

**COWICHAN VALLEY
WINTER TOURISM
INITIATIVE
PROPOSAL**

by
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is well recognized in the Cowichan Valley that:

- 1) New economic ideas are needed to stimulate the local economy,
- 2) Many individual tourism activities in the Cowichan Valley operate singularly in regards to tourism promotion, and
- 3) A central theme by which to market local tourism opportunities does not exist.

It is the purpose of this proposal to demonstrate that wildlife viewing, especially bird watching and winter off-season wildlife viewing, could provide a theme under which all local tourism attractions and businesses could be grouped to provide more effective methods of promoting the year round tourism opportunities that are present in this Valley.

The backbone of this proposal is to establish a wildlife sanctuary from Somenos Lake to the Cowichan Estuary and to provide viewing facilities and services to provide the optimum viewing and educational experience without disturbance to the wildlife.

To accomplish this will require Community Futures funding in the amount of \$9,000 for a three month period to investigate the feasibility of moving ahead with this proposal. During this period close to forty organizations, individuals and agencies will be contacted for their input into this proposal. A final report will be done and presented to the previous respondents for their final approval. Following this the updated proposal will be completed and funding possibilities to continue the initiative will be investigated.

INTRODUCTION

The Cowichan Valley is the winter home and resting place for thousands of migrating and resident birds. The average number of Cowichan Valley species counted during the annual nationwide Christmas Bird Count for the last five years is 125, making the Cowichan Valley one of the top spots in Canada for wintering bird species.

Species such as the *Tufted Duck*, *Eurasian Widgeon*, *Golden Eagle* and *Glaucous Gull* are considered rare, but can be found regularly in the Cowichan Valley during winter. *Western Screech Owls*, *Sabine's Gulls*, *Gyr Falcons* and *Emperor Geese* are considered very rare but are still seen here on occasion. Flocks of up to 500, ^{-2,000} once endangered, *Trumpeter Swans* are often seen during the winter at Somenos Marsh beside the Trans Canada Highway.

Winter time, October to March in the Cowichan Valley, is also the time of the year that the *Salmon* migrate up our rivers, *Roosevelt Elk* move down to river valleys, *Black Bears*, *Wolves* and *Cougars* expand their range bringing them closer to human habitation and up to 100 *Bald Eagles* at a time can be seen in and around prime feeding areas. *Beaver*, *River Otter*, *Muskrat* and a host of other small mammals can easily be found in the diverse habitats of the Cowichan Valley while the nearby ocean offers limitless opportunities to see *Seals*, *Sea lions*, numerous sea birds and migrating waterfowl.

On top of all this natural wonder, we live in an area where one can easily, and in a short time, travel from old growth to mountain top and see everything else in between. Not only will you see the local wildlife, you will see how the wildlife was, and still is, an important part of the local native culture, and history of the valley.

In the above rests an opportunity to bring economic benefits to the Cowichan Valley during some of the slowest business times of the year. Wildlife viewing, particularly birdwatching, is the fastest growing hobby in North America next to gardening. Important Bird Area's (IBA's) such as Point Pelee in Ontario, with the help of a supportive community, reap huge economic benefits from the natural spectacle that takes place, free of charge, every year. Making the same opportunities available here, would provide the vehicle with which to encourage winter tourism visits.

Other winter tourism operators in the Cowichan Valley would equally reap the benefits of winter wildlife viewing. Birdwatchers, or birders, as many prefer to be called, are usually an affluent group known to choose destinations for their birding opportunities and, when they visit, they stay a while! They will eat in restaurants, sleep in hotels or bed and breakfasts, buy in the shops and home studios and they will visit our other attractions featuring historical or cultural themes such as the Cowichan Native Village, BC Forest Museum and Chemainus murals, to name a few. Some may partake in one of the more vigorous eco-tourism opportunities available here, while others may enjoy the tranquillity and ease of less active pursuits.

I believe that, through this initiative, and the cooperation of the participating partners, the Cowichan Valley could become a leading winter destination for birders and wildlife viewing enthusiasts looking to experience what our community has to offer.

THE PROPOSAL

The purpose of this proposal is to develop, and complete a Winter Tourism Initiative Strategy Plan, that features the winter (October thru April) wildlife viewing theme as the vehicle with which to promote the Cowichan Valley as a major winter destination for tourists.

This strategy will center around the creation of the Somenos Cowichan Estuary Wildlife Management Area (SCEWMA), extending from Somenos Lake to the Cowichan Estuary, that provides managed opportunities for high quality wildlife viewing experiences within this protected area. While the proposed SCEWMA does not include the Chemainus Estuary nor Quamichan Lake, the possibility exists to include these areas in a larger proposal.

