**Geography 467 – The Cowichan River Hatchery and Windlow Farms**

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**The Cowichan River Hatchery**

The Cowichan River Hatchery tour led by Ken Elliot was an engaging and spiritual morning filled with stories of change and educationally informative talks. Ken was clearly a knowledgeable individual who was proud to be a member of the Duncan First Nations Tribe. He was very spiritual in the ways he described his experiences and clearly respected the ways of his past elder’s management techniques of gathering, and ecosystem management.

A Tour which focused largely on the Native edibles available for medicinal or nutritional values, and Riparian species control provided us with a solid foundation for why he took so much pride in the preservation of Native plants, while managing as best he could for alien invasive species.

The Salmon Hatchery tour was brief but it was clearly outlined through the fundamental steps required for the spawning, and releasing processes. Through a small dominantly family operated Facility, Cowichan River Hatchery has released over 65 million salmon back into Cowichan Lake over the past 35 years. A dominant four year cycle sees the fluctuations in numbers change greatly, but years with less returnee’s help the Department of Fisheries to determine limits for fishermen and when to open or close the fishery.

Ken explained that approximately 50% of the Chinook released will stay local within the Strait of Georgia, while the other half may travel all the way to the shores of Japan before working their way south and eventually end back in the Cowichan River to Spawn. A tremendous amount of degradation to riparian areas, and spawning habitat over time has led Ken to shift focuses when not busy with the run to commit time and funds to regenerating riparian areas. Habitats while changed greatly through European settlement, has changed both inputs and outputs of the River, while causing many streams and surrounding areas to be less suitable for safe habitat for the Salmon and their future.

The Native Plant Propagation of Cowichan River is involved with teaching and implementing Native Plants for both medicinal uses and as food sources. They wish to have community gardens and Natural areas that their peoples can once again take pride in maintaining the Natural Habitat and beauty of their traditional consumption and medicinal uses for the ecosystem in which they live. Many of the plants are no longer widely used by the Tribe but most of the stories and secrets containing facts of the important uses of each species have been taught and passed down by the elders which now must be preserved by this generation or could be lost.

The brisk walk through the Riparian area and down to the fish identifying station where their technician was busy collecting and recording passing Salmon species was being threatened by many invasive species which could potentially impact the native plants in the area. Work was being done to try and control and minimize their effects, though some seemed near to reaching a point passed easy repair. Knotweed and Blackberry were the major threats to the native species, and while efforts were made to plant Natives along the River and within the Riparian areas, many of their planted trees and vegetation appeared to be suppressed while the alien species thrived. From the European introduction and sales of “garden” species non-native to this ecosystem, bit by bit they encroach and eventually surpass the growing abilities of what was once a more controlled and symbiotic Natural ecosystem.

**Windlow Farm**

Owned and operated since 1945 by twin brothers Keith and Greg, Windlow Farm covers a vast area of 120 acres, 9 of which are dedicated to the use of Farmship Growers co-operation that focus on vegetables.

Although Farmship has only recently started work on the lands, there is a clear presence of passion and dedication to turn this Farm into a fully sustainable food source for local residents. The Vegetable gardens are split into two areas. The first is a higher field that has better drainage where they can start their seeds in ground and greenhouses before transplanting them into the lower field that is often not relieved of its high water table until late spring. They have ample volunteers, and are also part of the Organic Farm Workers Program, where farmers may work four, 5 hour shifts in the garden for a returned home-stay and meal plan. They currently have one farmer living with them from the program.

They have 30 available yearly family boxes sold through the Community Supported agriculture Program that provides 34 weekly boxes from the spring until late fall. This is a great way for them to get some money upfront to cover the costs related to farming and ensure ahead of time that product is sold. Much of the rest of the product is sold at the Bowen Park Market as organically grown, both local and sustainable foods.

**The Day in a Nutshell**

Two very interesting places were visited and provided both an educational hands on guided tour of how both old and new techniques must be studied and collaborated to ensure a sustainable future. I found both interesting in their own ways and feel that while they were both passionate about their works, they were humble in a sense that they knew it would take more than their efforts to have future success in their fields of work. I hope that the Farmship co-op finds success as it may be hard for them to get the full-time support and workers they need to fulfill all their ambitions for very little financial reward. It will take passionate volunteers to succeed long-term. As for the Hatchery, while it is funded they will be able to continue to stand steady with fish stock numbers, however their efforts for Rejuvenation of Native Plants will go largely un-noticed if Invasive’s are continued to survive in the ecosystems. Anywhere within Riparian areas, the control of invasive’s is harder as no pesticides, or chemicals can be used for control, which means on-going dedicated and hard man hours of labour is necessary if they wish to ultimately take back the ecosystem, and restore it fully to the Natural past in which it once stood.