

The Salmon River Floodplain

Summary

The Salmon River floodplain is an important historic area. The appendix documents some of this history including the portage route via the Salmon River and the Nikomekl that was the most important transportation route for the aboriginal people of the lower Fraser.

There is an important opportunity for a win-win situation in the floodplain. The Township is considering taxpayer funding to improve drainage in ditches and other waterways in the floodplain on private property off the main channel of the Salmon River. The opportunity is there for the Township to acquire, in return, a limited amount of land along the river for a conservation area and a trails network. This could be an important step in a wider goal of a coordinated parks and trails network in the Langley area.

Background: Trails and Heritage

With increased efforts recently to complete the Trans Canada Trail before the 2010 Olympics a trails network in the floodplain would be an important community asset as it would provide a side route for hikers on the Trans Canada Trail. There is also the potential for the Township to acquire some of the most flood prone lands (this has been suggested and is apparently being actively pursued) as a wetland park.

The floodplain trails network with associated parks could be a major step (there are also trails planned in the nearby Yorkson area which would connect with Walnut Grove) towards developing a coordinated parks and trails network in Langley to compliment the Trans Canada Trail and the Fort historic site. A longer term goal would be to recreate in some way the portage route (Tsalkwakyan) with its immense historical value going back long before the coming of Europeans to B.C. The area could become attractive for eco-tourism and heritage tourism with signage documenting the ecological, recreational and heritage values of the floodplain. Indeed the trails network might be a suitable project to initiate as part of the B.C. 150 year anniversary celebration.

We would recommend that Langley initiate an inventory of Township owned lands to determine which properties might be protected for inclusion in this coordinated parks and trails network. We hope that discussing the short term opportunity in the floodplain and the longer term opportunity for a heritage parks and trails network will generate discussion within the heritage committee and the Township which will enable these ideas to eventually be a reality.

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Appendix

Historical

The Salmon River has an important place in the history of British Columbia. John Cherrington, in his book "The Fraser Valley: A History" states that for the Sto:lo of the Fraser Valley "...the most important communication route to the outside world was the Salmon River. The aboriginals paddled down the Salmon, portaged over to the Nicomekl River, and then floated down to Mud Bay to greet their Nooksack cousins and engage in trade."

The river and portage were known as the Tsalkwakyan. The portage is said to have been approximately 8,000 yards over marshy areas near what is now Glover Road in the Milner area of Langley. This same route was used by the Songhee, Semiahmoo and the Saanich in yearly migrations in the other direction to share in the rich harvest of salmon. The village near the junction of the Salmon and the Fraser (or near present day Fort Langley) became a centre for trade and was one of the few permanent village sites in the Lower Fraser region. The local Kwantlen tribe became rich and powerful.

The Tsalkwakyan also plays a large part in the early history of the fur brigades. Simon Fraser is said to have stopped briefly at a large aboriginal village near Fort Langley (possibly on McMillan Island). Then in November, 1824, a party of 39 led by Chief Factor James McMillan made their way from Fort George on the Columbia, north to Mud Bay and then via the Nicomekl and the Tsalkwaykan to the salmon River floodplain and the Fraser. When McMillan returned in 1827 to establish a permanent base, he naturally returned to near the junction of the Salmon and the Fraser to establish Fort Langley (originally at Derby Reach then later moved to the present site).

As the name would suggest, the early settlers soon found the Salmon River and surrounding waterways an abundant source of salmon. By 1829 the fort had established a trade in salmon with the aboriginals and in the 1830's a thriving trade in fish curing was established, with salmon dried and packed in barrels (hardwood for the barrels was obtained across the Fraser from the area now known as the Stave River) for shipment to Hawaii. The area south of Fort Langley (Milner prairie) was developed for farming with the produce being floated down the Salmon River on barges.

Ecological

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Unfortunately, extensive fish harvesting eventually led to the extinction of the Salmon River's pink and chum salmon stocks. The Salmon River remains, however, the most productive stream for its size in the Lower Fraser Valley for coho and for cutthroat trout. Steelhead and at least 12 other fish species, including the rare and endangered Salish Sucker, make their home in the Salmon. Even the chum have made their way back into the river with counts as high as 800 per year in the last decade.

The Department of Fisheries has declared the Salmon an index river for coho thus preventing reintroduction of pink or stocking of coho or other species. Historically, the wild coho stocks of the Salmon River Watershed have shown much higher survival over their life cycle than stocks in other streams. Returning numbers, however, have dropped in recent years to 1,200 from highs of 8,000 to 10,000 in the 1980's. The lower Salmon River and associated Fort Langley floodplains have also been an important migratory wetland for wildfowl.

The Salmon River Watershed was selected by Howard Parish as early as 1980 for special study in regard to Salmonid Enhancement. He identified the Salmon as being one of the few remaining productive systems in the Lower Fraser Valley but as being on the "leading edge" of urban development and thus in danger of significant habitat degradation. The Watershed has been extensively studied by Westwater Research of UBC in regard to water quality and its effect on fish populations. In

addition, the Salmon River was selected by the Fraser Basin Management Project (a coordinated effort by many levels of government to promote sustainability) in 1993 as one of its six special demonstration projects with the development of a watershed Management plan completed a few years later.

Recreational

The floodplain portion of the Salmon River continues to be an important recreational area for bird watching, for fishing and for canoeing and boating. Larry Pynn of the Vancouver Sun floated down the Salmon River from Trinity Western University to the mouth of the river approximately 10 years ago and recommended this historic paddle as being one of the best in the Lower Mainland. He was especially impressed that the Salmon River has escaped major drainage projects and thus is one of the very few rivers in the Lower Mainland which retains its natural meanders and oxbows.

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