



# Summary of Initial Public Input

## Cowichan River Park Management Planning

May 2019



BC Parks

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## Summary Highlights

Respondents to the initial public comment period for the Cowichan River Park Management Plan identified a wide range of important natural values in the park, with an emphasis on fish and wildlife species and habitats, as well as river, forest and ecosystem values.

Recreational uses described most frequently included hiking and walking on the trails in the park, followed by camping, fishing, swimming, and other river-based recreational activities (e.g., paddling, tubing), as well as quieter pursuits such as wildlife viewing and nature appreciation.

The Cowichan River was a focus of concerns expressed around impacts to park values – water quality, water quantity, shoreline erosion and pollution were all mentioned. Also prevalent were concerns regarding high use levels, and associated impacts on park values. These concerns were accompanied by interests in managing park use and development levels to preserve the natural values and recreational experiences currently enjoyed by visitors.

Separating different uses in the park, through zoning or designated trails, was also suggested as a management strategy. Limited interest was expressed in expansion of park facilities, such as campgrounds and trails; however, some improvements were proposed.

Comments regarding appropriate recreational uses in the park revealed mixed views on cycling and horseback riding. Both activities were described as appropriate uses on the adjacent Trans Canada Trail (Great Trail), where they are currently permitted. Off-road motorized use was frequently identified as an inappropriate use in the park.

Most of the responses received made reference to the Cowichan Fish and Game Association facility currently operating under a park use permit in Cowichan River Park. Views on this facility were divided between respondents describing use of the facility as a valued recreational activity, and those concerned about impacts of the facility on park values and the adjacent residential neighbourhood.

A full summary of these initial public comments is provided in this document.

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# 1.0 Introduction

To inform the development of a draft Management Plan for Cowichan River Park, an initial public comment period was held from April 3 to July 15, 2018. Members of the public were invited to submit comments through an online form, or by mail, email or fax. The comment form included the following seven questions:

1. Why is Cowichan River Park important to you? What do you value about the park? What makes it special, in your opinion?
2. What environmental/ecological values in Cowichan River Park are important to you?
3. Do you have concerns regarding impacts on those environmental/ecological values?
4. Do you have suggestions for how environmental/ecological values can be protected?
5. What types of recreational activities do you feel are appropriate for the park? Consider, for example – additional camping, mountain biking, etc.
6. Are there any activities you feel strongly are not appropriate in the park?
7. Is there any additional information that you feel would assist with this management planning process?

Approximately 380 responses were received. The majority of responses were provided through the online comment form; however, a small number of mailed comment forms and emailed comments were also submitted. All of the comments were reviewed and analyzed to identify common themes, then grouped under the following broad response categories:

1. Views regarding important park values - including Biodiversity and Natural Heritage Values, Cultural Values and Recreational Values;
2. Concerns regarding impacts to park values;
3. Suggested management actions to protect park values;
4. Views regarding appropriate park uses and development levels;
5. Views on the existing Cowichan Fish and Game Club facility in the park.

Under each of these broad categories, a number of more specific topic areas were identified. A summary of the comments related to each topic area is provided on the following pages. These comments are summarized with an indication of how frequently certain views were expressed – e.g., by the majority of respondents, many respondents, or a few respondents. Excerpts of individual comments related to each topic area are also included in *italics*.

This summary of initial public input highlights some of the park values and activities that are important to the public in Cowichan River Park. It also helps to identify some of the management issues and opportunities that may need to be explored in the planning process.

## 2.0 Summary of Comments

### 2.1 Views Regarding Important Biodiversity & Natural Heritage Values

Most respondents described a range of natural values of importance in Cowichan River Park, including the forest, river, plants, and wildlife, as well as environmental services such as clean air, clean water, and healthy soils. Many comments spoke to the role of the park in protecting the riparian corridor along the Cowichan River, and contributing to fish and wildlife conservation, forest health, and watershed protection.

*The park has important conservation values, as a riparian environment and as a linear corridor of significance for fisheries and other wildlife.*

Wildlife and wildlife habitat were cited frequently as important ecological values of the park. Mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians, as well as aquatic and terrestrial insects, were all described as valued wildlife in the park. Specific species and groups mentioned included deer, elk, bear, raccoon, river otter, mink, western toad, eagles, and owls. The role of the park in protecting rare and vulnerable species was also noted.

