

Round table Report
June 2025 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
 - New channel/diversion of Cowichan river (good for fish, bad for tubers/recreators) the Quw'utsun Sta'lo diverted from its typical path, flowing in a new channel directly through the surrounding forest. The main flow of the river now goes through log jams, making it impassable between Little Beach and Skutz Falls. High river flows in winter 2023 broke through a bend in the river, splitting the flow and opening up the new channel through the forest. That, combined with low water levels this year, has led to the original path of the river drying up and the new channel becoming the dominant path. See photo at end of document.
 - Cowichan Lake, historically low water levels
 - urban redevelopment and infrastructure construction is increasing and resulted in a noticeable frequency of muddy silt pollution events this past winter. We believe that a couple of events this year may have been responsible for the sudden death of approximately 50% of our incubating alevins (Bowker Creek)
2. Any positive things that are directly related to DFO
 - CA very helpful in Bowker Creek projects, great results on chum incubation boxes
 - Great Salmon and the Forest learning program spring season, collaboration with CA, Cowichan Fish Hatchery (CT), Ken Elliot, Genevieve Singleton, and Cowichan Community Land Trust
 - Forage fish and green crab monitoring continue with Cowichan and Penelakut Tribes and Thetis Island
3. Any things coming up that DFO should know about
 - Bowker creek starting 3rd incubation box, increase request for chum eggs to 30k
 - Quwutsun Sta'lo' Skweyul (Cowichan River Day) Sept 20 or 21, cohosted by Cowichan Tribes and the Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable
4. Any issues that are affecting groups and their projects that are related to other agencies.
 - Municipalities and provincial jurisdictional challenges/conflicting interests. Media attention to alevin and fry mortality may be helping shift mindsets (Bowker Creek and Cowichan River)

- CVRD new bylaw enforcement tool; Bylaw Dispute Adjudication System – purportedly far more efficient, aiming to get greater compliance numbers, less lawyers/court time
- Cowichan River diversion (SAR, CVRD, Province, Cowichan Watershed Board)

Group reports

Friends of Bowker Creek

This year we incubated Chum eggs in two new incubation boxes that were designed and built by our volunteers and made possible by DFO advice and grant funding. The training and consultation that DFO made available allowed us to adapt a cassette-style design used by the Cortes Island Streamkeepers group. The new design helped to solve problems we had encountered in our first two years of chum egg incubation. We were very pleased with the performance of the new boxes and hope we will have the opportunity to receive eggs in 2026 from the 2025 spawning event.

Last fall we had adults that unexpectedly strayed into the creek. We contacted our DFO Community Advisor and appreciate the quick response in helping us identify the Coho adults.

During the fall of 2025, we will be watching for adults returning from our first year of Chum egg incubation, and will follow the advice of our Community Advisor regarding scheduling regular and frequent observation at key locations on the creek, assessing in advance for obstructions to fish passage and removing trash from the creek. We are now considering what stream channel preparations to make this year for spawning Chum, and will include the Community Advisor in such discussions.

We are planning to complete construction of a third incubation box, as specified in the DFO grant, which will raise our Chum egg incubation capacity to 30,000 eggs. Thus, we may be requesting this increased number of Chum eggs from the 2025 brood year.

We are progressing with and developing an active relationship regarding water quality and shoreline restoration with municipal staff of the three municipalities of the Bowker Creek watershed. However, urban redevelopment and infrastructure construction is increasing and resulted in a noticeable frequency of muddy silt pollution events this past winter. We believe that a couple of events this year may have been responsible for the sudden death of approximately 50% of our incubating alevins. Egg to fry rearing success was thus reduced to approximately 50%. It was a very disappointing setback in a year of progress in our communication with municipal staff.

We believe that our water quality sampling efforts and advocacy so far are resulting in greater vigilance at work sites, including site closures of offending projects. The death of the incubating alevins this year got media attention and has helped us in communicating with the municipalities. In this regard, the presence of salmon in the creek is very helpful to us in changing the culture of municipal Engineering and Public Works departments.

Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable groups:

Ian Morrison/CVRD Area F Director

- 1) Little Beach (Area F Community Park); consultant engaged to do a snapshot of what is there and what is possible - how to maintain/enhance the ecological value of the area. Heavy use in the summer time; decisions need to be made about how to care for the property. There will be a public event for input but that is not yet scheduled. Swift Water Rescue does their training at the site.
- 2) Official Community Plans for Electoral areas and Local Area Plans are underway. Electoral Area - planyourcowichan website - visioning/aspirational document to guide comprehensive planning bylaw.
- 3) Every 5 years CVRD does a Customer Satisfaction Survey; on now; selected number of folks will be phoned, others can go onto the website
- 4) CVRD new bylaw enforcement tool; Bylaw Dispute Adjudication System - far more efficient, aiming to get greater compliance numbers, less lawyers/court time, Nanaimo District has this in place so their personnel will help support (i.e. adjudicators).
- 5) CVRD Budget approved 2 weeks ago; Karen and Ian had the largest reduction in costs.
- 6) Reorganizing - Environmental Services area are now under Land Use Services Dept (Ann Kjerulf is the new manager); includes DWWP, Cowichan Flood Management, etc.

Kim and Bethany, Lulumexun

- new staff on marine team (Jacob); sea garden restoration coordinator. Working with Parks to find opportunities for Cowichan Tribes' staff and members to work on sea gardens and an eye on old project (Tom and Tim); Beach hasn't been selected but Barry Hetschko may help with how to monitor and maintain sea gardens.
- No green crabs found in Cowichan Estuary yet; starting again April 29th for the first monitoring this year. They are in Ladysmith, Penelakut, Chemainus Harbour. Hoping to catch any invasion early.
- Marine program update:
 - as part of transmountain pipeline funding developing marine program
 - Lulumexun (lands and natural resource dept); used to be lands and self-governance dept.
- DFO funding is ending; Kim found new funding to continue the program. Becoming a permanent self-sustaining program. Became own entity moving forward.
- Shared Program Map & Document

- new vessel to get community members out to see the territory, participate in monitoring; etc. can handle up to 25 people at once;
- everything done is reviewed by Natural Resource Committee or Chief and Council.
- two events per year -
- annual marine forum event for community members and may open to the public in the future (share what is being done; ask for feedback; celebrate)
- Sea Garden Campout (community members learning how to care for them, sometimes overnight in the dark!)
- Stay connected via the Cowichan Tribes' newsletter, website updates, Facebook

Joe Saysell, Friends of the Cowichan

- Exeter Creek restoration project initiated by Joe. - did some counts - 5 to 6 pairs of coho back in the creek; hopefully rebuild and widen on its own. Money given by the Fly-Fishing Club out of Victoria.
- left over funds, hopefully can be used to add gravel to Tiny Creek; hardest part is getting people to do the work.
- worried about anchoring in spawning areas, this is why we need the river closed

Cowichan Watershed update late May 2025 ~ Brian Houle

Cloudy weather with occasional rainfall is helping watershed conditions.

Lake level has recovered to 75% full but is levelling off currently.

Weather forecast still includes rain predictions and snowpack is still melting and helping conditions.

River flow will be maintained at 7.06 cms for coming months.

It is only after the snowpack is fully melted that conditions for the full dry season can be assessed.

From the following lake level trend, to keep things in perspective, 2025 is currently a lower lake level than it was during our worst ever year, 2023.

While on this day in 2023 lake level was higher than it is today in 2025, we still have some snowpack to melt this year and that will help raise lake level.

In 2023, the snowpack was not there to help, and river flow was held at 15 cms at that time and drawing lake level down quickly.

River flow in 2025 is 7 cms, not 15 cms as it was in 2023, and that will help us maximize lake level in the coming weeks.

The coming 3 weeks and as snowpack fully melts, will help define conditions for the 2025 dry season.

I included the Nanaimo snowpack trend where the snow pillow shows zero snow left at that lower elevation.

*serious concern about Cowichan and Koksilah water levels this season.

Article re: Cowichan River:

A 'death trap' along the Cowichan River could hold new hope for fish

June will be a critical month for the Cowichan River as water levels drop.

<https://thediscourse.ca/cowichan-valley/cowichan-river-diversion-a-death-trap-for-humans-haven-for-fish>

