

Islands Trust Asks for Caution on Geoduck

Aquaculture: the Backstory

You may have seen the announcement in the local media: “Islands Trust Council Chair Writes to Request Geoduck Aquaculture Impact Study.” This deceptively-simple-sounding action – writing a letter – is actually a carefully considered strategy that reflects months of discussion and many hours of research and thought.

Here’s some of the background and context of the letter:

Unless you’re had your head buried in the sand, you’ll be aware that there’s lots of concern on Denman Island about potential geoduck aquaculture on our shoreline. Global demand, predominantly from China, for this giant clam is strong and growing, and Denman’s western shore is a prime location for shellfish aquaculture. However, reports from other parts of the world, notably Washington state, suggest that geoduck aquaculture can be devastating to the marine environment.

The Denman Island Local Trust Committee, our land use planning authority, doesn’t have the regulatory power to simply say, “No geoduck farming.” It’s not that we are powerless – through zoning, we can and do regulate where shellfish aquaculture can, and can’t, be located – but we cannot specify the type of aquaculture that is practiced.

Much of Denman’s shoreline is zoned W1 – Water Conservation, which means no aquaculture of any kind can take place there (unless the LTC gives permission via rezoning). But in the areas currently zoned W3 – Aquaculture (approximately 50% of Denman’s shoreline), the Local Trust Committee has no say over how shellfish farming is practiced. Once someone has an aquaculture license in this zone, they can add new species, change their technology, and ramp up their intensity without asking the LTC. This complicated state of affairs holds true throughout the Trust Area and, in fact, for all local governments in B.C.

No one seems to know just how widespread Geoduck farming might become here, nor how grave the impacts really would be.

Faced with this uncertainty, Trust Council (the regional board consisting of 26 elected trustees representing all the Trust islands) tasked senior staff with investigating potential impacts of Geoduck aquaculture in the Trust Area, and as appropriate, initiating advocacy.

Trust staff launched into research, reviewing the latest scientific peer-reviewed and government-sponsored studies, and having conversations and meetings with people from the Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, the B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resources Operations and Rural Development, the Vancouver Aquarium, geoduck industry representatives, and members of the Association of Denman Island Marine Stewards.

The resulting report (available soon on the Islands Trust website on the Advocacy – Marine Environment page or the December Trust Council package pp.) is a great resource for anyone wanting to understand this topic. It concludes that “DFO has insufficiently considered ecosystem and cumulative impacts” of Geoduck farming, and that further study is warranted.

The report describes and documents seven potential harmful impacts:

1. Damage to habitat vital to species, including herring
2. Impacts to species (birds, salmon, and others) due to reduced foraging
3. Microplastic contamination
4. Human health
5. Chemical contamination
6. Garbage
7. Ocean acidification

Based on this report, **Trust Council voted to ask DFO for “an ecosystem-based study of potential and cumulative impacts of the Integrated Geoduck Management Framework 2017 on the health of the Salish Sea.”**

The resulting letter points out that the 2007 B.C. Special Committee on Sustainable Aquaculture recommended that: “No new species are to be approved for commercial aquaculture without a consensus of independent peer-reviewed science demonstrating that the potential impact on the marine environment is minimal,” and notes that this scientific consensus does not yet exist.

This letter was cc-ed to the **34 First Nations who have asserted rights and title in the Islands Trust Area**, pointing out that a number of these nations have an interest in the wild geoduck fishery and/or in geoduck aquaculture, and that some may expect to see their Traditional Ecological Knowledge incorporated into the study being requested.

Also, **Trust Council will be looking for allies** at the Association of Vancouver Island Coastal Communities Annual Convention this April, where it will ask this alliance of coastal municipal governments to unite their voices in support of the request to DFO.

As well, Trust Council, in partnership with the World Wildlife Foundation, is organizing a **forum on the health of Baynes Sound and Lambert Channel** this Spring, with the goal of bringing all the players together for some much-needed conversation, information-sharing, and strategizing. Geoducks will most certainly be a lively topic!