

Shuswap Watershed Conference Summary

By Warren Bell

"We destroy what we don't know." With those ringing words, Phil McIntyre-Paul, executive director of the Shuswap Trail Alliance, encapsulated the history of the Shuswap Lake watershed since the arrival of Europeans in this area 150 years ago.

McIntyre-Paul spoke halfway through the April 23rd Shuswap Watershed Conference, the culmination of "Celebrate the Shuswap Week", five days of varied events designed to highlight the relationship between humans and the ecosystem that surrounds one of the largest lakes in the interior of BC. As he enjoined participants to begin taking better care of the watershed, he also enjoined them to pause and remember that this was the territory of the Secwepemc, an aboriginal people occupying the area for 10,000 years.

This latter fact was abundantly obvious from the beginning of the conference, when the opening speaker, Chief Wayne Christian, current chairman of the Shuswap Nation Tribal Council, spoke eloquently of the ancient presence of the First Nations, affirming that "our connection to the land is our life".

Conference facilitator Bruce Weicker, principal of the Sullivan Campus of Salmon Arm Senior Secondary, had opened the conference by saying how much there was to celebrate about the Shuswap Lake Watershed. Throughout the afternoon, speaker after speaker alternated between this theme of celebration and a current of deep concern over the already extensive degradation throughout the watershed.

Salmon Arm Mayor Marty Bootsma pleaded for more provincial funding to implement the Shuswap Lake Integrated Planning Process plan, a recent and critical development that brings together all sectors to address watershed concerns.

Teacher Kim Fulton introduced student essay contest winners, all of

whom spoke of threats to water quality, and try to offer practical ways to protect it.

But keynote speaker Craig Orr advanced the strongest warning about the perilous state of the watershed's future, using the example of the stark decline of Pacific Coast wild salmon. Using the concept of an ecological "threshold", he made it clear that system collapse could be an irreversible event. Putting it in simple terms, he stated flatly: "Pass the threshold, pay the price."

No listeners failed to "get" this message.

Accompanying Craig Orr, First Nations biologist Michelle Walsh described a fascinating experiment that revealed clearly the critical role of cool water under the surface of the land in preserving salmon stocks. Her work demonstrated a peculiar irony: here was an aboriginal scientist using Western methodologies to explore events and processes in the ecosystem, while at the same time her own cultural heritage, largely ignored by Western science, is steeped in detailed knowledge and insights about this same ecosystem.

The conference closed with a panel presentation featuring representatives from the Ministry of the Environment (MOE), the Columbia Shuswap Regional District, the Ministry of Forests and Range, the respected non-profit organization Ducks Unlimited Canada, and the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO).

Each panellist outlined the activities and initiatives of his or her ministry or organization relative to the Shuswap Lake watershed, but it was clear, reading between the lines, that protection and restoration of the watershed is far from complete.

For example, Carol Danyluk, representing the MOE, was clearly uncomfortable when offering a lengthy and convoluted rationalization for the continuing release of "gray water" into the lake.

On the other hand, Bruce Runciman, habitat management biologist for the DFO, was able to step outside his government role, and candidly share that professional science could sometimes identify needs not addressed by ponderous regulatory change, thus creating sometimes difficult tensions. He also pointed out how both corporations and individual citizens had so far failed to live up to their responsibilities to the watershed ecosystem, adding that preserving, protecting and restoring the watershed required everyone to do their part, and to do it much better.

The overall message of the conference was clear. Everyone living around Shuswap Lake bears responsibility for the watershed. No one is exempt. No government, no individual and especially no commercial entity has the right to deface or degrade this vast and precious -- and highly threatened -- ecosystem.

As conference coordinator Jim Cooperman, president of the Shuswap Environment Action Society, pointed out in his remarks early in the conference, creating a poster portraying the image of the watershed had been the starting point. Now, however, matters had moved far beyond that initial project. Now it was obvious that we must develop an entirely new and more constructive relationship with the water and the land, and with the plants and animals living in it. *Our* future depends on doing so.

Following the conference, as participants sat down for a delicious meal composed of locally-grown and locally-prepared food, it seemed very possible, from the lively discussions taking place, that a new relationship was about to be born.

To learn more about the Shuswap watershed, visit www.shuswapwatershed.ca.