

DECISION TIME FOR BOWKER CREEK AT BEE STREET

by Gerald Harris

THE CROWS HAVE MUCH TO SAY. High in the cottonwoods by the creek at Oak Bay Rec Centre, the topic, probably, is finding lunch. Plenty of them, maybe seventy-five are working this block. Some balance on swaying twigs, facing into the breeze; some swoop in and perch; some flap off to explore. You'll hear exclamations and warnings, disagreement and affirmation and wish you could speak crow.

Is this a flock? They associate so loosely, arriving and leaving in small and large groups, gathering here and there. Always they communicate. This is a big surveillance net that covers the block. It monitors likely sources of food and of danger, follows people who might share peanuts or leave a bag of chips unwatched, spreads the news.

Is there enough food here for all these crows? Some walk the pavement in the parking lot, but I don't see them eating much. Some poke at garbage that was already well poked and strewn in the blackberries at the pavement's edge. Most sit and wait, silhouetted on treetop, roof edge and bridge railing. My guess: they are putting in time while the tide is high. Soon the flock will disperse along beaches and shore rocks to gather whatever edibles the ebb has stranded.

My phone rings. It's Ian, a member, like me, of Bowker Creek's flock of advocates. We talk as intense as crows at a salmon carcass. It's a big moment for Bowker Creek beside the Rec Centre. Restoration really might happen here. We have hoped for years, for decades. Now, this section of drainage ditch might become real stream again, ready for salmon to return. The District of Oak Bay Council will decide within weeks.

Salmon, human, crow and cottonwood have lived as family here for ages. Six to eight thousand years ago, our climate warmed and dampened

enough that small coastal streams like this one began to flow year-round. Salmon, cottonwood and people likely moved in immediately. The 20th Century broke up the family, converting Bowker Creek to urban storm sewer. Humans and crows have flourished, but the creek and its cottonwoods have not done well. The creek isn't dead. This section, for example, supports multitudes of crayfish that find safety in the rubble. Racoons and otter feed on the crayfish. But the stream ecosystem is gravely degraded. Salmon and trout—long gone. The great work this century in this valley is to bring the family back together.

Coastal British Columbia is home to thousands of little streams like this. Every 100 or 200 metres along the shore, you can find one. In the 1960s and '70s biologists began to study them. Sandy Argue, my boss at the Department of Fisheries, set his technicians to work on several little local creeks around the Salish Sea. We assessed coho salmon populations. I learned that a typical run of coho in a Bowker-size creek might number only fifty or a hundred spawners along a few kilometers of stream. But with thousands of streams, it adds up. The great wealth of wild coho on our coast, I learned, came from all the little streams like Bowker Creek.

But don't load the Grade Threes onto a bus to go and observe a coho run. They like their privacy. Coho spawn concealed by fallen logs, overhanging banks, roots and shrubs, protected by dense vegetation on the streambank. Some of the best coho creeks, you might never notice; bushes keep them well hidden. And you might not hear them because coho favour quiet streams with gentle gradient. When you see salmon leaping and hurling themselves up chaotic falls and rapids, those probably are not coho.

Coastal slopes and valleys that favour coho salmon streams also make excellent places for humans to live. They attract us to cultivate farms, to build industrial parks, shopping centres and subdivisions. Around the Salish Sea, all coho streams live under threat. Most are degraded and many have totally disappeared underground as storm sewer.

Living in Vancouver in the 1970s, I went in search of that city's coho streams, studied maps and memoirs in the archives, interviewed old-timers

and walked the entire town, tracing dips in the streets, alleys and parks where old city landfill had slumped and exposed the course of buried creeks. I found in the City of Vancouver about fifty streams, totalling 120 kilometers in length that previously flowed into the sea or river. Except for a few kilometers, all were buried.

In the 1980s, new to Victoria, with a different job, I brought my daughter to Oak Bay Rec. for the Bubble Blower level in swim lessons. We parked in this lot, facing this open ditch. It disappeared downstream under an enormous, inflated marshmallow, the tennis bubble. I recognized a coho stream in trouble.

The last salmon and trout spawned in the creek sometime between the 1930s and '50s. It's the typical urban stream story of that century. But this century, the story may be changing. Even in the 1980s and '90s, Bowker Creek advocates were getting active. They got city councils and staff interested. By the early 2000s the creek's three municipalities, Oak Bay, Victoria and Saanich were working together with the Capital Regional District. Engineering studies predicted major floods as cities densified and climate changed. Storm flows would inundate, for example. this entire block where Bee Street crosses Bowker Creek.

The next part amazes me. All three municipalities agreed, in 2012, on a plan, "The Bowker Creek Blueprint — A 100-year action plan to restore the Bowker Creek Watershed". The cities endorsed Integrated Stormwater Management for the valley. We would prevent flooding, not with bigger culverts, deeper ditches and more concrete, but by imitating nature.

Here at the Recreation Centre parking lot, for example, the Blueprint suggests widening and restoring the creek. Oak Bay would excavate a strip of pavement to create gently-sloping streambank and plant it with native vegetation. Sloped bank can accommodate much larger volumes of water, with slower flow compared to the present narrow ditch.

That work is needed now. Violent flow in winter storms is eroding the banks of the ditch. Last winter, a section fell away. Mature trees toppled

and the ditch widened to the pavement edge. The collapse forced Oak Bay to make quick repairs, lining several metres of bank with stone rip-rap in giant blocks — opposite from the Blueprint vision. With climate change, intensity of winter rains is increasing. We can expect further bank collapse in ditched sections of the creek.

So Bowker Creek advocates got busy last spring. We joined a kindred flock of climate change activists participating in a training program, Oak Bay Coolkit: For Neighbourhood Action on Climate Change. The District of Oak Bay offers Coolkit to raise champions for every part of town. Taking the Bowker at Bee Street block as our neighbourhood, we put our Coolkit training into action.

We hosted two “Ice Cream Social” events last summer, scooped a couple hundred free cones and consulted with as many people. Oak Bay Rec. provided space in this parking lot. Save-On Foods contributed ice cream. People assessed and mapped the block for Climate Change risk and vulnerability. Besides the flood and erosion issues, people noted high levels of CO₂ emissions, very high proportion of impermeable hard surface and very low proportion of tree canopy. They predicted “Urban Heat Island” effects in which the expanse of bare pavement and roof develops intolerable temperatures in summer hot spells.

People also suggested adaptations and mitigations: restore the creek and its diverse ecosystem; establish continuous urban forest canopy; create pedestrian and bike path to connect with greenways upstream and downstream; detain rainwater to infiltrate the soil; include community amenities and placemaking features.

We created a possible vision for people to comment on. After both events, we reported results to Oak Bay Council and staff, finally presenting a slideshow talk. Council has since requested staff to create a Project Backgrounder document for consideration in the budget process. Exciting news for us! Council asking for a backgrounder indicates serious consideration.

So the flock of creek advocates keeps working this block, proclaiming, warning, providing information. We encourage Oak Bay people and local organizations to let Council know that you support restoring Bowker Creek at the Oak Bay Rec Centre.

A few of the crows stand on boulders in the streambed. Beaks dip in the water to drink and to peck insect larvae from the rocks for food. Bowker Creek is still alive. We want to see it thrive. Bringing back coho? That goal lies many years and many small steps in the future. The municipalities termed the Blueprint a “100-year” plan because it took us that long to thoroughly wreck the stream and we will need that long to restore it. But this project is a good step.

