

**Round table Report**  
**October 2024 SEHAB meeting**  
**SEHAB Rep Name: Steph Cottell Area: Lower Vancouver Island and Southern**  
**Gulf Islands**  
**CA: Heather Wright**

**Summary**

1. Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are directly related to DFO
  - concerns about the separation of enhancement and stewardship into 3 directorates and how this will function over time as they are fundamentally interconnected. There is no formal policy announcement and/or org chart, leaving community groups in the dark about how things function. Stewardship groups are concerned because the message is that CA's are now focused solely on hatcheries and it's unclear how the PSSI stewardship team will function after April 2026.
  - inability of DFO to sign letters of agency on behalf of stewardship groups is a considerable problem for small stewardship groups that need an expression DFO support to help navigate various regulatory process and/or access other funding
  - concerns about how the serious impacts stewardship groups are seeing on the ground will ever inform nuanced fishing regulations in specific areas where plummeting populations are clearly more vulnerable
  - confusion around how different branches of the DFO co-inform one another, in turn informing fishing regulations/management plans and enforcement
  - frustration and concern that shifting baselines means we are losing any oversight in extremely impacted (rampantly increasing docks/shoreline vegetation loss/shoreline hardening) areas such as the Victoria Harbour, Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet, Colquitz, and Craigflower areas, where DFO enforcement staff have said have "no significant fisheries value" meaning enforcement responses are minimal
  - concerns about pH changes in the Cowichan, maybe related to recent fish kill of 84K steelhead trout. Because there is not adequate monitoring, there could actually be frequent fish kills due to environmental conditions such as pH that go unnoticed because the bodies get eaten within the food web quite quickly.
2. Any positive things that are directly related to DFO
  - CA Heather Wright and Stewardship Coordinator Sunny Mizushima continue to do great work, and the DFO Center for Restoration Excellence team provides much-needed capacity and support, especially on the shoreline. This team

- should be commended for their collaborative efforts and we support this direction/initiative and hope this capacity can be built and maintained over time
- grateful for the opportunity to attend the CaNOE and NAME conference under the Stream to Sea umbrella. Kudos to Christy Wilson and team for their visioning session for the Stream to Sea program and coordinating the travel/feedback/collective collation of information
3. Any things coming up that DFO should know about
    - This fall is the first year when returns of Chum adults might occur in Bowker Creek! Their Streamkeepers group will monitor the stream for migrating and spawning fish, starting in Mid-October.
  4. Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are related to other agencies.
    - provincial logging policies, municipal and regional development policies

## **Group reports**

### **Bowker Creek**

1. *Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are directly related to DFO*  
*We are hoping for Chum eggs from Goldstream this year, to incubate in Bowker Creek. We have prepared capacity for as many as 40,000 eggs.*

2. *Any positive things that are directly related to DFO*

*With help from a grant from DFO our Streamkeepers group has designed and made two incubation boxes for Chum eggs. The design is based on the boxes used by the Cortes Island Streamkeepers group, as adapted for Bowker Creek conditions. We will test the boxes in the creek during two time periods, Oct 15-Nov 15 and the month of December, to be ready for the hoped-for Chum eggs from Goldstream in January.*

*We appreciate the signage sent by our community advisor to help protect the prepared salmon spawning area and adjacent riparian habitat.*

3. *Any things coming up that DFO should know about*

*This fall is the first year when returns of Chum adults might occur. Our Streamkeepers group will monitor the stream for migrating and spawning fish, starting in Mid-October.*

4. *Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are related to other agencies.*

## **Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable**

### **1. Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are directly related to DFO Joe Saysell (Friends of the Cowichan)**

