

Islands Trust – What’s the Point?

“Just what *is* the point of the Islands Trust?” I hear that question quite a bit, and I’ve been part of some lively debates as a result. Why does this group of islands in the Salish Sea have its own unique type of local government, with a special mandate to “preserve and protect the Trust Area and its unique amenities and environment for the benefit of the residents of the Trust Area and of British Columbia?”

We can find at least part of the answer in the story of how the Trust was formed. Back in the 1960s, these islands were sparsely populated and tranquil. The B.C. economy was booming and the islands, it appeared, were being discovered by the larger world. A University of British Columbia study predicted rapid, intensive private development. On some islands this was already happening, with forests being razed to create subdivisions. For instance, on Pender Island, 600 acres were carved up into 1,200 small lots – creating the largest sub-division in Canada – with down payments as low as \$500.

Proximity to Vancouver and Victoria was creating a real estate ripple effect, with no oversight or regulation in place to limit and shape growth. And there were other threats: the area’s increasing popularity as a vacation and recreation destination brought potential for environmental degradation and out-of-scale tourism-related development; and also the activities and infrastructure of our global industrialized economy, such as clear-cut logging, mining, and marine shipping, with all their attendant environmental impacts, surrounded the islands.

B.C. residents – not just islanders – organized to ask the government to protect the islands. This effort continued for over five years until, in 1974, the Provincial government passed legislation giving land use planning authority for 13 major, and over 450 smaller, islands to a new entity: the Islands Trust.

In short, the Trust was created because this region was deemed both special enough and threatened enough to call for an unusual type of protection.

What makes the Gulf Islands special? Here are some reasons, in no particular order:

- 1) **Natural beauty:** So many people have fallen in love with the islands for their stunning mix of panoramic ocean views, lush fragrant rainforests, sheltered bays, secluded beaches and pastoral vistas, as well as the soaring eagles, playful seals, and other wildlife.
- 2) **Unique communities:** Our self-sufficient, creative and

highly-involved communities are a big attraction for artists, innovators, ‘back-to-the-landers’, and others looking for alternatives to urban mainstream life.

- 3) **Sensitive ecosystems and rare species:** This remarkable area holds an unusually high number of terrestrial and marine sensitive ecosystems, and is home to an exceptional variety of species of birds, fish, intertidal life, wildlife and plants, including more than 100 species-at-risk.
- 4) **The forest:** The Trust Area holds ¼ of all of B.C.’s Coastal Douglas-fir biogeoclimatic zone. This type of forest is exceedingly rare (comprising only 1 per cent of B.C.’s land base) and supports a collection of plants and animals unique to the province, including arbutus woodlands and Garry oak meadows.
- 5) **The marine environment:** The Trust Area includes both the Salish Sea and Howe Sound, both areas of incredible marine diversity, supporting over 3,000 species of marine life, including all seven species of Pacific salmon, not to mention orcas, grey and humpback whales, porpoises and dolphins, herring, surf smelt, kelp forests, eel grass beds, glass sponge reefs and much more.
- 6) **First Nations presence:** Before European contact, dating back as far as 14,000 years ago, the Salish Sea region was one of the most populated places in North America. Multiple nations lived, traded, sustainably harvested the land and ocean, and maintained complex and diverse economic and political structures. Today, over 37 First Nations have interests in the land and waters of the Trust Area, and their culture, traditional knowledge, and governance of the land are increasingly recognized as defining characteristics of island life.

Protecting all the beauty and value of the islands in the face of these continued pressures is no easy task, and it would be unrealistic to imagine that the Islands Trust, with its limited tools and resources, can meet all the “preserve and protect” goals of islanders and island-lovers. Just what it *can* do, and how it does that, will be the subject of a future article.

For more info about the Trust and its history, check out this 13-minute film from the Gulf Islands Alliance: <http://www.gulfislandsalliance.ca/news/>