

Background:

If you live in the False Creek district of Vancouver, you are accustomed to the urban landscape – paved streets, houses, businesses, industrial sites, and the ever-present sound of traffic. When it rains, water is carried to the sea in storm drains, out of sight, beneath the roads and buildings. A scant 150 years ago, this was a dense temperate rainforest with numerous creeks that emptied into the ocean through rich tidal flats. It was home to First Nations people who had lived in balance with the area's natural abundance for thousands of years.

Why were the forests cleared? What happened to the freshwater streams? It could be said that a different set of values came to the region by way of European settlers. The newcomers tended to see nature as inhospitable, something to be tamed. It took them only a few decades to extract, process, and sell most of the watershed's abundant natural resources.

The idea of "natural capital" – the value of nature as an essential part of our economy – had yet to become the significant issue that it is today. We now realize that our communities can, and must, be friendlier to the ecosystem of which they are a part. Green spaces in an urban environment help freshen the air and filter polluted rainwater before it enters the water table and the ocean. We have come to understand the importance of preserving this rich natural inheritance for future generations.

To picture what the land around False Creek looked like 150 years ago, one has only to visit the old-growth forest at Lighthouse Park, the clear waters of Lynn Creek, the historic native village site at Jericho Beach, or the vast tidal flats of Boundary Bay. Then imagine a creek choked with the squirming red bodies of hundreds of returning salmon. The watershed around False Creek was once dense with huge coniferous trees, some over 1,000-years-old. Berry bushes of all kinds flourished in the understory. Bears and cougars roamed the woods, elk and deer inhabited the grass pastures. In marshy areas near what are now Douglas Park and Trout Lake, beaver built dams.

There was a large bog called the Tea Swamp, south of 15th, between Main and Fraser. Creeks flowed from these marshy areas, swelled with countless other small streams, and wound their way down to the sea. Salmon and trout thrived. At high tide, the peninsula of present day downtown Vancouver was an island. The eastern end of False Creek was a large tidal flat, fanning out from a narrow isthmus of land what is now Main Street. The shallows supported abundant sea life such as oysters, clams, crabs, and mussels. The seawater was rich with oolichans, herring, perch, flounder, and rock cod. Sturgeon came into still side waters to enjoy their warmth and calm. Because of the rich intertidal life, thousands of migratory birds lived around the creek, and seals and orcas were often seen. The First Nations used to say, "When the tide is out, the table is set."

According to Major J.S. Matthews, Vancouver's chief archivist at the turn of the last century, False Creek was "...originally a narrow sylvan canal, where, at high tide, the waters lapped the lower branches of towering trees, which lined its shores, a placid marine corridor framed in forest green." False Creek's lost streams – where did they go?

Present Day

It is obvious that the extremely rich ecosystem that used to exist in the False Creek Watershed is lost to our community forever. Since the 1850's there was a gradual clearcutting of the oldgrowth forest and burial of all the streams. The First Nations residents were relocated very early on. The people who remember the subsequent environments which Europeans developed, moved to old age homes and passed on. Many old buildings which hearkened back to the past were torn down to make way for new, more efficient structures. Non native plants replaced the Native species. All the memories of "what used to be" disappeared along with all these older residents.

However, we can still remember this ecosystem – the plants, animals, and human residents that lived here before the Europeans arrived through our art, culture, gardens and more. There is a saying from the Jewish Talmud that "a person only

truly dies when their name is no longer mentioned". We do not want the memory of the old ecosystem in False Creek to disappear forever. Therefore we feel it is important to keep the memories alive in our present day.

What We Can Do

Short of tearing down buildings, dislocating people and replanting the forests, there are ways of bringing the memory of these lost ecosystems back into our community. In place of the lost natural resources, we have acquired many creative and industrious human resources and the potential to tap these is infinite.

We can "bring back" the memory of lost ecosystems and human history through:

Gardens:

Replanting native gardens, on private property and Parks, with accompanying interpretive signs.

Putting back some larger trees – cedars, Douglas firs, into large park areas.

Collecting plant names from the First Nations and adding these to interpretive signs.

Buildings

Encouraging buildings in the area to incorporate some of the memory of this lost ecosystem into the new structure. A plaque would be a small gesture, a water feature or artwork in a courtyard would be a larger statement. Native gardens could be added or emphasized, historical names could be included.

Water:

Bringing water back up to the surface where a lost stream once flowed.

Installing water features outside or inside buildings, in parks, and public places to remember lost streams.

Community Art

Creating community art projects such as sculptures, fences, mosaics, banners, stepping stones, plaques, walls of art to commemorate the history.

Creating theatre works that remember the history.

Inviting the First Nations to return for ceremonies in the neighbourhood.

Street and Building names

Naming street names, parks, green spaces, schools, community centres for the lost creatures of the forest or the First Nations groups who lived there. (eg. Chum, Chinook, Coho, Sockeye, Sturgeon, Orca, Sculpin, Kingfisher, Eagle, Frog, etc.) There are many First Nations and Chinook possibilities.

Collecting stories of the older residents and placing their stories in the neighbourhood to help bring them alive. Encourage community and arts groups to use these stories in their dance, theatre, art projects. See the "Our Community Story" project from Renfrew Community Centre.

Adding signs and markers to explain what was once there.

Closing Comment

Sustainability is a very popular buzzword these days. We have the desire as a species to make our lives more sustainable in theory. But many might wonder, why is this so important?

By bringing the physical and cultural presence of the lost natural world back into the "minds" of the community, the residents may be more inspired to care about a world where humans lived more in harmony with the natural world, and where history is not buried.

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