies of Indigenous food systems in Hawaii, Costa Rica, Canada (Northern Manitoba, Ontario, southern Prairies), South Korea, Zimbabwe, India, Japan, Ghana, Nigeria, US, Ecuador, and Mexico.

The book's contributors frequently observe that land and communities heal when the specific and complex inter-relationships among the plants, soil, water, animals (including humans), and climate of each "land" are understood, honoured and strengthened.

To take one example of "a land," *Indigenous Insights* describes *Ahupua'a* as a "self-sustaining land unit of the Hawaiian economic and natural resource management system – wherein all of the water, complex carbs, lean proteins, building material, medicines, and implements for the creation of weapons can be developed in a hyper-localized, highly skilled economy." The relationships in each "land" are different. This is the basis of many Indigenous worldviews, and Indigenous

communities continue to hold detailed understandings of these relationships.

Rather than trying to imagine solutions that work in all places for all people, *Indigenous Insights* encourages readers to envision local successes that replace harmful food systems as the sprouts of new, broader ecologies, economies, and communities that are key to planetary health. I can't do justice to all their insights here, but I will present three projects from the book's innovations section.

**The Wisahkotewinowak Collective** began in 2015. (*Wisahkotewinowak*, in Michif, means the first green shoots that come up from Mother Earth after a fire has gone through the land.) Its members include Métis and First Nations people and non-Indigenous allies, most of whom live in five urban centres in Grand River Territory, Ontario.

The collective's intention is to revitalize Indigenous foodways by following seasonal rhythms of maple syrup harvesting, seed saving and starting, planting, medicine walks, harvesting, and preservation. They're learning about wild food that can be harvested in the Grand River water-

shed, and they have created four food and medicine gardens. Volunteers, students, and a small staff put together food boxes for sharing, hold food preparation workshops, and work hard to keep Indigenous knowledge at the centre of their work. They are re-establishing reciprocal relationships with the land and among people, and capturing the hearts and minds of everyone involved, particularly young people. [www.wisahk.ca](http://www.wisahk.ca)

**MA’O Organic Farms** in O’ahu, Hawai’i is a story about transforming a proposed industrial site (“a bucket of rocks,” p. 282) to an economically viable, ecologically healthy place now recognized as the “birthplace of Maui.”

Aunties and uncles in a group called “Concerned Elders,” upset by a proposal to rezone the land from agricultural to urban use, spoke with knowledge holders and compiled research and powerful stories about the land’s sacred nature and the interconnections between its mountains, rivers, and forests. The stories highlighted the colonial misuse of the land, challenged the land “dismembering” rezoning proposal, and built support, par-

ticularly among young people. Another group organized bus tours that educated and mobilized opposition to the rezoning while boosting support for a vision of the farm. These actions strengthened groups that were then able to purchase the land and take control of its regeneration.

The farm now covers 281 acres and uses agroforestry, organic farming, and traditional cultural principles. It is enriched by – and sustains – large numbers of young people, their families, and surrounding communities. By 2017, it had provided college internships for 1000 young people. By 2021, it had led to a 100% decrease in diabetes and pre-diabetes in students and their families and produced 3000 lbs of food for local local consumption. The elders proudly describe this process as transforming land from commodity to tool to partner, and ultimately to land as ancestor. [www.maoorganicfarms.org](http://www.maoorganicfarms.org)

**Prairie Food System Vision Network** is in Treaty 4 Territory in southern Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The purpose of this project is *Kwyeskastasowin wahkohtowin*, Cree for “setting things right with all our relations.” This infor-

mal network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people recognizes that all who live in the Territory are Treaty people; that colonial and corporate agriculture’s domination have equally detrimental effects on the land and Indigenous people; and that big agriculture is not sustainable.

Over several years, the network mapped 140 lines of action in six key areas that could lead to an equitable and sustainable prairie food system. They grounded these visions by identifying signals or trends specific to Treaty 4 Territory that indicate an alternative approach is already taking place. The network then identified 175 projects and groups already working on these alternatives and established micro-funding for 11 of these, including seven that are with First Nations. They also established a Solutions Hub for workshops and food system labs that brings the network together to develop further solutions. Find them online at [www.prairiefoodsystemvision.org](http://www.prairiefoodsystemvision.org).

Alice de Wolff is a community activist, researcher, and writer based in the Co-mox Valley. She is a Sentinel Educational Foundation board member.



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# Wild Times

## The Biggest Build

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by Joe Foy

**Metro Vancouver has some mighty big builds going on right now. In my home town of New Westminster, the Royal Columbian Hospital expansion and the Pattullo Bridge replacement are both nearing completion.**

These big builds all have websites where you can see completion dates and progress reports. So I'm wondering what in the world is going on with the biggest build of all: a doubling of the park system to ensure that 30% of lands and waters within Canada will be protected from industrial damage by 2030?

Two government reports on "30 by 30" came out in 2025. One of them beats around the bush; the other gets to the heart of the matter.

Reading the one that gets right to the point, from the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, felt like a bucket of ice-cold reality poured over my head.

The *Establishing Terrestrial Protected Areas* report is a frank assessment of progress made towards achieving 30% protection by 2030. After reading it, I gotta say that Canada has been utterly failing to work with provincial, municipal, territorial, and First Nation governments with enough technical rigour to get the job done.

Here's one sobering takeaway: "The federal government has committed to conserving 25% of terrestrial areas (land and inland water) in Canada by 2025, and 30% by 2030. By the end of 2024 ... less than 14% of Canada's land and inland water had been protected and conserved."



Clearcut in Karen Creek Wildlife Habitat Area designated for spotted owl conservation

The beating-around-the-bush report, on the other hand, doesn't have a single bad thing to say about provincial efforts – which is concerning, given BC's love of saw logs. Entitled *Tripartite Framework Agreement on Nature Conservation: annual report – 2025*, the report does have some tasty bits on forest protection in Clayoquot Sound and the Incomappleux.

But it's what the report *doesn't* say that is the most revealing. It gives no hint that BC, like Canada, is failing to protect enough lands and waters needed to live up to the task of halting biodiversity loss and meeting the 30% by 2030 deadline.

The report's biggest sin is listing as protected areas places that government double-speak refers to as "Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures." These include research forests and community



Recent logging in priority old-growth deferral area near Fire Lake, BC

watersheds, which, with few exceptions, have had the stuffing logged out of them..

Here's an idea: BC should ban logging in all community watersheds and research forests. Heck, logging should be banned in all so-called OECEMs, all Wildlife Habitat Areas, all deferral areas, and whatever else the province includes in its OECEM tally – all 3,868,472 hectares. Sort of like, if we call places "protected," they should actually be, you know, *protected*.

Read the reports. Write your MLA and MP. Demand that BC and Canada get moving to protect 30% by 2030. Our biggest build – doubling the park system to put the brakes on species extinction – needs to be built right and on time.

Joe Foy is the protected areas campaigner for the Wilderness Committee.

# Thank You!



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