

2010 – Year of the watershed

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

December 31, 2010

It was an extraordinary year for the Shuswap region, with news stories that made it into the national and even international media and activities that improved awareness of the watershed and its many values. The full extent of the 1.6 million hectare Shuswap watershed was finally delineated, when the first ever map was published as a poster in late February. Then in April, a week long series of events was held to celebrate the Shuswap, including hikes, tours, concerts, contests and a conference devoted to the watershed.

The first ever Song for the Shuswap songwriting competition successfully captured the imagination of both musicians and appreciative audiences at two Salmar Theatre concerts. As a result of the interest generated by these Shuswap Songs, a CD was produced that celebrates the Shuswap with song. And now these CDs are available in stores and coffee shops throughout our region.

After all the publicity surrounding the Shuswap poster release and celebration events, more local residents understand what a watershed is and what our watershed actually looks like. And then in June, the Shuswap's second major algae bloom spread from Mara Lake into Shuswap Lake. While B.C. government staff tried to dismiss concerns about the bloom and was unable to determine what caused it, those living nearby had to endure the awful stench it produced.

In July, Shuswap Lake became the scene for a national news story after a tragic boating accident following a Canada Day fireworks display, when a speedboat ended up inside a houseboat killing one and injuring others. This accident raised concerns about boating safety and the need for better compliance and enforcement. As well, the accident reinforced the need for a study of lake-based recreation as proposed by the Shuswap Lake Integrated Planning Process (SLIPP), which could eventually result in setting limits for activities that have seen continuous growth.

With a now better-informed public, the implementation of the SLIPP plan for the watershed became a controversial issue for local politicians. Despite a public survey that showed close to unanimous support for allowing a minimal tax increase to fund partial implementation of the plan, many local politicians still opposed providing any funds. Thankfully, two CSRD directors, Ted Bacigalupo and Denis Delisle, showed leadership and pledged their carbon-tax income to fund the project. And as a result, rural Sicamous, the City of Salmon Arm, Sicamous and the Regional District of the North Okanagan are helping with funding.

The SLIPP high tech water quality-monitoring project is now set to begin in March, 2011. Plans include opportunities for the public advisory committee to provide input to the three-year project. By testing for the chemical tracers found in streams and bays, the

goal will be to determine the source of the excess nutrients causing the increased growth of algae in parts of the lake.

The furor over plans to build a massive shopping centre in the Salmon River floodplain on the outskirts of Salmon Arm also helped raise more awareness of the Shuswap environment and improve cooperation with local first nations. Although approval was provided by the city council, the issue is far from over. Another controversial development near the mouth of the Adams River that continues to face nearly unanimous opposition is now close to bankruptcy, along with the developer's other projects. And due to the economic downturn, many other Shuswap Lake developments are at risk.

After last year's disastrous salmon runs on the Fraser River which is now the focus of a judicial inquiry, there was a great deal of attention focused on this year's runs. And then to most everyone's surprise, this season's Fraser River massive returns became one of this province's biggest news stories of the year.

First, the early returns on Scotch Creek and the Seymour and Eagle Rivers broke all records. Then the massive return on the Adams River, the highest in 100 years, became an international news story. Along with the salmon came many thousands of visitors from all over the province, the country and the world, which also broke all records. And the Song for the Shuswap inspired another song contest dedicated to the salmon, with the winning song, Salmon Hymn, getting national media coverage.

As this remarkable year for the Shuswap is now finished, attention focuses on 2011. Will we finally get a real winter with a decent snowfall? Will we face floods, more fires, or more algae blooms? Whatever the future holds for the Shuswap, at some point in time the impacts of climate change are bound to create challenges for all of us.