

# Green Scene: Achieving Ecological Health

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If there is one thing government bureaucrats should know by now, it is that summer is the wrong time to consult with the public. While we might feel inspired to perform our civic duties and provide thoughtful input throughout the rest of the year, summer is for vacations and relaxing with family and friends. Thus, I was taken aback when I learned Metro Vancouver released a draft 39 page plan on Ecological Health in mid July and are soliciting public input only until August 15 (for details, see [www.metrovancouver.org](http://www.metrovancouver.org)). Answering a long questionnaire online is probably not how you plan to spend your summer vacation.

For me, ecological health implies robust ecosystems with well-functioning intact habitats, the presence of all components of food webs and a biodiverse mix of species. The approach taken in Metro Vancouver's draft plan is extremely narrow with a focus mainly on the benefits provided to people by healthy ecosystems. These so-called ecosystem services include clean air, the hydrological cycle that provides drinking water, fertile soils in which to grow our food, pollinators of food crops and other benefits provided by nature. Thus, this Ecological Health Plan envisages ecological health more as a link between the natural environment and human health. The Metro Vancouver document suggests four areas where ecological health could be improved. These include providing greenways that would connect between parks and thus enable movement of animals (as well as people), supporting "salmon in the city", reducing toxics in the environment and building green infrastructure. The Plan also recommends 15 initial projects.



**Barn owls are a species at risk in the lower mainland but it is not clear if the Ecological Health Plan will do much to ensure protection of their habitat. *Kiyoshi Takahashi photo.***

I was disappointed to see so little emphasis in this Plan to protect all aspects of biodiversity especially species at risk in the lower mainland. For example, the continued presence of great blue herons or red-legged frogs in the lower mainland could easily be threatened by actions taken by people. However, because these species provide no apparent benefit to people, they appear to merit little attention in this Ecological Health Plan. Metro Vancouver is also conducting a sensitive ecosystem inventory and, to my mind, an Ecological Health Plan should be based on the findings of this inventory rather than preceding it. Identifying the significant ecosystems in the lower mainland and, then, developing strategies to protect them would be a more sensible approach. One of the more significant ecological features in the lower mainland is the Fraser River delta and surrounding areas which provide critical habitat for migrating shorebirds along the Pacific flyway. These areas remain vulnerable to disturbance from port expansion and associated facilities. An ecological health plan for the lower mainland

should surely emphasize the international significance of this flyway and our obligation to ensure it will continue to fulfill this important function.

Another goal of the ecological health plan is to reduce toxics in the environment. This is entirely laudable but rather hypocritical considering Metro Vancouver's recently approved Solid Waste Plan which calls for construction of a large incinerator to burn more garbage and generate electricity. Incineration of garbage creates dioxins which will then be released into our airshed. Dioxins are some of the most toxic chemicals ever created by man. Canada has signed a UN Treaty which commits us to avoid generating them.

Supporting salmon in the city certainly sounds worthy although it is hardly a new concept. Many volunteers from stewardship groups have been engaged in doing this for years. However, attention should be paid to other species. For example, one of the projects calls for salmon habitat enhancement on the lower Brunette River. This river is one of only four streams in Canada and the only one outside the Nooksack watershed that provides habitat for the Nooksack Dace, a tiny but highly endangered fish. It is not clear the proposed Brunette River project will focus sufficiently on the habitat needs of the Dace as well as salmon.

There are also a number of irritating errors, misleading statements and significant omissions in the report. This is a draft ecological health plan that clearly needs some serious tweaking before it is approved. Given that it was released for comment at the height of the summer, it's likely most people will pass up this opportunity to recommend improvements. That's unfortunate because this plan is very much a work in progress.