*...The Cowichan River is an important wildlife zone... ...All fish and wildlife and the intact forests along the river are very important too... ...Protection of the animals, birds and reptiles that live there...  
...Forest and river habitat - birds, salmon, mink, bears... ...The River allows the abundant Wildlife to use the waterway as their corridor through a Natural Habitat... ...This is a particularly rich ecology with rare plants and animals in a climate unique to our country....*

Fish and fish habitat were described frequently as important ecological values of the park. Salmon and steelhead were the focus of many respondents' comments. Trout were also mentioned, including the introduced Brown Trout population in the Cowichan River. Many comments described the protection of riparian and aquatic habitat, including spawning habitat, as important park values. The vital role of spawning salmon in providing an influx of nutrients into the river and riparian ecosystem was also noted as an important ecological process.

*The health of all the salmon species, Steelhead and trout are what we value most... ...much of the Cowichan's ecological value comes from its annual salmon run. The nutrients that the salmon carry with them from the ocean feed local animal life... ...[the park] encompasses a large part of the land on either side of a tremendously important and famous salmon and steelhead bearing river...*

Many comments described the forest, trees, plants, wildflowers, and vegetation as important environmental values of the park. Specific species and groups noted included Garry oak, salal, Oregon grape, salmonberry, lilies, mushrooms, and lichens. Culturally important plants were also mentioned.

*This park has an amazing variety of native plants and animals which are disappearing elsewhere...this is an opportunity to promote the diversity and health of a natural area on Vancouver Island... ...preserving vulnerable plant species - wildflowers, trees, lichens...*

## **2.2 Views Regarding Important Recreational Values**

Recreational activities commented on most frequently included hiking, walking, jogging, and overall enjoyment and use of the trail system in the park. A few people specifically mentioned the adjacent Trans Canada Trail (Great Trail), which follows a right-of-way through Cowichan River Park that is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure.

*We walk the trails on a weekly basis. The Trans Canada Trail linkages are what makes it special... ...I go hiking there with my dogs several times a week. It is an accessible outdoor hiking area, very scenic... ...Scenic great hiking trails and park for kids and walking dogs... ...Seeing the local wildlife in and around the river while we hike the trails is a great thing throughout the year... ...I, and my family, enjoy the use of the many trails the Cowichan River Park provides. We like to hike and they offer a nice variety and beautiful setting...*

Camping was the second most commonly noted recreational activity, followed by fishing and swimming. Paddling, including whitewater kayaking, canoeing and drift-boating, were also frequently cited river-based activities, along with tubing and rafting. Picnicking was also described as an activity enjoyed by park visitors.

*...As a fly fisherman, access to the river is important to me. I am also a frequent user of the Drift boat launches... ...Fishing, hiking, camping, etc. is important to the community, as it is to me... ...The park is extremely valuable for whitewater paddling, as it's one of the few parks on the island that is paddlable all year long... I love to white water kayak on the Cowichan River!... ...I have spent many hours over the years on the Cowichan river fishing and enjoying the natural wildness of the area and look forward to continuing to do so... ...Camping, hiking, fishing and water access are great here...*

Many people commented on the role of the park in supporting public recreation and enjoyment generally, describing the diversity of activities and the proximity of the park to local communities as important values. The relatively flat, accessible trails were also noted as a recreational asset.

*...Cowichan River Park is a real gem. Love that you can swim, kayak, hike etc. in one place. Love being surrounded by nature, hearing only the birds and the laughter of children... ... Its relatively flat trails make it accessible and easy for all to use...*

Quieter activities such as wildlife viewing, bird-watching, nature appreciation, and enjoying 'peace and quiet' were highlighted by many respondents as important park experiences. Scenic values were frequently mentioned, along with creative pursuits such as photography and painting. The contribution of the park's natural setting to overall health and well-being was also noted.

*...The benefits in health, sense of wellbeing, ability to play and run free a bit, make our parks more important now than ever... ...Walking in the forest provides deep relaxation, as well as increased oxygen flow, inner peace and increase in well-being... ...people come here to enjoy the peace and quiet of the area...*

A small number of respondents also mentioned the role of the park in supporting tourism and contributing to the local economy.

## 2.3 Views Regarding Important Cultural Values

Comments regarding the cultural values of Cowichan River Park focused on First Nations cultural values and history, as well as the Cowichan River's designation as a Heritage River. The connection to the history of the Cowichan peoples was identified as one of the things that make Cowichan River Park special.

