

How Big Brother came to the Gulf Islands

The Islands Trust has turned the region into a museum exhibit for wrong-headed conservation

BY ELIZABETH NICKSON, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JULY 6, 2010

Last Sunday, suitably enough July 4th, the 13 communities of the Gulf Islands threw Salt Spring Coffee into Ganges Harbour and kicked off a rebellion.

With the Islands Trust's refusal of the coffee company's development application, the iron-fisted conservation government now finds itself in more trouble with its citizens than ever contemplated in those dewy days 35 years ago when the trust was struck to preserve and protect the Gulf Islands.

Former Vancouver mayor Senator Larry Campbell spoke, and 40 tractors, backhoes, septic and dump trucks drove to the protest site, some of the big-machine operators were nude.

To many on the Gulf Islands, the trust has become Big Brother, impenetrable, managed by a small closed elite, and destructive not only to once vivid, diverse and open communities, but arguably to the land itself.

The Gulf Islands have long been known as an argument surrounded by water. The end of the hippie trail, the repository of the anarchic, ridiculous and strange, to the casual observer people move here, shed their adult selves and decide to express their inner artist. All of which might lead that observer to divine that the islands are essentially ungovernable.

In point of fact, there is no government. Dozens of volunteer committees struggle with parks, water, library, recycling, recreation, fire, and every other issue that might come up before a municipal government. Area CRD directors parcel out money and try to keep up. And while the trust describes itself as a "unique form of local government," its mandate is solely to manage land use. Mismanage might be a more precise word.

Property prices are among the highest in the country, despite 90 per cent of the land lying fallow and neglected. Tinder builds up in those abandoned forests, and invasive species predate once fertile fields. Hundreds of Gulf Islanders live in forest shacks, boats, trailers and tents, while the trust endlessly studies plans for affordable housing.

Applications for business expansion can take a decade to process through the trust and requirements are so stringent that applicants shell out hundreds of thousands of dollars only to be turned down, as the coffee company was, based on a "feeling."

As business owners wait, jobs melt away, and young people, shorn of opportunity, leave. On many of the islands, there are so few students that schools are starting to close. And the islands are aging rapidly; on Hornby, the median age is 60.

The trust is the great-granddaddy of a new kind of government, which has over-laid strict environmental management on a new kind of jurisdiction -- the conservation community. Struck in 1974, the trust has been imitated all over the world: The California Coastal Commission and the Cape Cod Commission, for example, are modelled, in part, upon the trust.

Essentially undemocratic, each island, whether 10,000 or 450 strong, has only two trustees, with any tie vote broken by an off-island trustee who comes in for the monthly meetings. Trust council can, with a single vote, obviate any decision approved by local trustees.

On Galiano, 100 forest-lot owners have been waiting since 1991 for permission to build just one house on plots that range from eight hectares to 43 hectares. Nowhere else in Canada must a property owner pay residential taxes on a property he cannot live on, and nowhere else in B.C. is a forest-lot owner not permitted a residence. On Denman, trustees turned down a 405-hectare park, bigger than Stanley Park, offered in return for a total of 100 houses on the 486 remaining hectares. Denman's density is one resident for every 10 hectares, hardly "overdeveloped." Dozens of similar decisions have worn away trust credibility and respect.

All over the world conservation communities are failing. An imposed web of ecosystem management regulation practically ensures a poor and aging population.

New York State's 2.4-million-hectare Adirondack National Park, for example: 59 per cent of the park is private but subject to the earliest form of environmental regulation. The 30-year results were just tabulated: the population is aging, a school closes every 18 months, private business has fled, there is no Internet or cellphone coverage, young people have left, property tax revenues crashed, welfare and social service requirements have spiked and only massive government subsidy keeps the park going. Much of it is now closed off with little money left for maintenance.

Not one resident of the Gulf Islands wants over-development. We cherish our small intimate rural communities and treasure the little corner of the natural world we have been given to tend. Many of us build green houses, covenant our lands, and build salmon enhancement.

But without sensible reform, another 10 years of trust mis-management will turn the islands into museum exhibits for authoritarian and wrong-headed conservation.

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