

The Collaborative Approach:

Pro-Active Efforts in Overcoming Land-Use Conflict to Repair the Squamish Spit and Estuary

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The Squamish Spit and Estuary, located in the traditional territory of the Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation) is a vital ecological and cultural area that has been altered greatly over the last 30 years and become subject to many conflicting land uses. Estuaries are known to be highly productive environments, with biodiverse ecosystems that thrive in the unique mixing of salt and freshwater.¹ The Squamish Estuary upholds this standard of ecological abundance, while also having a deep-rooted cultural importance for the Squamish Nation members of whom have resided here for many generations.² Over the past 30 years, the estuary and surrounding district of Squamish have been subject to industrial and residential development which has greatly altered the land use and ecology in this area.³ As Squamish has grown and developed, it has also become a hotspot for many outdoor enthusiasts due to its ideal location in proximity to the ocean, mountains and rivers. The Squamish Estuary has become a popular recreational area, locally referred to as “The Spit,” due to the long, man-made berm leftover from a coal mining project which is now internationally recognized as a prime take-off location for wind-sport enthusiasts.⁴ Through years of back-and-forth planning efforts, campaigns and petitions, it has become evident that the damaged ecology of the spit can only be restored through a collaborative approach that acknowledges the differing interests between the Indigenous community, local organizations, and businesses. To achieve a sustainable future for the Squamish Spit and Estuary, it is crucial to find a balance between conflicting economic, environmental, and recreational land uses.

¹ Squamish River Watershed Society (SRWS). “About the Estuary,” n.d. <https://www.squamishwatershed.com/about-the-estuary.html#/>.

² Edith B, Toby. “Squamish Estuary,” Accessed April 23, 2023. <https://oceanwatch.ca/howesound/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/12/OceanWatch-HoweSoundReport-SquamishEstuary.pdf>.

³ Squamish River Watershed Society (SRWS), “About the Estuary.”

⁴ Steph, Kwetásel’wet Wood. “Inside a 50-Year Journey to Reopen the ‘Lungs’ of the Squamish River,” The Narwhal, September 17, 2022. <https://thenarwhal.ca/squamish-nation-estuary-restoration>.

Repairing the Ecology

The Squamish Estuary is located at the confluence of the Howe Sound and the Squamish River which drains a multitude of basins in the Coast Mountains and an expansive portion of coastal rainforest.⁵ This estuary is integral to the ecology of the area as it provides important habitat to a diverse range of species including a variety of fish, migratory birds, and native mammal species.⁶ Moreover, this estuarine environment is more than just an abundant ecosystem, it also functions as a protective buffer, mitigating floods by absorbing and slowly releasing storm-water, as well as purifying water and filtering pollutants.⁷ The ecologically rich environment of the Squamish Estuary holds significant cultural importance for the peoples of the Squamish Nation, making life in this area possible for thousands of years.⁸ In the late 1970s, the Squamish Estuary was cut off from its freshwater source, the Squamish River, after being controversially dredged by BC Rail for a proposed coal port project without consultation from the Squamish Nation, a project that ultimately ended up being rejected by the federal government.⁹



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⁵ Lower Mainland Region Environmental Stewardship Division . “M Skwelwil’em Squamish Estuary Wildlife Management Area,” August 2007. <https://squamish.ca/assets/LDA/6471022cdf/Skwelwilem-WMA-Management-Plan-Final.pdf>.

⁶ Lower Mainland Region Environmental Stewardship Division, “Wildlife Management Area.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Toby, “Squamish Estuary.”

⁹ Kwetásel’wet Wood. “Reopen the ‘Lungs’ of the Squamish River.”

¹⁰ Squamish River Watershed Society (SRWS). “The Squamish Spit and Estuary” n.d. photo. https://thenarwhal.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/DJI_0312-2048x1152.jpg.

The Squamish Nation's exclusion from the land-use planning on this site is one of many examples of the ongoing exploitation of Indigenous land through pervading colonial systems, highlighting the need for more collaborative land-use planning approaches alongside the creation of Indigenous legal framework that supports these communities values and visions.¹¹ With this in mind, the Squamish Estuary Management Plan was signed in 1999, outlining a land exchange between the Province, BC Rail and the Squamish Nation as well as a management agreement between the Ministry of Environment and Squamish Nation, and functioning as a decision-making framework to guide land use efforts and ensure a sustainable future for the Squamish Estuary.¹² Evidently, the dredging of the estuary caused great damage to the ecology of the site and restoration efforts began in 1999 by joint efforts of the Squamish Nation, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DF0) and Squamish River Watershed Society (SRWS) with the Restore the Shore coalition, together, tackling the dredge pile and restoring 15 hectares of the estuary by 2015.¹³ In 2017 the Restore the Shore initiative received \$1.5 million in funding for the Central Estuary Restoration Project (CERP) from Coastal Restoration Fund, Pacific Salmon Foundation, Habitat Conservation Trust Fund and the Fish and Wildlife Compensation Program.¹⁴ The main goal of CERP is to remove a large portion of the spit restoring the estuary and removing the barrier that has prevented salmon from accessing the area.¹⁵

¹¹ Jennifer, Sankey. "USING INDIGENOUS LEGAL PROCESSES to STRENGTHEN INDIGENOUS JURISDICTION: SQUAMISH NATION LAND USE PLANNING and the SQUAMISH NATION ASSESSMENT of the WOODFIBRE LIQUEFIED NATURAL GAS PROJECTS," October 2021. <https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/24/1.0402462/4>.

¹² District of Squamish. "The Squamish Estuary Management Plan.," n.d. [KM_C454e-20160922101805 \(civicweb.net\)](https://www.squamish.ca/civicweb.net)

¹³ Restore the Shore. "History." Accessed April 23, 2023. <https://www.restoretheshore.ca/history>.

