

Reprint **Island Tides**

Visit www.islandtides.com for more interesting articles on other BC, national & international topics

Reprint from Volume 27 Number 15

August 6, 2015

UVic at the Galiano Conservancy

Suzanne Fournier

Blistering hot summer days on a Level Four drought-stricken Gulf Island, with smoke and ash particles raining down from nearby forest fires, brought home the urgency of learning about ecology to fifteen university students who recently attended classes on Galiano.

The University of Victoria's Environmental Studies 441 class, taught by Professor Eric Higgs—a part-time north-end Galiano resident—was convened from July 3-11 this year at the Galiano Conservancy's unique 188-acre Learning Centre site. It was the third year for the ES 441 course, and the second year that the university-level class has been taught at the mid-island Learning Centre.

This summer, students enjoyed the benefit of an actual classroom instead of an outdoor canopy—a huge step up in convenience, thanks to the donated and now reconstructed classroom building. Students still had to camp, but could view powerpoint presentations and enjoy meals in the off-grid classroom, equipped this year with a kitchen and a chef. Esther-Ruth Teel's low-on-the-food-chain meals gained rave reviews.

Although the fifteen students enjoyed longboat rowing on the ocean and refreshing daily swims, the class took place in truly 'hothouse' conditions, noted Higgs, running from the early morning until late into the night, with guest lectures every evening after dinner. 'Field conditions were rigorous, with the smoke haze and heat, and temperatures that rose as high as 36°C on Monday,' noted Higgs.

The students' challenge was to conduct independent and collaborative research into a range of topics, including ecological restoration at the Learning Centre, once an active logging/sawmill site. Third-year UVic student Alexander Campbell devised a prescription for restoration of the site's beautiful cove area, where a fresh water seasonal stream meets the sea, and 'sentinel' rocks signal the entry to a sheltered beach.

Campbell acknowledged that the Coast Salish have lived in the area for at least 5,000 years. But he noted that the cove was heavily-impacted over the last 50 years, with a stream relocated by bulldozer, the slope eroded and the area invaded by alien plant species. The benefits of nearby human settlement include the planting of many mature nut and fruit trees. Restoration of

Crystal Creek's original pathway and removal of alien species would be among the first steps to take, said Campbell.

In all, there were eight specific projects that the students could choose to do alone or in a small group. Because the students came from a variety of disciplines, including history and political science as well as environmental studies, their on-island studies included documenting the history of the land, including a 'human legacy transect survey Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis,' evaluating interpretive trails and devising geocache adventure education games for children and youth. The students' intensive research, to be consolidated into final reports for UVic grading, was presented to visitors and islanders Friday, June 10, before a lavish local-voire banquet.

Catherine Krull, UVic's dean of social sciences, attended the banquet, along with many Galiano residents. Krull said she was 'incredibly impressed' by the quality and depth of the students' presentations. 'I think it's a testament to the value of experiential classroom learning,' said Krull. 'One of our goals is to get the university out of the ivory tower and begin learning at the community level.' UVic is deservedly known for excelling at 'community engagement and experiential learning,' said Krull.

Higgs noted that the ES 441 class is 'a true partnership between UVic's School of Environmental Studies and the Galiano Conservancy Association. This is not a course dropped into a beautiful location, but a learning experience that emerges out of the culture and ecology of Galiano Island.'

Bronte Renwick-Shields, a Galiano Islander as well as a fourth-year political science major, joined with history graduate student Jon Weller to research the history of the Learning Centre land, drawing on written and oral accounts and interviews with locals along with data gleaned from survey records, photos and historical maps, starting as early as 1888. Aerial photos showed the incursion of agricultural clearing, logging and sawmilling over the years, although miraculously the Learning Centre site still boasts the longest undisturbed old-growth coastline in the Salish Sea. Documenting the human history of the land 'is a means of better informing the restoration process,' noted Weller, with the goal of 'paying attention to the stories the landscape can tell—it's

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with the following attribution, in its entirety, and notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

'This article was published (August 6, 2015) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing on the Canadian Gulf Islands, on Vancouver Island and, via the internet, worldwide.'

Island Tides Publishing Ltd, Box 55, Pender Island, BC V0N 2M0 • 1-250-216-2267 • islandtides@islandtides.com • www.islandtides.com

not just a blank wall of human disturbance.'

Student Bekki Khan took on the task of effectively using social media to communicate with the wider world about conservation goals. Students Lindsay Kathrens, Emily Potts and Tammy Schiefelbein drew up plans for a 'native plant forage forest' slated for just below the classroom building, surrounding a giant 'grandmother cedar.' The trio drew up a list of native species including Western red cedar, Douglas fir, sword fern, huckleberry and blackcap raspberry along with settler-planted trees such as apple, cherry, chestnut, pear and plum. Stumps left behind by logging could be used as nurse logs for smaller plants useful for both food and medicinal purposes, the students recommended.

Frederique D Bouchard worked on the human legacy transect, using GIS and traversing a grid of lines on foot to document evidence of human occupation over the years, with the goal of 'restoring for the future by looking at the past.' Artifacts of settlement included roads, trails, cabins, fences, chicken coops and old garden structures, and even an old outhouse 'in the middle of nowhere.' Student John Bransfield addressed the mounting problem of voracious deer browsing, showing photos of landscapes that began as 'rich and diverse' but suffered a 'drastic decline' not only in plants but in bird

populations, including rufous hummibirds, song and fox sparrows, wrens, warblers and spotted towhees. Bransfield presented solutions ranging from fertility control, fencing and predator reintroduction to a controlled cull to address food security issues. Utilizing a few highly-skilled hunters could help islanders get 'reskilled in meat processing' so people know food doesn't always come in Styrofoam packages, Bransfield noted.

At the beginning of the course, meals were quiet and restrained but it took only a couple of days for camaraderie to grow. Laughter and chatter rang out as students forged partnerships and shared skills with maps, computer technique and GIS. The class was described as 'an advanced investigation into the meaning, limits and significance of ecological restoration.' Higgs noted that the students were also learning about the human role in restoration and the 'importance of engaging community in making durable change.'

On the final night of the course, as Galiano Islanders listened in rapt attention to student presentations, it was clear that an exchange of information had taken place that had enriched the lives of all. Higgs is hopeful that the best of the students' final reports, due in a few weeks, will be available for further public review. ✍