- **Upper River Closure:** *Our group had a meeting with Fisheries in Nanaimo for our proposal at the FRAC meeting to try and get it closed. This has been the 15th year we have tried to get it closed. This is done every two years because the synopses are made every two years. There is no decision at the meeting. It is a roundtable of different groups. I said the reason this year is different than others is because there has been a fish kill. We said we have 144 resident rainbows, according to last years count. 280 browns. That equals about 35 fish per mile. Most rivers, good trout rivers, have 1000 - 3000 fish per mile. We have 35. We have almost no steelhead in the upper river, and those in the upper river are the early run and big run fish we have. They spawn earlier and go out earlier. They are almost non existent because drift boats and anglers dragging over those reds. The drag marks are great big troughs down the river. Maybe 100 yards along in some places. That is where our chinook salmon and early steelhead spawn. Those anchors and people wading on them are killing 90 percent of wherever they go. It is a common sense proposal. It hasn't gone anywhere in the past, especially the guiding that has happened since COVID. The guiding association. Maybe this year we might have a chance. It takes a catastrophe. We have that meeting and then one person said, he came to replace another person. Mike is his name, and Mike said, is there a vote? No there is no vote. Fisheries looks at it, gathers information from everyone. They have to do their annual swim count in july. Whether the numbers have gone up or down. I assume the numbers are way down, not even what we had. Then, they say they have some money for a census. I don't know if they will do it every day. They have to make a decision before Christmas time, before december, because they have to send their answer to Ottawa. So, this is where we are at. There are enough people now that are aware of what the situation is. People didn't understand what we are talking about waiting on reds. People didn't understand that in the past. Especially with climate change going on, the proper regulations at that river should actually be closed December 1st-April 1st for spawning. Opened April 1st-June 15th. With climate change coming on, we should be moving that right up to the 15th of June. Then closed from October the 1st, then closed again. That is when the fish are at their prime, clean, feeding, and best bang for your buck. That is when you go. Hopefully we will get it. People will send their individual letters in. After talking to the minister's assistant the other day, he acknowledged especially the stewardship group how many letters are coming in. He really thanked everybody for sending those letters in. They need support from individuals and like minded people who think the same way about conservation of fish. He said just*

*please keep up the good work. He needs that ammunition to go to a meeting. Hopefully we will get it.*

- **pH:** *I have one monitor near my place to monitor pH. It is very alarming. The river dropped to seven in May, early, and right away, not at my place, but the lower readings at horseshoe and the trestle, started climbing right away. This is in May. That is why they switched to the reserve tank, the other tank, early. They took the monitors from down below. Since mine was good, they changed them to see if there was an error. They got the same reading. The monitors are working. It is the river. Now, a few of us have been talking. This has probably gone on, a fish kill, for not just last year, for a lot of years. Because there is no monitoring, because the ministry doesn't have any money to go out there. This has been going on. Fisheries were at my place. When things were put in this river. We will say, say I was canning some salmon. How long do they last? You go back the next day and you will not find one scale, everything is gone in one night. Whether it is crayfish, otters, mink, eagles. Everything eats everything in that river. So we could have fish kills all the time, you wouldn't know it, unless it is at a major thing where the bottom is this deep. That is the only way you are going to know. It just keeps getting eaten and eaten. We really think something is definitely wrong. At least we have water this year. Almost getting down to 15 cubic meters. Having that kind of water late in June, we are really happy about that.*

#### *Big Changes in Upper Watershed*

- *There are big changes to the hydrology in the upper watershed. A lot of places are being filled with solid sand under the water. Insects cannot live in these conditions. The Upper River, all the way to Skutz, is filling up. So the upper river is becoming like the lower river, with all fine gravel and no big rocks. The only place that will have these is from town to the big diversion. The big pools; there will no longer be big holding places. That is one of the important reasons we should be closing the upper river during spawning time.*

## **2. Any positive things that are directly related to DFO**

### **Cowichan Community Land Trust**

*It was great to have our CA Heather Wright and Stewardship coordinator Sunny Mizushima participate in the Quw'utsun Sta'lo' skewyul / Cowichan River Day. Thank you to Sunny Mizushima for the work on getting rid of an abandoned vessel at the inlet of Shawnigan Creek, and to Heather Wright for efforts at Exeter Creek the upper Cowichan.*

*Grateful for the opportunity for some of the community members to attend the CaNOE and NAME conference under the Stream to Sea umbrella. Kudos to Christy Wilson and team for their visioning session for the Stream to Sea program and coordinating the travel/feedback/collective collation of information*

3. **Any things coming up that DFO should know about**
4. **Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are related to other agencies.**

*-logging practices in the upper watershed and development pressures in the whole region continue to severely impact riparian and aquatic health.*

### **Cowichan River Fish Fence numbers:**

#### **2024 Pre-Season Expectations**

**Chinook:** *There are no formal forecasts for Chinook returns to the Cowichan River. Returns in 2023 surpassed 10,000 adult fish for the seventh year in a row. Expectations are for continued rebuilding with a strong possibility of reaching the target escapement for the system (6,500 naturally spawning adults). Informal forecasts for Natural Spawners (including age-2) through brood-year projections and Forecast-R modelling suggest a return of 30,085 and 27,219 respectively.*

**Coho:** *Coho are expected to remain in a low productivity period throughout Southern BC. Marine survivals are forecast remain similar to 2023 levels at 3.5% for wild and 1.8-2.6% for hatchery indicators in the Georgia Basin. A new project to estimate Coho escapement and run timing for the Cowichan River was initiated in 2018 with the goal of building an annual data set.*