The Winter Tourism Initiative Strategy Plan, while primarily promoting the winter wildlife viewing opportunities to be had within the SCEWMA and the Cowichan Valley, will also promote the myriad of other winter attractions and experiences that fall under the wildlife viewing theme umbrella, such as: the BC Forest Museum, Freshwater Eco-center, Cowichan Bay Marine Ecology Center, Duncan City totems, the Cowichan Native Village, white water or sea kayaking, sailing, hiking, fishing, and many others.

The SCEWMA, as well as providing a major protected area for wintering and resident birds, will become the flagship of winter tourism opportunities in the Cowichan Valley. The 'managed opportunities' for high quality wildlife viewing within the SCEWMA will include Nature Centers at both Somenos Marsh and the Cowichan Estuary. The Somenos Center will showcase freshwater marsh ecology while the Estuary Center will provide the salt water estuary component. Self guiding boardwalks leading from each center will provide screened access to viewing platforms, bird blinds and other viewing sites, while at the same time interpretive signage will provide an educational component for visitors.

The Winter Tourism Initiative Strategy Plan will not only increase tourism and economic activity in the Cowichan Valley, it will also produce additional benefits for; employment, agriculture, the environment, business, education, community planning, issue resolution, research, and the community as whole.

START-UP

(March 1 - May 30, 1998)

During the 3 month start up period, the Contractor will develop a one year budget and meet with over thirty organizations, agencies and individuals (listed below) to:

- (1) Introduce the proposed initiative,
- (2) Invite their input
- (3) Obtain letters of support, and, in some cases,
- (3) Request partnership funding for the next twelve months.

ORGANIZATIONS, AGENCIES AND INDIVIDUALS

Community Futures
Municipality of North Cowichan
Cowichan Valley Regional District
Cowichan Tribes
City of Duncan
Jan Pullinger, MLA
Reed Elley, MP
Pacific Estuary Conservation Program
Ducks Unlimited
Nature Trust of BC
Ministry of Environment
Canadian Wildlife Service
Ministry of Agriculture
Department of Fisheries
Parks BC
Cowichan Agricultural Society
Waterfowl Management Committee
Cowichan Community Land Trust Society
Cowichan Watershed Council
Cowichan Conservation Network
Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society
Cowichan Valley Naturalists Society
Cowichan Tourism Association
Duncan City Improvement Association
Cowichan Bay Improvement Association
School district 79
Malaspina College
Cowichan Valley Arts Council
Cowichan Native Village
BC Forest Museum
Cowichan Bay Marine Ecology Center
Fresh water Eco-center
Chambers of Commerce

THE NEXT TWELVE MONTHS

(June 1, 1998 - May 30, 1999)

With the partners support and participation, and 12 months funding in place, the Contractor will:

- (1) Develop a community partnership to create a Winter Tourism Initiative Strategy Plan, centered around a winter wildlife viewing theme,
- (2) Initiate and implement the Somenos & Cowichan Estuary Wildlife Management Area, and
- (3) Develop a Somenos Marsh and Cowichan Estuary Wildlife Viewing Facilities Plan, which will include:
 - (a) Preparing a project plan, including design and budget,
 - (b) Securing of all necessary approvals,
 - (c) Identifying funding sources,
 - (d) Preparing a 5 year business plan for facility operations, and
 - (e) Applying for funding.

WINTER TOURISM INITIATIVE STRATEGY PLAN

As mentioned earlier, wildlife viewing, particularly birding, is big business in North America. Outdoor enthusiasts, traveling here to view our wildlife, will stay overnight or longer, to allow time to fully appreciate and experience the superb birding and wildlife viewing opportunities available within the SCEWMA and the rest of the Cowichan Valley. The Winter Tourism Initiative Strategy will be based on using our wildlife and scenery to get winter tourists here, then using our other winter attractions and experiences to keep them here for a while so that they have time to spend locally while taking in more of what the Warm Land has to offer.

The Cowichan Valley offers such diversity that it can become quite overwhelming, especially for those who are only passing through. Presently the community promotes culture and history, and, to a lesser extent, scenery and outdoor recreation. Many promotions are individual efforts and attractions often compete with each other for the slim tourist numbers. Despite the fact that we have one of the greatest concentrations of musicians outside of Nashville and one of the largest populations of artists in Canada, music and the arts are rarely promoted outside the Cowichan Valley. Wildlife viewing promotion is often an after thought. What is lacking is the central theme, the signature of our community, a signature to coordinate all of our promotional efforts. Wildlife viewing would be that signature.

