

Securing a sustainable future for the Shuswap River

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

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The Regional District of the North Okanagan (RDNO) has long been a leader for environmental protection. When Okanagan Lake was threatened by pollution over 40 years ago, the regional district joined with other regional districts to form the Okanagan Basin Water Board which helped secure funding to clean up the region's sewage treatment systems. When development threatened Sugar Lake and the Shuswap River, RDNO worked quickly to prevent the development from dumping its sewage effluent into the lake.

Now, with concerns mounting yearly over the Shuswap River, the regional district has embarked on an ambitious planning process to achieve long-term sustainability for the entire watershed. With an investment of over \$250,000 towards the process, the goal is to involve all relevant stakeholders in the development of a plan that will guide decision making by all public agencies and the community. Rather than compete with the Shuswap Watershed's other project, Shuswap Lake Integrated Planning Process (SLIPP), the goal is to collaborate and share information.

The Shuswap River planning process kicked off on December 2nd with a workshop in Enderby that was attended by local environmentalists and community leaders; federal, provincial and regional district government staff; and most of the region's local politicians. I participated in the workshop as one of the regional environmentalists and was impressed with the commitment of the local politicians who worked side by side with us on the assigned tasks.

The goal for the workshop was to create a long term vision for the Shuswap River watershed and determine the issues that need to be addressed by the sustainability plan. The next stage of this first phase will be to gather data in order to develop a baseline that shows the current condition of the watershed. Rather than duplicate the work of SLIPP, the plan is to join forces for the water quality monitoring and some funding will even flow from RDNO Area F, as a portion of Mara Lake is within this area.

At the workshop, after we completed the visioning process, large maps of the watershed were placed at each table, where participants rolled up their sleeves and went to work identifying the problems that plague the river. Some of the top concerns include the erosion caused by intensive recreation, the need to protect water quality, foreshore development on Sugar and Mabel Lakes, the need to identify and protect spawning habitat, off-road recreational vehicle use, the need to protect recreational areas, water quantity, and the problems caused by the Wilsey Dam, which blocks passage by salmon to the upper spawning beds.

As well, a number of specific problems were identified, including an old garbage dump that could be leaching toxins into the river and the loss of riparian vegetation along the

river that results in continuous erosion of the river banks, particularly where the hydro-line crosses the river. Concerns were also expressed about the sewage treatment for Lumby and for Silver Star Mountain that may be leaching into the watershed. Another major concern is the agricultural run-off from manure spreading on fields near the river, which was likely one of the causes of this year's algae bloom in Mara Lake.

The next phase of the planning process will be the actual development of the plan which will include establishing the desired future condition for the watershed and determining how best to achieve this condition with both short-term and long-term objectives and strategies. To do this, it will be necessary to identify all the existing policies that currently direct management and then determine where there are gaps that need to be filled.

The final phase of the process will include implementing all the recommendations by first prioritizing the actions and seeking the necessary funding to insure these actions take place. As well, the implementation of the plan will be monitored and reviewed, so that if needed, changes can occur to ensure the plan succeeds. Of course, the major complicating factor is that regional districts do not have jurisdiction over many of the issues impacting the watershed. So for the plan to be successful, provincial and federal government agencies will have to cooperate with all phases of the process, especially the implementation phase.

Ideally, within a few years, the completed Shuswap River Watershed Sustainability Plan will merge with the ongoing SLIPP process. As a result, all the Shuswap watershed regional districts will see the value of working together with other levels of government and from these efforts a permanent watershed board will emerge to ensure we will have sustainability throughout our entire region.