

Local eelgrass as vital as tropical rainforests

To the everyday person it just looks like a patch of limp green grass exposed at low tide. But to marine conservationist Nikki Wright, an eelgrass meadow provides a food web so complex that it rivals the world's richest tropical rainforests.

"Our native eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) provides food and protection to all five species of juvenile salmon, young herring, nudibranchs, anemones, jellyfish, clams, scallops, cockles, shrimp, several species of crabs, sea stars, moon snails and sand dollars," explained Wright at a public presentation in Chemainus in November.

These species, in turn, are important prey for herons, ducks and geese as well as fish and birds.

"Pacific herring roe is spawned directly on eelgrass in the spring and is central to the marine food web. It is an important part of the diets of migrating seabirds, grey whales, and invertebrates."

Eelgrass earned the name "marine highway" since 80 per cent of commercially important fish and shellfish use eelgrass at some stage of their life. In fact, eelgrass is protected by law, under the Federal Fisheries Act, due to its high value to fisheries.

Even dead eelgrass provides life. The shed leaves become part of a chain of consumers in the open ocean living as far as 10,000 meters deep.

The extensive root system of the plants helps stabilize sediments and prevent erosion all along the BC coastline.

The rhizomes (underground stems) are highly nutritious and many First Nations use eelgrass for food and ceremonial purposes.

Not surprisingly, damage to eelgrass can affect an entire ecosystem as well as the stability of our shorelines.

Damage happens from overgrazing by sea urchins and Canada Geese.

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Developers will be required to pay attention to eelgrass

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But even more significant are pollution and chemical contamination from fertilizers, pesticides and household hazardous wastes, runoff from streets and roads, oil spills, logging, and industrial activities such as dredging and filling in the construction of harbors and ports.

Intensive aquaculture such as geoduck inter-tidal harvesting is particularly harmful and incompatible with eelgrass habitat.

The importance of local eelgrass habitat was raised during initial planning for the Chemainus Marina/Quay development. Because an eelgrass bed was located in the area, DFO policy required that a biologist be hired to survey and map the area. The design of the proposed development was modified to minimize the impact to eelgrass.

"If the project is approved, any loss of eelgrass will be compensated for at a 2:1 ratio," Wright said. "The developer will also be required to have the eelgrass surveyed after the development is completed to determine whether the actual loss was the same as the predicted loss. If the actual loss is greater then additional compensation by transplanting will be required."

Wright's key message for Chemainus? "Eelgrass serves as a vital marine protected area for many species



NIKKI WRIGHT

of birds, fish and marine animals. We are impacting them because these habitats are close to our shores. We need to locate them using community mapping projects, and protect their value to us and the marine world."

Nikki Wright of Brentwood Bay is co-chair of the BC-wide Seagrass Conservation Working Group (www.stewardshipcentre.bc.ca/eelgrass/index.html) and heads the Seachange Marine Conservation Society (<http://www.seachangelife.net/>).

Wright's talk was part of the Chemainus Biodiversity Education Project. (<http://www.polisproject.org/projects/biodiversityeducation>)

Penelakut Dinner & Dance

Saturday, December 8, 2007
Chemainus Legion Hall



Doors open at 5 p.m.
Dinner will be served at 6 p.m.
Dancing will begin after dinner and will be open to Midnight or 1 a.m. if people want to dance longer.
Tickets \$25.00 per person

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