Take for example the Duncan City Improvement Association (DCIA), who have worked several years towards establishing a Business Improvement Area (BIA) in downtown Duncan to raise funds to improve the downtown economic climate. A large focus of this group is to bring the local community downtown to shop. Looking at the locals who presently do not shop downtown, you will easily see why they don't shop downtown. Our community is a busy place and many people have little time or money to go hopping from store to store. It is far more convenient to shop at the giant stores nearby, who carry everything, and even have cheap prices to boot. Unless these people come into a sudden windfall, or find time on their hands, they are not going to shop downtown.

On the other hand, tourists have time on their hands and cash in their pockets. These are the customers our downtown shops need to supplement local shopping. A downtown Duncan core of shops catering to both local shoppers and visiting tourists would generate community pride and this in turn would encourage more local shoppers to come downtown. A world renowned wildlife viewing area, would bring these tourists here. The rest of what we have to offer will keep them here.

The Winter Tourism Initiative Strategy will be developed through a partnership of winter tourism stakeholders, coordinated by the contractor. These stakeholders will include: Cowichan Tourism, Cowichan Tribes, Chambers of Commerce, DCIA, Cowichan Valley Arts Council, Cowichan Bay Marine Ecology Center, Freshwater Eco-center, BC Forest Museum, and other groups or individuals wishing to participate. Strategy implementation will coincide with the progress of the SCEWMA designation and viewing facilities construction.

SOMENOS COWICHAN ESTUARY WMA (SCEWMA)

OVERVIEW

The Pacific Estuary Conservation Project and local conservationists have long desired a Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for the Cowichan and Chemainus Estuary's and Somenos Lake. Outstanding land use issues in the proposed WMA area are one of the main reasons that this designation has not been actively pursued. The initiative to establish a WMA from Somenos to the Cowichan Estuary would, not only provide a refuge and wildlife corridor for resident, wintering and migratory wildlife, but would also expedite the resolution of many of the outstanding land use issues existing in the proposed SCEWMA.

Land use issues, such as: Somenos Basin annual flooding, Timbercrest/York Road in Somenos Marsh, Waterfowl predation on farmers crops, and the Cowichan Estuary Management Plan are all long standing issues that need to be resolved before the SCEWMA can be established. Currently, most of these issues remain unnecessarily deadlocked, and continue to impede the progress of wildlife and fish conservation projects in the valley. The following is a short summary of each issue, the recommended action needed, and the Contractors role in each.

RESOLVING THE ISSUES

SOMENOS BASIN ANNUAL FLOODING

Again, a very old, perhaps over one hundred years, issue that remains unresolved today. The potential for a serious flooding situation to appear is at hand. Recent years flooding has almost closed the northbound Trans Canada Highway, and last year resulted in closures of Trunk Road. Meanwhile, fields along Somenos Lake, once farmed, now sit unmanaged and falling into disrepair and the costs to rehabilitate these fields mounts as time goes by.

Many past efforts to resolve the issue have led to failure. The most recent effort ended a couple of years ago when one of the stakeholders, Barry Bradshaw, sued several parties at the table for property damage and loss of income due to annual flooding conditions. To complicate the issue further, Cowichan Tribes have indicated that they would like to see a Cowichan Watershed study done before any other work is undertaken to alleviate flooding concerns. The Nature Trust (TNT) have recently applied to the Habitat Conservation Fund for funding to rehabilitate their fields at Somenos. To accomplish this they will have to resolve the flooding situation first. The Cowichan Watershed Council has agreed to reconvene the Somenos Basin Project to get all the stakeholders back to the table, to try again, to resolve the issue.

This proposal recommends that the Contractor participate in both the TNT and CWC initiatives to develop a viable flood reduction plan and encourage Mr. Bradshaw to enter into mediation with the other parties to determine some method of resolving the law suit rather than continuing its slow and costly process before the courts.

RESOLVING THE ISSUES CON'T

TIMBERCREST/YORK ROAD

This issue began over 25 years ago with the removal of valuable farm land from the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) to build the Timbercrest subdivision. Time has passed and the subdivision has grown to almost completion. Each new phase has drawn larger public outcry, which in turn has slowed the zoning approvals. Part of the zoning process includes the extension of York road across Somenos Creek to service the subdivision.

While local conservationists argue that the road isn't needed, and that better alternatives are available to ease traffic concerns, North Cowichan Council maintains that the road extension is needed as part of the Official Community Plan. To further complicate matters, a native burial site has been unearthed in the heart of the next area to be developed.

