

2020 EAGLE EYE VISION

Adapted from the Living Rivers Georgia Basin and Vancouver Island process in Squamish (2005)

People congregate on the banks of the Cowichan River each fall below the Silver Bridge to see the bald eagles feed on returning salmon. No other bird is more dependent on the salmon of British Columbia. As we look into the future of the Cowichan Watershed, it is most appropriate that we see it through the eyes of an eagle soaring overhead.

Yuxwule', the eagle begins her day in the early dawn of a cool fall morning, looking for new arrivals in the river below. Each year she awaits the salmon and steelhead that are her lifeblood. Her instinctive bond with these fish is shared by the people of the Cowichan Valley who have at last recognized the fragility of nature in the face of on-going environmental change.

As Yuxwule' watches and waits at the river's mouth, a group of bears, spe'uth, catch several salmon and leave remnants to feed the forest, its residents and the nearby intertidal life. After feeding and resting, the eagle takes flight, catching sight of a small group of native and non-native youth studying the return of the salmon in the footsteps of the Cowichan Elders. After she reaches the river's headwaters above the Lake, the eagle notices old clear-cuts replanted with young trees, and steep slopes left untouched. Unused logging roads have been put-to-bed and streams that feed the Cowichan Lake are running clear and free.

A low weir at the lake outlet retains seasonal runoff for release during summer droughts, a more frequent artifact of climate change. Below the Lake, Yuxwule' flies low over community forest land that provides areas for sustainable harvest of timber and near-pristine areas where whole ecosystems once again flourish in the large contiguous parkland that encompasses the upper river. The large bodies of the Chinook, the king of salmon, dig deep nests in the long stretches of upper-river gravel beds.

As her flight passes over the upper reaches of the Cowichan and the gradient begins to shallow, the eagle notices summer s-xuw'q'um' (steelhead) in clear deep pools, feeding occasionally on the many insects from nearby riffles. She can spot the fish for only an instant as they quickly dart for cover under logs and among boulders. Although it is early, anglers dawning waders are about to cast flies in anticipation of the waiting steelhead or perhaps a resident trout. A small group of eco-tourists moves through the area in search of wildlife viewing opportunities. She moves onto the middle reaches where the stream tumbles through the canyon walls and ground-water keeps deep pools cool through the hot summer sunny days.

As she rounds a bend in the river, the Yuxwule' comes to a steep hillside stabilized and covered with native trees and plants. She soars over the bioengineering projects, blending in so well, of live stalks and living wattle fences protecting the shores made out of cottonwood, red osier dogwood and willows that have been built with such care it takes the discerning eye of an eagle to detect the human influence. The downstream reaches,

where young salmon live and spawners come home, run clear. The gravel is now silt-free, but covered with active spawners and spent carcasses. She stops for her second meal of the day – a dead chum salmon (kw'a'luhw) in a nearby side-channel.

She is not alone as the bears are already there looking for fish. Otters will come later but there is enough for all. As Yuxwule' tears at the flesh of the salmon, people recall the past conflict in the town hall as citizens fought over the last few fish. In the end, with the Elders' guidance, the choice was made to live with the river and restore the salmon runs. As bountiful salmon returned to the river, so did the life of this coastal community. Now all members of the ecosystem prosper each fall: the eagle in the side channel; fishers at sea and on the rivers; the many other animals and invertebrates that salmon nourish; and the forest sustained by salmon remains left by carnivores.

The eagle resumes her flight over the town above the estuary. She observes the dikes set well back from the rivers edge. A healthy riparian zone flourishes with trees and shrubs of various ages, and wildlife once rare, has returned. People are conserving water and have tamed urban sprawl so there are plenty of open spaces for birds to land. Nearby farms have restored natural flow and vegetation on tributaries and spreading of manure to fertilize fields happens in dry weather, preventing sediments and contaminants from reaching fish-bearing waters. Annual dredging to prevent flooding no longer happens in the reaches downstream where the gradient lessens. The river can take a more natural path and winds its way across the delta, mixing with the lower Koksilah, the largest of its tributaries.

Further along, an old retaining wall has been breached, and disturbance of the rivers mudflats has been minimized at the port where a ship is loading. New fuel-efficient transporters bring logs from sustainable forests to a non-polluting mill at the edge of the bustling town. People are once again employed in well-managed industries producing value-added products for export and domestic markets. The eagle inspects the myriad of channels in the intertidal zone that are well populated with native eelgrass and teeming with life. At the community hall in L'uml'umuluts (Clem Clemaluts), she sees a celebration being prepared with dried fish and other traditional foods, some harvested from the estuary and clam garden earlier in the year.

It is not far to a park where the Yuxwule' sees people gathered to discuss watershed management and water conservation plans. Representatives from all levels of government, First Nations, industry, stewardship groups, anglers and developers review progress to date, and determine how they will partner this year to improve the river and their community. Guests watch and listen, learning lessons they can take back to their own communities.

Times have changed now, and Yuxwule' is content as she regains her perch on an old snag at the rivers edge. She watches a group of children arrive with tubes and fishing rods, laughing and comfortable in the knowledge that the river and all that it offers will always be there.