

Forum puts focus on fjord

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safe and sound Participants who attended the Future of Howe Sound Forum agreed on the need for an ongoing dialogue about the future vision of Howe Sound. FILE Photo

It was all things Howe Sound recently to focus on the body of water named after Admiral Earl Howe as stakeholders gathered for a forum on the region.

The celebrated British military man died in 1799 but his legacy has lived on in the triangular fjord roughly bounded by Horseshoe Bay, Squamish and Gibsons and it was this area that was recently the topic of discussion at a daylong meeting of more than 140 people.

The Future of Howe Sound Society (FHSS) brought community, business and non-profit sector leaders together on April 13 at the Gleneagles Golf Club for the Future of Howe Sound Forum. The objective of the forum was to hold a dialogue on a common vision for Howe Sound.

Ruth Simons, the executive director of the FHSS, said 65 organizations were represented at the event and her expectations were far exceeded. The organizations represented included the film industry, tourism, forestry, mining, the marine industry, the arts, conservation interests, marine sciences, youth camps, education and recreation.

"The common feedback we got overall was how wonderful it was to have so many people from so many backgrounds in one room together," said Simons, days after the event, as she continued her work to summarize and document the events of the day.

Whistler councillor Jayson Faulkner was one of the elected officials who attended the forum.

Faulkner said after the forum that Howe Sound has played a role in the success of regional tourism and the body of water needs to be maintained.

He noted that while Whistler isn't located on Howe Sound it is situated in the critical upland region and within the watershed that feeds into the fjord. "Whistler needs to have a place at this table and they very much want us," said Faulkner.

"I grew up in Howe Sound so I have a deep personal connection to it," said the Whistler councillor.

Faulkner supports the creation of a comprehensive plan for the body of water because at this point there isn't one.

According to Faulkner, some early work on a lobby for the creation of Howe Sound National Park has taken place. He described what he has seen of the proposal as "cool" and suggested it would be great to have a national park in the Sea to Sky region.

Simons said one common theme from the participants at the forum was a desire to keep talking. There will be more discussion, she said, as a Howe Sound Community Forum (HSCF) of elected officials is planned for September. The HSCF was created in 2002 and led to the creation of the Howe Sound Community Forum Principles for Cooperation, a document agreed to by 11 parties including regional districts, the Resort Municipality of Whistler, the Village of Pemberton, municipalities on the Sound and the Squamish First Nation. The 2002 document commits the communities to work together on planning issues that impact Howe Sound.

While the next HSCF event is five months away, Simons said the April 13 meeting in Horseshoe Bay has prompted one key action.

"From this event it's clear that we're going to be asking the provincial government to consider moving forward with some sort of land and resources management plan (LRMP)," said Simons.

The fjord has enjoyed some natural resource rebounds in the last decade with herring appearing in significant numbers. Dolphins and whales were a rare site in Howe Sound but they have been spotted plying the waters in recent years. Cloud sponge reefs were recently discovered off Lions Bay. Two herds of elk were transplanted to the area and they are thriving on the shores of the sound and the river systems above the fjord.

One of the speakers at the April 13 forum was Bob Turner, chair of the Howe Sound Environmental Science Network.

"We are seeing some of the most encouraging environmental trends in the last two decades," Turner told those gathered. "Howe Sound is in recovery. All of this is very exciting."

According to Turner, Howe Sound suffered badly from the impacts of pulp mill disposals of dioxins and furans, acid rock drainage at Britannia and mercury from chemical plant operations in Squamish.

The Woodfibre pulp mill stopped operating in 2007, Howe Sound Pulp and Paper at Port Mellon upgraded and decreased its impact in the early 1990's, a five-year clean up of the chemical plant site in Squamish has improved conditions around the Squamish River Estuary and acid rock drainage from the closed mining operations at Britannia dropped drastically when a water treatment plant was built in 2007. Turner, a geological scientist with Natural Resources Canada, pointed out that pink salmon returned to Britannia Creek in 2012 for the first time in 80 years.

According to Turner, community groups are rising up to take on the responsibility of restoration and repair of Howe Sound.

"Groups like the Squamish Watershed Society, Marine Life Sanctuary Society and the West Vancouver Shoreline Preservation Society, to name a few, are doing remarkable work," said Turner. He added that the work of the

Squamish Streamkeepers to promote the abundant recovery of herring is astonishing.

While there was emphasis at the Future of Howe Sound Forum on nature and the environment in an era following significant negative industrial impacts, two current industry proposals are also on the minds of environmentalists.

Burnco Rock Products wants to remove gravel from its privately owned land at McNab Creek and Pacific Energy Corp. has offered to buy the Woodfibre lands so it can build a liquefied natural gas plant on the east side of Howe Sound.

Melanie Gaboriault, Burnco's consulting communications director, attended the forum. She said it was positive and she was pleased that many of the forum attendees were open to the notion of some industrial activity in the future on the Howe Sound shores. Gaboriault said Burnco supports the creation of a LRMP.

"It must be met, I would say, with the balancing of the whole area and all the uses and to be flexible," said Gaboriault. "I believe a land and resource plan is a good one in any situation. If we don't know what the plan is for any given region then we don't know what can be put forward, what can be proposed in an area and it doesn't make for good business sense."

According to Gaboriault, uncertainty leads to difficult relationships amongst stakeholders while a clear understanding of what land uses are permitted will create certainty.

For Simons, who has lived near Howe Sound all her life, she concluded that everyone who attended the Future of Howe Sound Forum agreed there is a desire for an overall management plan for Howe Sound.

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