To resolve this issue, this proposal recommends that the contractor initiate negotiations between Timbercrest Estates (the developer), the Municipality of North Cowichan, Cowichan Tribes, and the Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society, towards a publicly supported land use agreement, that addresses outstanding public concerns over this issue.

WATERFOWL PREDATION ON FARMERS CROPS

This issue results from the ever increasing numbers of waterfowl using farmers fields for feeding. Within this issue is the non migratory *Canada Goose* numbers which have continued to climb unabated since being brought here in the early 1970's. There also is the side issue of increased hunting to discourage waterfowl from using farmers fields.

Affected stakeholders have recently taken the initiative to bring this issue to resolution, by creating the Waterfowl Management Committee (WMC). The mandate of the WMC is the creation of a Waterfowl Management Plan (WMP) which will present solutions to waterfowl predation issues. One of the four key recommendations put forth by the WMC is the creation of Sanctuaries where waterfowl can find refuge and lure crops can be planted to encourage waterfowl use as food in lieu of farmers fields.

This proposal recommends that the Contractor continues working within the WMC towards the completion of a WMP that will utilize the potential of the SCEWMA to reduce waterfowl crop predation.

COWICHAN ESTUARY MANAGEMENT PLAN (CEMP)

This complex issue is as old as the settling of the Cowichan Estuary. Industry, wildlife, tourism, and a host of other stakeholders continue to argue for what they perceive to be the best use of the Estuary lands. The CEMP approval process has been deadlocked for a long time now and needs resolving before the SCEWMA can be implemented.

This proposal recommends that the Contractor use the proposed SCEWMA as the basis to re-establish the Cowichan Estuary Management Plan Review Committee to resolve the outstanding land use issues.

ESTABLISHING THE SCEWMA

To establish the Somenos Cowichan Estuary Wildlife Management Area, the Contractor will:

- (1) Through consultation with all the stakeholders, including residents, local government, landowners, and all regulatory agencies, Identify the area to be included in the SCEWMA,
- (2) Initiate and coordinate land acquisition efforts to acquire outstanding properties,
- (3) Work with the Municipality of North Cowichan, CVRD and Cowichan Tribes to coordinate the steps necessary to achieve Conservation Zoning for the SCEWMA,
- (4) Work with the Ministry of Environment (MELP) and the Pacific Estuary Conservation Program (PECP), whose partners include MELP, Nature Trust and Ducks Unlimited to Implement a Wildlife Management Plan,
- (5) Work with the MELP and PECP to obtain WMA status for the proposed SCEWMA, and
- (6) Help in future community planning decisions by identifying the potential Greenways that would complete the wildlife corridors from the higher elevations to the SCEWMA.

WILDLIFE VIEWING FACILITIES PLAN

(THE MILLENNIUM PROJECT)

OVERVIEW

The guiding principle of the viewing facilities planned for the SCEWMA is to protect the wildlife from excessive intrusion by bringing the wildlife to the people. This will be accomplished by the construction of Nature Centers and wildlife viewing facilities at both Somenos Marsh and the Cowichan Estuary. Apart from the ongoing habitat enhancement projects, the facilities are planned to open June 1, 2000.

PROJECT PLAN

Nature Centers are planned for both Somenos Marsh and the Cowichan Estuary. The Somenos Center will provide education based on fresh water marsh ecology while the Estuary Center will provide the salt water estuary ecology component. Both Centers are planned to be small, multi-use facilities, that provide hands-on educational experiences for both young and old alike. The Somenos Center could also house a Tourist Info Center due to its proposed location on the corner of the Trans Canada Highway and Beverly Street.

Wildlife Viewing facilities planned for both sites will include: wheelchair accessible boardwalks, bird blinds, viewing platforms, info kiosks, and interpretive signage. Facilities will be designed to blend in with the natural environment to reduce impact on the wildlife. Some facilities may have limited access due to high water or sensitivity to human encroachment during nesting season.

Habitat enhancement projects will include; pond construction near viewing facilities, planting screening vegetation, erecting nesting boxes, and other such efforts necessary to improve the habitat available within the SCEWMA. These projects will be coordinated with ongoing salmon habitat enhancement projects be carried out under the management of the Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society.

APPROVALS

Once the design and budget stage has been completed the appropriate approvals will be requested from the regulating agencies.

FUNDING SOURCES

While the design, budget and approval stages are underway, potential project funding sources will be investigated in order to prepare a fundraising proposal.

FIVE YEAR BUSINESS PLAN

A five year business plan will be developed during the design, budget and approval stage. This plan will include details on projected revenues, and the cost of facilities operations, maintenance, management and staffing.