*Preliminary data suggest Coho survival is higher than other Strait of Georgia systems and recent escapements (2019-2023) are in excess of 10,000 adults. Skutz Falls is the primary enumeration site for this species as the fence is typically removed before the peak of migration.*

**Pink:** *A small number of pinks (~100) are typically observed at the fence every fall.*

**Chum:** *Chum returns in 2024 are forecast to be lower than the escapement target of 160,000 for Cowichan at 133,600 based on contributing brood year escapement and normal survival values ("normal forecast"). However, if recent low survivals persist through 2024 then we expect to see around 30,700 chum return ("like last year model"). Forecasts for chum are highly uncertain and will be revised in-season as returns are enumerated*

**Sockeye:** *Although the Cowichan is not considered a Sockeye system a handful of fish are observed in most years but migration likely occurs before the fence is installed.*

#### **Count as of Oct 4:**

Table 1: Cumulative totals for Chinook migration past the fence by age and origin.

	Wild (unclipped)	Hatchery (clipped)	Unknown	Total
Adults	4,866	149	803	5,818
Jacks	4,028	94	1,179	5,301
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,894</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>1,982</b>	<b>11,119</b>

Table 2: Cumulative totals for Coho, Chum and Pink migration past the counting fence.

	Coho	Chum	Pink	Unknown
Adults	332			
Jacks	90	9	61	66
<b>Total</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>66</b>

**Peninsula Streams:**

1. Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are directly related to DFO  
*The inability of DFO to sign letters of agency on behalf of stewardship groups contributed to provincial regulatory delay for PSS on its project with Tsartlip First Nations. For PSS, letters of agency from DFO for provincial permitting are not often required however in some cases and for many other stewardship organizations, this support is greatly needed.*
  
2. Any positive things that are directly related to DFO  
*The DFO Center for Restoration Excellence team provides much-needed capacity and support, especially on the shoreline. This team should be commended for their collaborative efforts and we support this direction/initiative and hope this capacity can be built and maintained over time.*
  
3. Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are related to other agencies.  
*Please see above (question 1). Provincial Crown Licensing continues to be an inadequate regulatory pathway for shoreline restoration projects with timelines that are not conducive to funding and species windows. They are currently delaying, adding expense, or altogether rejecting work seeking to restore shoreline habitats above and below the*

*natural boundary while seemingly failing to protect shoreline habitats as this jurisdiction ends above the Natural Boundary.*

*Kyle Armstrong  
Executive Director  
Peninsula Streams Society  
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**Veins of Life Watershed Society**

*I'm writing out of frustration and concern. As the Veins of Life Watershed Society, we dedicated immense time, money, and energy in the '90s to projects such as removing abandoned docks and dead boats, controlling urban runoff and storm sewers, and reclaiming shorelines by planting trees, eelgrass, and seagrass.*

*However, upon returning to my Gorge in 2007, I was disheartened to find that much of our work had been undone. Over 80 new docks have been added, the shoreline vegetation we planted has been removed, and many shorelines have been hardened. Not a single permit was granted from any agency—whether municipal, provincial, or federal.*

*I've raised these issues with higher management at DFO Enforcement, as well as with provincial and municipal governments, but to no avail.*

*Back in 2001, we met with DFO Habitat, DFO Enforcement, Environment Canada, Environment BC, Fisheries Renewal BC, Transport Canada, Island Health, and the core municipalities of Victoria, Saanich, Esquimalt, and View Royal. It was agreed that due to historical contaminants, outfalls still polluting the tidal waters, and the highly contaminated seabed (especially in Rock Bay and up to Tillicum Bridge), no work disturbing the seabed should be undertaken. Yet, since 2001, over 30 new docks have appeared, with significant habitat loss from vegetation removal—and nearly all without permits.*

*One particular issue that stands out is the expansion of the swim dock in Bamfield Park, Victoria, which was approved by all agencies without any mention of the contaminated seabed. The report claimed there was no eelgrass present, which is inaccurate—at least 30% of the dock now extends over eelgrass beds.*

*To make matters worse, last year, DFO Enforcement informed me that the Victoria Harbour, Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet, Colquitz, and Craigflower areas have "no significant fisheries value," meaning enforcement responses are minimal.*

*As many of you know, I work across this coast from Port Renfrew to Alaska, and I see this lack of enforcement everywhere. Countless fisheries groups and First Nations express the same*

*frustrations—we spend millions reclaiming these creeks, rivers, and inlets, only to watch ongoing destruction with no meaningful intervention.*

*After 30 years and countless millions invested in trying to make a difference, I'm at a loss.*

*Best regards,*

*John R Roe*