

WATER IN THE CITY

VICTORIA CONFERENCE CENTRE Monday, September 18th 2006

A2 Is Your Aquifer Under Threat?

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PUTTING PEOPLE BACK IN THE PROCESS

Natural Resources Canada, Geology division, put on a series of public workshops on Vancouver Island a couple of years ago. The focus of the work was to collect local knowledge and expertise and to use this to design a poster for the Gulf Islands which demonstrated the facts of life of groundwater in our area.

(The completed poster can now be seen on all the Gulf Island ferries. Schools and libraries in our area also display it.)

I was there at the Nanaimo workshops (on behalf of GGMS) and I was very impressed by the attitude of the facilitators.

Our collective experience as islanders was noted and combined in such a way that the collective truth of our groundwater, our natural community infrastructure, began to emerge.

We saw the traditional representation of Gabriola and other Gulf Islands as expanses of thick rainforest green on a blue ocean background evolve into a more accurate portrait. This portrait included the facts of life we deal with on a daily basis. It told a story about the way we as a community were based on a supply of water that was only recharged by rain in the wet months. We saw that our whole water-based natural infrastructure was stored in aquifers that kept our water supply underground.

As people discussed this we realized as a group that educating the visitors, tourists and summer vacationers and part time residents, was a necessary function of this poster.

As we discussed this further we realized that educating the residents on best practices of water use was also necessary. So finally, as in all successful human discussion, we discovered that the responsibility devolved on us. We would be the ones to use our water in a responsible, caring manner, and to educate others to this end, or to abuse this fragile natural resource, to our eventual ruin.

In January of 2006 Natural Resources Canada, Geology, at the suggestion of Islands Trust, approached GGMS to set up a series of three community workshops to develop a computer-modeling project on aquifer sustainability.

The time frame was short but in a small community sometimes this is an advantage. GGMS was very excited about this because we were looking for a way to involve more people in our work with groundwater issues, and we thought this was the perfect public-based forum.

The Gabriola Groundwater Management Society is in the business of collecting information on groundwater and groundwater regulations and disseminating it to our island residents.

We assist people to check water quality. We have set up a small lab that tests water samples for total coliforms and e-coli. We think this is an ideal tool to help our people manage their own water resources, and a responsible way to keep water safe for them and their families.

We have encouraged people to install well watchers. This device measures the static level of water in a well and allows for the keeping of individual well logs.

GGMS felt that this workshop series was an ideal next step for us because it dealt with the issue of sustainability.

This project has proven itself successful to us in many ways. After two out of three workshops, both very well attended, the results are obvious.

1) The project has sparked new community interest in groundwater information and management.

2) It produced an impressive mix of inter-governmental activity: Natural Resources Canada, a federal agency; Ministry of Environment, a provincial agency; and Islands Trust, a local governing body have all worked to develop this model. All of these groups shared and gathered information.

3) Old historical sources as well as a new deep geology study were identified and made available. These involved the participation of island residents. Insights and experience on many levels came together to form a new understanding of our natural resource.

As we worked on this picture of the holistic groundwater situation, and as we put the computer model through its paces, we came to realize this: our daily decisions as a community and as individuals strongly impacted this living groundwater resource. No matter how many outside solutions to the problem of water scarcity on a seasonal basis were proposed, (like trucking in off-island sources of water or pumping water from one location on Gabriola and selling it to someone in another location on the island) it all came back to us. If we continue to use groundwater at the rate we do, and to manage it in the way we have, we are heading for trouble.

Our individual attitudes direct our actions and we will be the ones to suffer the immediate consequences. Future generations will be the recipients of the long-term consequences.

There is nothing as terrifying as the thought of running out of water. You can buy water but not all can afford it. You cannot use non-potable water to bathe, wash vegetables and meat and other food, brush your teeth or in a coffee maker.

As climate change becomes more and more evident and weather patterns change we start to see water as a precious, fragile resource. Some see it as a commodity. It is, in reality, the basis of life, and the natural foundation of any human community.

This computer-modeling project illustrated this clearly and projected the results of the use and abuse of this resource. This computer model can be tailored to any community, large or small. What is required is information gathering and sharing on a large scale.

The process of developing a water-centric community profile geared toward maintaining a sustainable water resource becomes, in itself, a powerful community-building tool with the effect of educating and informing the public participants.

We believe that Gabriola is the canary and this is a very large coalmine. We have, in miniature, the same problems with water availability and sustainability, the same pressures of development, the same conflict of lifestyles that are starting to manifest on Vancouver Island and on the mainland, as well as across Canada and North America.

There is so much knowledge and so much good will and there are so many good intentions. I believe that all of us want to preserve and protect the natural groundwater infrastructure that sustains and nurtures our community and the environment that surrounds it.

People are either the problem or the solution.

By including people in the process of discovery and research, from the ground up and the grass roots down, you will accomplish much toward the goal of a sustainable groundwater community resource in one step. The people who attended the workshops now own a part of this process and embrace this goal and for the most part they will defend and sustain it. It will become a part of the community ethic and it will be honored.

Gabriola Groundwater Management Society thanks everyone who imagined this, who worked on this, and who shared this with us and now, with all of you.

Jenny MacLeod

President

Gabriola Groundwater Management Society