¹⁴ District of Squamish. "Collaborative Effort to Achieve Long-Term Balance of Environmental, Economic and Recreation Interests in the Squamish Estuary and Spit Is Underway," March 13, 2020. <https://squamish.ca/yourgovernment/news/collaborative-effort-to-achieve-long-term-balance-of-environmental-economic-and-recreation-interests-in-the-squamish-estuary-and-spit-is-underway/>.

¹⁵ District of Squamish, "Collaborative Effort to Achieve Long-Term Balance."



Repairing the Relationship

The removal of the Squamish Spit was a proposal that aligned with the shared interests of the environmental stakeholders but left economic and recreational stakeholders feeling overlooked. As an effort to communicate the economic significance of the Squamish Estuary, the Squamish River Watershed Society commissioned a Natural Capital Assets Assessment of the site.¹⁷ Whilst acknowledging the risks of assigning a monetary value to nature and the dismissal of unquantifiable assets, the assessment remained convincing for the broader public, valuing the Squamish Estuary between \$8.6 and \$12.6 million for its ecological services: disturbance regulation, habitat, recreation and tourism, education, clean water, Indigenous environmental values, fisheries, carbon sequestration, carbon storage, waste treatment, and nutrient cycling.¹⁸ However, the windsport community recognized the exclusion of windsport contribution to the Squamish District economy in the tourism assessment, which as of 2020 was estimated at an annual \$3.5 million with room to grow.¹⁹ Shortly after a petition was signed by nearly 3000 people fighting for further recognition of the Spit as a world-class launching point for

¹⁶ Squamish River Watershed Society (SRWS), “Squamish Estuary before Restore the Shore Coalition Restoration.” n.d. photo. https://thenarwhal.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/DJI_0312-2048x1152.jpg.

¹⁷ Hughes, Andrew. “Squamish Estuary and Its Ecological Goods and Services Worth Millions: Report.” Squamish Chief, September 10, 2021. <https://www.squamishchief.com/local-news/squamish-estuary-and-its-ecological-goods-and-services-worth-millions-report-4323707>.

¹⁸ Hughes, “Ecological Goods and Services Worth Millions: Report.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

windsports.²⁰ Simultaneously, city businesses like Squamish Terminals remained concerned about the possible changes in sedimentation from the proposed spit removal.²¹ The CERP committee quickly recognized that to move forward with the repairing of the Squamish Estuary, relationships between competing land interests must also be repaired and compromises must be made. On February 28,th 2020, the CERP partners held a stakeholders conference that included representation from the Squamish Windsports Society (SWS), the Province of BC, the Government of Canada, Squamish Terminals, Fortis BC, CN Rail, BC Rail Properties, The Nature Trust of BC, Squamish Streamkeepers, Squamish Paddling Club, Squamish Environment Society, and Squamish Trails Society.²² The goal was to have a pro-active approach to land-use proposals by directly communicating and finding a way to balance conflicting stakeholder interests.

The Collaborative Outcome

The Central Estuary Restoration Project finally broke ground with 300 metres of the spit being removed between January and April of 2022 and another 550 metres set to be removed in the coming October of 2023.²³ Modifications to the project proposal were agreed upon prior to removal with the ultimate decision to leave the tip of the Spit as an island launching point for windsport athletes.²⁴ The Squamish Windsport Society attempted to negotiate a vehicle access route to the point but settled on water access via a boat bought for the Society by its members, which can transport athletes to what is now known as “Spit Island.”²⁵ The wary Squamish Windsport Society stated they were ‘pleasantly surprised to see the Spit Island plan succeeding this past summer, exclaiming that it was easier to get to the island than expected and acknowledging that while their interests may not have always lined up with the Squamish Nation, they are understanding and support the most sustainable future for the Squamish Estuary.’²⁶ Additionally, concerns of local businesses surrounding sedimentation shifts from the Spit removal were addressed by the visible weir left in place to ensure that sedimentation and

²⁰ Kwetásel’wet Wood. “Reopen the ‘Lungs’ of the Squamish River.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² District of Squamish, “Collaborative Effort to Achieve Long-Term Balance.”

²³ Squamish River Watershed Society (SRWS). “Updates,” March 11, 2021.
<https://www.squamishwatershed.com/updates#/>.

²⁴ Kwetásel’wet Wood. “Reopen the ‘Lungs’ of the Squamish River.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

gravel bars will not migrate into the central estuary basin.²⁷ Furthermore, the proposed full 850 m opening will allow for the re-integration of salmon species into the ecosystem allowing access into the nutrient-rich waters of the central estuary, a main goal of the Central Estuary Restoration Project.²⁸

The values of collaboration which initiated restoration efforts with the signing of the Squamish Estuary Management Plan in 1999 were upheld into the final stages of the Restore the Shore initiatives, with the inclusion of all land-use stakeholders in the decision-making process. The interests of the Indigenous Community alongside environmental organizations, community members and recreational organizations and local businesses were balanced through direct communication, negotiation and the understanding of ecological value. The pro-active approach that was taken in repairing both the land and the relationships between those who use it, was integral to the successful planning of the Squamish Spit and Estuary restoration proposal. The collaborative efforts and values that were carried through this project can act as an example for other sites of conflict, as we move towards a more inclusive and unified future for land-use planning.



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²⁷ Squamish River Watershed Society (SRWS). “Updates,”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Explore Squamish, “Wind & Kite Surfing at Squamish Spit.” n.d. Photo. [Windsurfing & Kiteboarding | Tourism Squamish \(exploresquamish.com\)](https://www.exploresquamish.com)

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