

GaLTT Reflections on the Tree Cutting on Gabriola

Gabriola Land and Trails Trust

The sight of a seemingly endless stream of loaded logging trucks leaving Gabriola Island this spring has clearly sparked widespread community concerns and awareness that the Islands Trust currently lacks sufficient regulatory power to effectively uphold its mandate “to preserve and protect the Trust area and its unique amenities and environment” [Island Trust Act, 1974]. Adding to this concern is a surge in clearing due to property development. The inability of the Islands Trust to regulate tree cutting and ecosystem protection on private lands is not unique to Gabriola; it is a serious problem throughout the Trust Area, where rare and threatened Coastal Douglas-fir (CDF) forests have the highest number of species and ecosystems at risk in the province and some of the most altered and fragmented habitats.

According to the Islands Trust Conservancy, “when ranked for sensitivity to climate change, carbon storage capability, biodiversity habitat, and the degree of human impacts, the CDF is the most important BC ecosystem.” Despite its importance, the CDF ecological zone is the least-protected in BC with <1 % old growth remaining and only 10% of forests older than 120 years.

Gabriola Land and Trails Trust (GaLTT) was formed in 2004 as a non-profit society to conserve and protect natural habitats, develop and maintain a network of public trails, and engage in public education regarding conservation and outdoor recreation issues. As a conservation organization, our volunteer Board shares the concerns of many Gabriolans about the threat that tree-cutting and disturbance of natural habitat poses to healthy and stable ecosystems, even when undertaken in compliance with current laws.

Thankfully, some preliminary steps are being taken to address this longstanding issue. The Islands Trust Council has advocated to the provincial government to grant them the necessary jurisdictional authority to regulate tree cutting in the Trust Area such as enforcement of development permit infractions and much needed amendments to the Private Managed Forest Land Act. Authority for the Islands Trust to regulate clear-cutting and harvesting of the few remaining old growth CDF forests is also needed. The Islands Trust and provincial government ministers are engaged in ongoing conversations about these important issues, although progress is frustratingly slow. Also, the Salt Spring Island Local Trust Committee has identified 'Protection of the Coastal Douglas-fir Ecosystem' as a strategic priority item and is currently considering several potential actions, including: a) new CDF protection Development Permit Areas; b) stronger Official Community Plan policy to support CDF protection; c) Land Use Bylaw amendments to help reduce impacts of development on ecosystems; and d) incentive/reward options to protect natural habitat on private land. The project is proceeding slowly, with public consultation, in recognition of the wide-ranging views held by island residents about this potentially divisive issue. GaLTT is hopeful the Salt Spring project may serve as a useful model for other islands within the Trust Area.

GaLTT recently sent a letter to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and the Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development requesting that law reform be undertaken to provide the Islands Trust with the legal tools necessary to protect threatened CDF forests. We have also written to our Local Trust Committee urging them to continue working within the current regulatory framework to protect island ecosystems as to encourage the Trust Council to aggressively lobby the provincial government to make much needed regulatory changes. GaLTT encourages other organizations, businesses, and individuals to similarly voice their concerns and wishes to the Trustees, Islands Trust, and provincial government on this important issue.

The ongoing disturbance to forest and non-forest natural habitat, the fragmentation of natural landscapes, and the threat they pose to ecological health, should be of concern to all Gabriolans. GaLTT

is willing to cooperate with all levels of government and members of the Gabriola community to find workable solutions. However, we also understand that simply transferring tree-cutting bylaws created for use in urban municipalities to rural, largely forested landscapes is neither practical nor workable. A variety of issues, including large property sizes, different types of zoning (e.g., forestry, resource, agriculture) and fire protection must be considered, and these may fall under different jurisdictions. Most of the current harvesting was undertaken lawfully on lands within the Agricultural Land Reserve, where agriculture is given priority. In other words, it's a complex issue with no easy solutions. Also, regulatory changes will take time to implement and will not, by themselves, offer a complete solution.

GaLTT believes that education and targeted conservation programs, in concert with an updated regulatory framework, offers the best chance of success. We recently launched a new Nature Stewards program that will encourage private landholders to voluntarily take actions to preserve natural habitat. We will assist large and small property owners by conducting walkabouts on their land and suggest ways to create wildlife habitat and conserve and enhance biodiversity, including tree retention. The program is intended to raise more community awareness and identify practical ways in which Gabriolans can make more ecologically sensitive decisions on their private properties. GaLTT is also seeking opportunities to enter into conservation covenant agreements with the holders of larger forested properties. In some cases, covenants could combine the preservation of ecological values with appropriate harvesting methods, thus ensuring continuous mature forest cover and sustainable ecosystems.

Timber harvesting has occurred on Gabriola since at least the mid-1800s, and despite the past and recent logging, Gabriola remains a well forested island. Unlike many other natural resources, forests are a renewable resource when managed sustainably.

On the other hand, we know that ecosystems cannot sustain endless fragmentation or disturbance and survive. According to the 2019 Islands Trust 'State of the Islands Indicator Project', the natural areas already converted to human use on Gabriola (~ 28%) puts our island much closer to the accepted threshold for ecosystem health than most other Gulf Islands. As land conversion rises above 30-40%, the number of species in a given habitat have been shown to decline more quickly. Climate change will exert even more pressure, changing the baselines for health and sustainability. Truly, the health of our ecosystems is inexorably linked with the future health and well-being of our community.

It is imperative that different levels of government and Gulf Island communities, including businesses, work together in finding effective ways to protect our precious CDF ecosystems. To date, there has been some talk but very little action.