APPLY FOR FUNDING

On completion of the design, budget and approval stages, funding will be applied for from all the previously identified sources. At the same time, donations of materials and equipment will be solicited and volunteer canvassing carried out.

PROJECT CONSTRUCTION

(May 30, 1999 - June 1, 2000)

Project construction is expected to take approximately one year, with an anticipated opening date of June 1, 2000. It is anticipated that many of the project materials and equipment rentals will be donated and actual construction will take place with volunteers, much like the recent Kingdom Hall raising by the Jehovah Witness congregation. Other workers will be found within the training programs available through Fisheries Renewal, HRDC and Malaspina College. Project management will be provided by the Contractor working closely with all the participating agencies.

There is a possibility that the North American Timber Framers Guild will hold their annual convention here in the year 2000. The highlight of this convention would be the raising of a timber frame Nature Center at Somenos Marsh as part of the Convention workshop activities.

PROJECT COMPLETION

Upon completion of the wildlife viewing site facilities and with all elements of the Project Plan coming to a close, the management of the facilities will be turned over to a community Board approved to operate the facilities. At this time the five year operating plan will come into play to enable the sites to become self financed by the income generating avenues described in the 5 year plan.

With the opening of the facilities, the last elements of the Cowichan Valley Winter Tourism Initiative Strategy Plan will be implemented. These elements will include: an annual wildlife festival; boat tours on Somenos Lake, the Cowichan River and Cowichan Estuary; cultural tours; and other events planned to increase winter tourism visits to the Cowichan Valley.

SUMMARY

Winter time, loosely defined in tourist terms, is the off season from October to April. Apart from the seasonal boost of Christmas, services catering to tourists slump during this period. Local businesses, while not as affected by the tourist off season, are currently suffering the consequences of mega store competition and thin wallets.

One of the strengths of our community is the setting we live in. It is the reason most given for moving here but the setting is one of the least used reasons for visiting here. The time has come for a paradigm shift in thinking. The old ways are not working well and may never work well again. A world renowned wildlife viewing site, acting as the flagship of winter tourism opportunities in the Cowichan Valley, is a new way to encourage increased visits and increased economic activity in the Valley. Once completed, the Winter Tourism Initiative Strategy and the SCEWMA with its related facilities, will also be of benefit to:

TOURISM:

- * Creation of world renowned wildlife viewing opportunities
- * More people visiting the area and staying longer
- * Coordinated tourism promotion strategy
- * Creation of an annual Wildlife Festival
- * Opportunities for seasonal attractions to open year round

EMPLOYMENT:

- * Creation of part time and full time employment
- * Creation of small business opportunities
- * Creation of job training programs

AGRICULTURE:

- * Reduction of waterfowl crop predation
- * Improved communication between farmers and community
- * Restoration of fields through flooding issue resolution
- * Establishment of research programs for wetlands farming and waterfowl luring

ENVIRONMENT:

- * Improved water quality
- * Resolution of existing land use issues and flooding issue
- * Creation and implementation of Waterfowl Management Plan
- * Creation of Wildlife Management Area and buffer zones
- * Opportunities for completing Greenways
- * Enhancement of salmon and wildlife habitat
- * Opportunities for education and public awareness

LAND USE ISSUE RESOLUTION:

- * Resolution of Cowichan hunting access issues
- * Resolution of Timbercrest/York Road issue
- * Resolution of Somenos basin annual flooding
- * Resolution of Cowichan Estuary Management Plan issue

BUSINESS:

- * Coordinated use of the Winter Wildlife Viewing promotion theme
- * Creation of Winter Tourism Strategy Plan
- * Increased and longer lasting tourist visits
- * Opportunities for small business creation
- * Increased urban core shopping
- * Creation of annual wildlife festival
- * Opportunities to host environment/wildlife conferences

EDUCATION:

- * Creation of on-site environmental and cultural studies and programs
- * Opportunities for teaching at Nature Centers
- * Creation of on-site training programs
- * Opportunities for environment and biodiversity education

RESEARCH:

- * Opportunities for on-going research

COMMUNITY PLANNING:

- * Resolution of outstanding land issues
- * Supports long term planning
- * Promotes community involvement in planning processes

COMMUNITY

- * Creation of year round hiking opportunities
- * Improved community pride and involvement
- * Opportunities for cultural mixing
- * Sets an example for other communities
- * Increased property values
- * Fosters community values
- * Supports community control of environment
- * Opportunities for year round arts, music and cultural activities
- * Promotes community partnerships