

## Draining local watersheds

By Richard Boyce

Parksville Qualicum Beach News - May 06, 2008

The Pacific tree frogs are singing in the wetlands, after a long winter of hibernation in the mud. Their eggs laid, in balls of transparent gel attached to twigs or grass stems, these tiny amphibians will climb into the trees and spend the summer eating insects.

Rough-skinned newts, commonly mistaken for Salamanders with orange bellies, can be seen crawling slowly from their nests under logs towards pools of still water. They will mate and then the females will lay individual eggs on the leaves of submerged vegetation. The hatched larvae take four or five months to reach maturity and rely on standing water for survival. The adults will stay in water for as long as possible and then move to the damp shade under logs and rocks.

The natural drainage of the Oceanside region, for that matter much of the east coast of Vancouver Island, is such that water was retained in wetlands.

Although it rains a great deal during the fall, winter, and spring months the summers are usually dry. These annual extremes between flood and drought demand that water be held back for several months in order for life to prosper.

Wetlands by definition retain water throughout the year, several types are found in this area including: marsh, fens, and woodland swamps.

Marsh areas have an abundance of grass and other vegetation along with open water, which combine with peat moss to act as a sponge that maintains water levels throughout the year.

Hamilton Marsh is the only local wetland that qualifies for this distinction and it is owned by Island Timberlands who plan to log the forest around it and develop the land for real estate.

Fens, or peat-forming wetlands, can be found at a variety of locations from the lowlands up into the sub-alpine. The ridge overlooking Oceanside is currently covered with large patches of white snow. Those are clear-cuts: the result of logging in the past few years where there were once an abundance of fens.

By far the most abundant wetland type, in this area, are forest swamps. Historically, surface water has been retained in low spots under the shade of trees where thick sword ferns cover the moist soil, even during a prolonged draught. Many landowners drain these areas to allow for development. The run-off is then accelerated during the rainy season leaving very little or no moisture in the summer, particularly if the wetland is covered with backfill.

Currently, many government agencies have limited jurisdiction over water but none of them have the clout to make private and corporate landowners comply in order for local drinking water to be protected.

The BC Ministry of Environment and Minister Responsible for Water Stewardship and Sustainable Communities have not enacted any legislation with regards to water. However they have named their water action plan: Water for B.C. — Safe, Sustainable, and Valued by All.

According to Minister Barry Penner's website: "The plan is built around three broad goals: public health and safety, healthy watersheds and responsible use, and encourages British Columbians to adopt a sustainability ethic around caring for and protecting water resources and aquatic ecosystems."

No mention of corporate responsibility, although big business uses are by far the largest amounts of water in this province to flush mines, cool pulp mills, drill for oil, and cool metal smelting plants.

Oceanside has seven golf courses.

Each 18-holes uses more than one million liters of water every summer's night. Logging corporations, like Island Timberlands continue logging the aquatic ecosystems such as the banks of Hamilton Creek as seen on Highway 4A between the town of Qualicum Beach and Coombs.

The BC Ministry of Health can intervene in the case of extreme situations.

The Regional District of Nanaimo has very limited authority over water.

The Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans prescribes 30-meter setback from rivers and creeks but does not enforce these limitations on private lands.

Ironically, the BC Ministry of Transportation has the most control over the flow of local surface water. Ditches have been dug along every roadway to drain surface water. The goal of this ministry is to discharge the water to the ocean as rapidly as possible.

This is in direct contradiction to nature, which seeks to retain the water for the dry season so that life can exist during the summer droughts.