

GREEN SCENE

Kudos to BC Hydro for their Water Use Plans

by Elaine Golds

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As someone with a keen interest in environmental issues, eternal disappointment seems to be my default response to many of the actions taken by industry and government.

However, occasionally, good things do happen.

A truly positive action taken by BC Hydro has been their *Water Use Plans* that were developed for several rivers they dammed in earlier eras for power purposes. These plans, known as WUPs, have been developed over the past 15 or so years; they have improved water flows in a number of significant salmon-bearing rivers in BC. While WUPs have brought environmental benefits, the insightful actions taken by BC Hydro to develop these plans have all but been forgotten by the community at large. This is a great shame as the formulation of these plans was accomplished by extensive consultations which involved many people in local communities. .

Learning and doing. Students from BCIT's Fish, Wildlife and Recreation program conduct fish habitat assessment of the Coquitlam River.
File Photo. Coquitlam River Watershed Roundtable



They remain as outstanding examples of how community stewards can pull together to reach wise and balanced decisions about the use of natural resources (for more information see the “Water for Power, Water for Nature” report, available at <http://www.wwf.ca>).

The rivers for which WUPs have been developed include the Alouette, Stave, Wahleach, Cheakamus, Campbell, Shuswap, Puntledge and many others including our own, the Coquitlam River. The development of a water-sharing plan, which is what the WUPs do, was a particular challenge for the Coquitlam as water in the upper Coquitlam River is used to generate electricity and provide Metro Vancouver with a considerable portion of its drinking water. An opportunity to help determine the allocation of Coquitlam River’s water attracted considerable interest from river stewards in our community. The Consultative Committee for the Coquitlam River was one of the largest ones convened which, at times, made reaching consensus decisions a particular challenge.

Water Use Planning had its origins in the unfortunate draining of BC Hydro’s Downton Reservoir on the Bridge River system in 1996. This down-drafting of the reservoir, which killed many fish, horrified river stewards and resulted in a petition to the trilateral (i.e., Mexico, USA and Canada) international Commission for Environmental Cooperation regarding Canada’s failure to properly manage salmon-bearing rivers. The incident on the Downton, BC Hydro’s redevelopment of their facilities on the Stave River plus some insightful behind-the-scenes prods from a few passionate river stewards led to BC Hydro’s initiation of demanding and lengthy planning processes for 23 rivers in BC.

The local consultative process, which remained open and transparent, relied on finding keen and interested participants by advertising for volunteers with an interest in the Coquitlam River. The response was overwhelming; clearly, there was (and still is) a great passion to protect the Coquitlam River in this community. Approximately 40 people had the stamina and determination to participate in a process which lasted for 4 years. We met mostly in the old cedar-clad BC Hydro building on the corner of the Barnet Highway and Falcon Drive where we sat through many long evening meetings. Without a doubt, many friendships were forged throughout this lengthy 4 year process.

Our Committee had many fascinating presentations from a number of biologists and fisheries experts as well as from Metro Vancouver and BC Hydro staff who spoke of the need for drinking water and electricity generation. We learned much about the history of BC Hydro and dam construction on the Coquitlam River which extinguished a historic sockeye salmon population in Coquitlam Lake. We learned how riparian forests around a river fundamentally change when natural flows cease. And we all had to grapple a little to understand the complicated statistics and analyses required for allocation of water. Personally, I found participation on this Committee to be an engrossing learning experience. I was impressed by the dedication of all the volunteers who stuck with this process for over 70 consultative committee and technical meetings. In the end, we could not agree on a single recipe to allocate water. What our Committee did was propose two possible solutions both of which would be tested over time and studied extensively. To follow that process, a new Monitoring Committee was struck. The conclusion of this grand experiment on the Coquitlam River is expected to be reached by 2020. In the meantime, the River has much improved water flows for fish especially during the dry summer months.

The legacy of this WUP remains. In addition to the ongoing Monitoring Committee, a Salmon Passage Study has been convened with the keen participation of Kwikwetlem First Nation who want to see their

sockeye run restored. This is now a distinct possibility given that a landlocked kokanee population in Coquitlam Lake has been identified.

People remain very committed to stewardship of the Coquitlam River. With support from the Cities of Coquitlam and Port Coquitlam, a [Coquitlam River Watershed Roundtable](#) has now been convened (see www.coquitlamriverwatershed.ca for details; their next meeting, open to the public, is on April 22). I think BC Hydro's WUP process is an outstanding example of how collaborative decision-making can lead to more sustainable outcomes and a better informed public. It's an example that should be followed more often.