

*Please stay on designated paths
to avoid trampling sensitive vegetation*

Local community groups and NGOs continue to monitor and improve water quality and biodiversity in the restored creek and Gorge Waterway.

Restoration in Esquimalt Gorge Park A Self-Guided Tour

This walking tour along the shores of the restored Gorge Creek creates a circular journey through history and demonstrates environmental stewardship and restoration in an urban setting.

For thousands of years the ancestors of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations lived along the Gorge Waterway and used the area for gathering shellfish, wildlife and plants for food and medicines. In early days, the area was covered by forests and meadows and it was possible to paddle up Gorge Creek at high tide to where Esquimalt High School now stands.

After Fort Victoria was established in 1843, thousands of settlers moved to the area, and the Gorge Waterway became a recreational hotspot. BC Electric Gorge Park was established in 1905 and an electric tramline ran from downtown to the existing entrance to the park on Tillicum Rd. Thousands of people attended community celebrations, swimming competitions and regattas on the Gorge. Amenities nearby included an amusement park, swimming beach, bandstand, Japanese garden and floating tea room. However, by the 1940s the Gorge had become polluted with sewage and industrial waste and the area declined in popularity.

During the 1950s the creek flow was diverted into a buried pipe that discharged into the Gorge near the narrows. The park was given to the Township of Esquimalt and upgraded through donations from the Kinsmen Club. The stream estuary was transformed into a tidal swimming lagoon, and the building that is now the Gorge Waterway Nature House provided visitors with change rooms and a concession stand. Chlorine was added to the water daily to control contamination and a system was installed to pump polluted sediments from the pond. These activities had a negative impact on water quality in the Gorge Waterway and continued until the 1990s.

The installation of sanitary sewers in the region in the 1960s marked an important first step in cleaning up the Gorge Waterway. Community groups and local governments have since taken on the challenge of improving the environment of the Gorge and its watersheds. In 2005, high levels of pollution entering the Gorge through the Gorge Creek prompted the Township of Esquimalt to rebuild the creek and its estuary in a way that helps treat the water. Currently, the area is generally safe for swimming and is popular for kayaking and canoeing.



GORGE WATERWAY NATURE HOUSE

**To learn more or become a volunteer, please
contact the Gorge Waterway Action Society
gorgewaterway@gmail.com
778-265-5119
1070 Tillicum Road**

Start: The Gorge Waterway Nature House

The Nature House building was built by the Kinsmen Club in the 1950s to provide services to visitors using the saltwater swimming pool and beach. The original concession stand was closed in the early 1990s and in 2008 the Township of Esquimalt took over the Nature House in partnership with World Fisheries Trust and the Gorge Waterway Action Society. Today, it serves as a hub for local environmental education.

Stop 1: Lower Bridge and the Salt Marsh

This is the site where a weir once controlled the swimming pool. Today, a salt marsh has been constructed on the site of the former pool and beach volleyball courts. Much of this area is covered by sea asparagus. Small fish can be seen from the bridge, including sticklebacks and small salmon. The brown algae visible on the rocks helps to improve water quality as the creek runs through the stream bed. Downstream, clam beds have been established to provide food for crows, gulls, and other animals. Rocks beside the bridge provide good habitat for native Olympia oysters, a species of special concern in BC.



Stop 2: Lower Settling Pond



Pass the parking lot to enter the creek path, where native stream-side vegetation has been planted. Here you might spot Red Osier Dogwood, Pacific Ninebark, Nootka Rose, Douglas-fir, and Broadleaf Maples. This deep pool is designed to allow silt with heavy metals and other pollutants to settle out of the water before flowing into the Gorge. Water birds including mallards, widgeons, and herons often forage along these shores.

Stop 3: Creek Channel

The high banks visible across the creek were created when soil was dredged from the lower creek during restoration. The slopes have been designed to prevent erosion along the creek banks. The trails of stones leading down from the stream bank help to reduce erosion during heavy rainfall and allow for infiltration of water into the soil. As the trees continue to grow, they will shade the creek and protect it from temperature extremes. Their roots will also help prevent erosion and leaf litter will provide food for insects and other invertebrates.



Stop 4: The Upper Bridge

Approaching the upper bridge, you will pass through a tall patch of native shrubs and trees. Just above the upper bridge on the North bank, you can see the overflow pipe that leads across the park peninsula to the Gorge, where the entire



creek flow used to be directed. This by-pass is still operational during floods. Notice the large rocks along the stream bank. These help slow the water and provide niche habitats for small organisms that help treat the water. There is less tidal exchange this far up the creek, and the green algae seen here (*Enteromorpha*) is one that indicates greater freshwater influence.

Stop 5: Upper Settling Pond

Turn right after the bridge and follow the creek to where it emerges under Craigflower Rd. Next to the road, the upper settling pond is a key feature of the creek restoration. Approximately 1/3 of the run-off from the Township of Esquimalt comes through this culvert, bringing with it many pollutants from roads and ditches. Most of the flow is diverted into the pond where it slows for sediment to settle out. Cattails, sedges, and rushes in and around the pond help to filter contaminants. The pond was designed to have sediment pumped out at regular intervals and the creek now reduces contamination of stormwater runoff by approximately 70%.



Stop 6: The Pollinator Meadow

The pollinator meadow was constructed in 2020 by GWAS and the Township of Esquimalt. The meadow contains a variety of native shrubs and wildflowers selected to encourage the presence of native pollinators. Some of these (like the Yarrow and Pearly Everlasting) are host plants, which provide shelter and food for pollinator larvae year round. Some examples of native pollinators are the mason bee, the bumblebee, the and the Lorquin's Admiral butterfly.



Stop 7: Sherwood Forest

On your way back to the Nature House you will pass a stand of urban forest. Here you can find Arbutus, Douglas-fir, Grand Fir, Western Red Cedar, and native shrubs like Oregon grape, salal, and trailing blackberry.

Unfortunately, invasive non-native species such as Daphne, Himalayan blackberry and English Ivy are also flourishing here. These plants must be regularly controlled or removed in order for native species to thrive.

Urban forests are vital for providing habitat, absorbing rain, preventing erosion, reducing air pollution, and providing shade. Standing and fallen dead trees provide important habitat for mammals, birds, and insects. Fungi decomposes dead vegetation, creating more soil. Can you spot our resident Barred Owl?



End: The Gorge Waterway Nature House

Return to the Nature House where you can find more resources on the Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet, and the surrounding watersheds. Interesting and informative resources are available for all ages and knowledgeable staff and volunteers are present to answer your questions.

To learn more, volunteer, or donate please contact:
Gorge Waterway Action Society
gorgewaterway@gmail.com