

Trustee Notebook

By Laura Busheikin

The World Watches Baynes Sound

The body of water now known as Baynes Sound pretty much defines Denman Island. It is a watery barrier that we often need to cross (to get to school, work, friends, medical care, etc), and that we rely on to define us – it is what makes us an island.

But there's much more to its significance than that, which is why 40 people, including scientists, shellfish farmers and community organizers, some from as far away as Europe, gathered for a conference at Simon Fraser University entitled "Management of Sensitive Marine Ecosystems: Lessons from Case Studies to Identify Solutions for Baynes Sound," in early April. I had the pleasure of attending this event. Here's some of what I learned:

What Makes Baynes Sound unique and important?

Baynes Sound.... is a sea within a sea, with its own circulatory pattern. Protected along its eastern boundary by Denman Island and by Comox to the north, where the estuary exerts multiple influences, it is geographically isolated from the Salish Sea (Strait of Georgia).

.... meets all three criteria to be named one of 32 proposed Ecologically and Biologically Significant Areas (EBSAs) in BC by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

...has a huge diversity of bi-valves – 27 separate species have been identified here.

... is one of 100 Important Bird Areas (IBA) in Canada – a formal designation which signifies a "place of international significance for the conservation of birds and diversity."

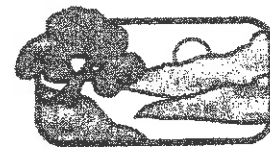
.... along with Lambert Channel on Denman's east side, is the single most important herring spawning area on the BC coast.

....provides important habitat for forage fish such as the Pacific Sand Lance, dubbed by some as the "most important fish in the North East Pacific." Much of Denman Island foreshore is suitable spawning habitat for these creatures, which are a cornerstone of the food web.

...is much valued by humans who live in the area, and as a tourist destination.

...hosts 50% of BC's shellfish aquaculture industry.

...has deep cultural, historical and economic significance to First Nations (although there was no presentation on this topic at the conference, it was part of the conversation).



Islands Trust

What are the main threats to the integrity of Baynes Sound?

ocean acidification: This is considered an "overarching threat," say conference organizers.

shellfish aquaculture impacts: Shelley McKeachie, co-chair of the Association for Denman Island Marine Stewards, spoke on this issue, pointing out that while a certain level of shellfish aquaculture in Baynes Sound is appropriate, the cumulative impacts resulting from both the intensity and some harmful industry practices suggest that this level has been exceeded.

seaweed harvesting: Recent industrial seaweed harvesting in the Deep Bay area has raised many environmental concerns.

ocean pollution: sewage run-off from failing septics, stormwater run-off, microplastics, oil spills (especially given the prospect of increased tanker traffic in the Salish Sea) and more

the proposed Raven Coal Mine (no presenter on this, but it was part of the discussion)

The conference included two shellfish aquaculture industry representatives, which allowed multiple points of view to be aired. For instance, a local shellfish farmer explained that driving on the beach was a historical use dating back to 1925 and was not unreasonable, and that according to statistics he had from DFO, only 17% of Baynes Sound shellfish farms are covered by predator netting. The resulting debate was civil and constructive. A number of presenters talked about approaches to managing sensitive marine areas elsewhere in the world, with examples from Japan, the Wadden Sea in Northern Europe, Quebec's Magdalen Islands, Narragansett Bay in Maine, and Washington State. People seemed particularly inspired by the work done in the Magdalen Islands, where a committee of 14 members representing many different interests and sectors work together, in a collaborative, consensus-based process, to create management plans for the region that respect the ecosystems while balancing competing interests and working through conflicts constructively.

The conference ended with discussion of how something like this might be created for Baynes Sound. Many participants expressed interest in taking part (me included!). I am curious to see what might come next!