

Trustee Notebook

By Laura Busheikin

One thing I love about Denman is the ample opportunity for pure appreciative absorption in the beauty of nature. Some personal examples: the lively song of Beadnell Creek in the Spring, serenading me on my morning walk; the wide eyes of my daughter, releasing salmon fry into Danes Creek as the culmination of a classroom project; a pair of swans moving through the mist on Morrison Marsh, like emissaries from a magical realm. I'll bet you have your own list.

As we drink in these moments, we are probably not thinking about the Provincial Riparian Areas Regulation.

But these sorts of scenes are what the BC Riparian Areas Regulation (RAR) is designed to protect. And if your property is within the vicinity of any riparian area, these regulations apply to you.

You may have heard of the RAR before, and you will hear of it again. For now, I'll look at two questions: "Why?" and "Where is the Denman Island Local Trust Committee (DLTC) at with RAR?"

The first big "why" is this — since these are provincial regulations, why are we reading about them in the "Trustee Notebook" which is about our local government?

The answer is that when the provincial government passed the RAR, they also passed legislation requiring local governments all over BC to implement it. This is not something we can opt out of.

Since the Islands Trust has a strong mandate for environmental protection, in theory this assignment is welcome. In practice...well, it's a bit more complicated, as the RAR has created extra work — such as bylaw amendments, mapping and administration. While I do have mixed feelings about the RAR, I unambiguously support its intent. And I'm pleased that it provides us with impetus to improve our current mechanism for protection riparian areas, Development Permit Area (DPA) 4: Streams, Lakes and Wetlands. This is being revised to be more accurate, relevant and understandable. Also, new mapping — a crucial element — has been created for one watershed (Morrison Marsh) and will be in place for four others.

What I like best about the RAR is how it shines a light on the reasons we need to protect riparian areas. This is the second "why" I'll attempt to answer. I'm no expert, so what I present here should be just about right for the lay person to understand.

First, a definition: riparian areas are the areas bordering streams, lakes and wetlands that link water to land.



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If you've spent any time at all in a riparian area, you've noticed they are teeming with life. In fact, scientists tell us they boast an exceptionally high number of species for the area they occupy. This is because they provide the essentials of life — water, cover and food — all in one place.

Those fallen logs, dense vegetation, and snags alongside watercourses that can make manoeuvring difficult for humans? They provide ideal hideouts and homes for birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and fish. Those insects that drive us crazy? A life-saving feast for all these critters.

Riparian areas are key fish habitat, and also support river otters, mink, muskrat, the endangered water shrew, a host of waterbirds, frogs, salamanders, snakes and more. Land mammals such as deer depend on them as wildlife corridors. For us humans, they have multiple practical values as well as aesthetic and spiritual value.

Every element in a riparian area supports the other elements. The trees and shrubs provide shade, keeping the water cool enough to support life, and they also hold the bank in place. Logs, branches and leaves falling into the water provide food and hiding places. Soil and vegetation act as filters, preventing excess nutrients, sediments and toxic material from reaching the water.

Any disturbance to the area can have multiple and long reaching impacts. That is why we need to tread carefully in and around riparian areas, and why we have the RAR, which is primarily concerned with protecting fish habitat.

What this means for landowners and how that will be managed by the DLTC is material for another article. The DLTC has a time-line for the work it needs to do to in order to efficiently fulfill its RAR-related duties: a draft bylaw amendment updating DPA4 is currently being reviewed by the Advisory Planning Commission; a draft updated development approval information bylaw is planned for the fall; mapping is scheduled for summer 2013 (dependent on Trust Council budget decisions), and public consultation (articles, a public hearing) is planned for fall, 2013.

In the meantime, the RAR is already in effect. So if your property is in a watershed area, you need to meet RAR requirements before building anything or in any way disturbing the area (for instance, clearing). To find out more, contact Islands Trust staff.