

Green Scene: World's Best Water?

by Elaine Golds

(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, March 17, 2006, page 17)

[photograph]

[caption: Every summer since 1991, the GVRD has offered free tours of the local watersheds, including the Coquitlam watershed at the end of Pipeline Road
Tri-City News file photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Water woes if we don't protect our resource]

Next Wednesday, March 22 marks World Water Day, a designation initiated at the UN Environmental Conference in 1992. Its purpose is to bring attention to the critical role that water plays in our lives and all species on earth. It is a solemn reminder that billions of people on this planet still do not have access to safe drinking water while others must rely on private companies and, thus, pay high prices for something that is regarded by many as a basic human right.

In the GVRD, we are blessed with one of the most pristine sources of drinking water in the world, a natural forest. For lack of alternatives, many cities in Canada are forced to take their drinking water out of rivers that are downstream from farms and industrial areas or the recipient of sewage from other municipalities upstream.

A plan to provide the Vancouver area with safe drinking water began in 1889 when water was diverted from the Capilano River to supply the City of Vancouver. Two years later, an 11-foot dam was built across the south end of Coquitlam Lake and a pipe constructed along the uphill portion of what are now the Riverview Hospital grounds through Coquitlam to deliver water to New Westminister. Over the next few decades, the forested watersheds of the upper Capilano, Seymour and Coquitlam Rivers were assembled. Dams were built and large reservoirs created behind them. Since the early 1900s, water behind the Coquitlam dam has been used for both drinking water and electrical generation.

Although the forested watersheds of Capilano and Seymour were acquired exclusively for drinking water purposes, logging continued in them. Concerns raised by the Vancouver Natural History Society and others brought this to an end in the late 1920s. In 1961, an insect infestation provided an excuse to resume logging which continued for approximately 30 years. Once again, public outcry from several groups, including the Burke Mountain Naturalists, resulted in another logging moratorium. Today, these forests, a patchwork of old growth and younger forests, help to sustain a remarkable diversity of wildlife as well as provide drinking water. The tallest Douglas fir in mainland Canada is found in the Coquitlam watershed and, until recently, so were the highly endangered spotted owls.

Tri-cities residents receive drinking water mainly from the Coquitlam watershed although residents close to Burnaby Mountain are supplied from Seymour most of the time. Seymour, the highest elevation reservoir allows for an economical gravity-fed system throughout much of the GVRD. Although our drinking water is free of human-derived pollutants, the possibility of contracting diseases from animals has necessitated costly upgrades to drinking water treatment. In addition to chlorine treatment, designed

to keep water in the distribution system bacteria-free, Coquitlam water is treated with ozone. A filtration plant is nearing completion for the Seymour and Capilano systems.

Local weather patterns provide abundant rainfall most months of the year with a typical dry spell during the summer. Climate change has been predicted to amplify these seasonal contrasts. Thus, the GVRD reservoirs need to hold sufficient water to provide a reliable supply over the summer. In recent years, restrictions on lawn watering have helped to conserve water use. Nonetheless, we are truly water gluttons. Per capita water consumption in the GVRD has, at times, been almost double that of the average Canadian consumption of 326 liters per day and quadruple that of Europe. Population growth and global warming will provide incentives for GVRD residents to become wiser water users in the future.

World Water Day should remind us of what a fantastic resource we have in our drinking watersheds. Every summer since 1991, the GVRD has offered free tours of these watersheds. If you have not yet seen these wonderful forests, you should consider joining one of these tours this year.