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Embarking on a water journey

By FRED DAVIES News Reporter

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Todd Butler entertains with a mix of music and sarcasm at the opening night of Our Water—Our Future held in Qualicum Beach over the weekend.

Known as the universal solvent, water covers about two thirds of the earth, forms 70 per cent of our bodies and is increasingly linked to political conflict.

Yet somehow it remains an enigmatic, misunderstood resource that far too many in the industrialized world take for granted.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates Canada has an enviable supply of the world's fresh water, and its use has increased almost eight times as much as the average Dane at 1,600 cubic metres per person, per year. Since 1980 our country's use of the wet stuff has increased by over 25 per cent, a rate five times higher than the overall 4.5 per cent increase of member OECD nations.

Still, there's plenty of it around so why worry right?

That's what many thought in Tofino. As this summer's crisis showed, even in a rain forest there are limits to how much pressure can be borne by local water supplies.

This past weekend's Our Water-Our Future conference in Qualicum Beach allowed area residents to embark on a water journey of sorts — an opportunity to posit fundamental questions in regards to water, its uses and what the future might hold should pollution and unabated waste of the resource continue.

Privatization, watershed management, sustainability and more were all discussed in a series of free workshops held Saturday. Keynote sessions were provided by the Polaris' Institute's Tony Clarke and Severn Cullis- Suzuki — daughter of Canada's favourite scientist — near equally as famous for her untiring work to engage people towards thinking of ways to exercise moral stewardship over the earth that sustains us.

On Sunday, attendees to the conference were offered a tour of the local watershed with Trevor Wicks who has been working on issues related to the Arrowsmith watersheds for 26 years.

In a written statement to The News, Wicks outlined what the potential of untapped drawing of water from local aquifers might entail.

“Groundwater levels have declined by as much as eight metres in some localities,” he states, going on to say, “New and deeper wells or alternate sources have [sometimes] been required. This information is not usually broadcast too widely, as property values tend to take a nosedive if the water supply is limited ... Overdrawn aquifers can result in saltwater intrusion, regional climate change including less precipitation, dying trees and vegetation, loss of summer creek flow, etc. etc.”

Without a doubt, increasing industrialization of our land base, coupled with an unprecedented level of migration to the area and its attendant stresses doesn't bode well for Oceanside's future supply of fresh, clean water. But there are any numbers of stewardship groups (relying for the most part on dedicated crews of volunteers) active in our area. Riparian plantings and habitat restoration

efforts are ongoing along both the Englishman and Little Qualicum Rivers resulting in emerging yet encouraging results in the health of fish stocks and the overall river flows that support them.

Creeks and channels that feed the rivers are likewise seeing a renewed push for protection and enhancement, Chef Creek, the subject of the conference's other field trip, being but one example.

Chef Creek flows into Baynes Sound just north of Bowser. Stewards of the land since 1883, Warren Cook and his family have done an excellent job of maintaining the environmental values on this 87 acre parcel while operating successful commercial shellfish and timber operations. The creek maintains cool, year-round flows and the site includes wetlands, mainstem creek, side-channel, off-channel and estuary habitat.

Working together, the landowner, Ministry of Transportation Environmental Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Nature Trust of BC and local streamkeeper groups have completed this project to restore and enhance fish and wildlife habitats and natural populations.

In a similar vein The Little Qualicum River has a protection plan being proposed for its watershed that is attracting interest from a wide variety of stakeholders. They've come together despite competing agendas, to explore the feasibility of such a plan in recognition of the shared interest all inhabitants of the watershed have in maintaining the river as a healthy ecosystem.

There appear to be glimmers of hope at the political level as well to judge from the attendance of several elected representatives at the weekend conference that included the mayors of Oceanside's municipalities, Alberni-Qualicum MLA Scott Fraser and Regional District of Nanaimo officials.

Chair of the RDN Joe Stanhope put it well.

"Once an aquifer becomes polluted they say it's permanent," he stated in introductory remarks made Friday evening. "The RDN believes very strongly we must pursue sustainable goals."

Those in charge have an enviable task. Privatization of community drinking water continues despite recent Ipsos Reid polling that shows three-quarters of British Columbians oppose it. In many instances, river flows across the Island and the province were at record lows and waterfront development proceeds at levels unheard of until recently.

Conferences such as this hold out hope for the future, for no good decisions can be made without equally good information.