*Cowichan River is an important river as part of BC's natural environment, as well as our human history, especially indigenous history and culture... ...Cowichan River Provincial Park protects the Cowichan River's designation as a Heritage River... Cowichan River is a heritage river in an area that has been settled for centuries by First Nations peoples...*

## 2.4 Concerns Regarding Impacts to Park Values

### **Cowichan River**

The Cowichan River was the focus of many comments regarding impacts to environmental values. Water quantity and quality were key concerns, including impacts of low summer flows and high summer water temperatures on fisheries values.

*The low summer flows affect the well being of the life in and around the river, and this habitat loss is concerning... ...I am nervous that the big crowds of tubers in summer at times of low flow may be injurious to the fish... ...We may experience increasing variability in timing and quantity of precipitation and there will be conflicting demands...The fish habitat and general ecological health of the river must be prioritized...*

Shoreline erosion was also a topic of concern. Erosion linked to riverside trails was specifically mentioned, as was erosion and sediment discharge at Stoltz Bluffs.

*Erosion is a threat to salmon... ...There is continual erosion along the banks, particularly the stretch below the 70.2 mile trestle bridge... ... soil erosion caused by the trails... ... A plan that includes the stabilization of Stoltz Bluffs should be a very high priority...*

River and shoreline pollution was raised as another potential impact on park values.

*...I am concerned that the river is being impacted by chemicals from activities in and around the river...  
...pollution/disturbance of shoreline by people (residents, campers, locals, tourists)... littering in the  
river...*

The Cowichan River was also identified as an “Endangered River” (likely referring to the Outdoor Recreation Council of B.C.’s inclusion of the Cowichan River in its 2016 and 2018 lists of B.C.’s most endangered rivers). As well, climate change was noted as a threat to the river and the park as a whole.

### **High Use Levels and Associated Impacts / Concerns**

Concerns regarding overall high use levels in the park emerged as a common theme. Littering and garbage were frequently mentioned. Additional monitoring and enforcement of unauthorized activities was also proposed – examples included: dogs off leash, partying, littering, motorized vehicles/ATVs, campfire bans, vandalism, cutting of trees/plants, camping in unauthorized areas, and fishing regulations.

*...There is a fairly large off road vehicle use in the Cowichan River area resulting very damaged trail and slope areas, as well as those who actually drive along the river bed and through potential fall spawning areas. The Park needs to provide monitoring and enforcing of no use within the park... Stop allowing dogs to be off leash... More regular patrols by parks staff would prevent littering... ...Increase staff for protection and enforcement...*

### **Adjacent Land Use and Development**

A number of comments were made regarding potential impacts of adjacent land use and development, such as forestry and residential development, on park values.

*I am concerned with the clear cutting behind the park... ...Increased urban development around the park and increase in use of recreational facilities will endanger protection and preservation of this park...  
...continuous encroachment of residential development in what used to be park buffer zones... ...industrial uses of the river, increased residential density along the river, logging around the lake ... ...logging and development in proximity to the park boundary...*

## **2.5 Suggested Management Actions to Protect Park Values**

### **Managing Levels of Use and Development**

Preserving the natural values and experiences that park visitors currently enjoy was a theme in the comments received. Keeping the park ‘as is’ was a common sentiment. Many comments expressed an interest in maintaining current park access and use levels, and limiting further development. The words ‘low impact’ appeared a number of times in reference to appropriate recreational activities and levels of use, as did statements about ‘balancing’ environmental

protection and recreational uses. Monitoring recreational uses and impacts was also suggested as an important foundation for managing park values.

*...I like the current level of development and access: camping, walking, hiking, running, paddling, and swimming... Please leave the park as is... The park is great as is, with all the existing activities it provides... As much as possible keep it a low impact use area... A balance between nature and people... Limit human impact by monitoring human use of the park... The upper river has to be maintained as it is presently – no development and in a natural state... there should be good monitoring to ensure proper use of the park, and signage informing the public on how to report any abnormal activities...*

### **Separating Different Uses**

A management strategy mentioned repeatedly in the comments involved separating different uses in different areas of park. Suggestions included: separating walking/hiking trails from multi-use trails where horse use and/or cycling are allowed; limiting recreational activities in areas of critical fish and wildlife habitat or other significant natural values; and, separating recreational activities from areas of importance for First Nations cultural use.

*Recreational activities need to be limited in areas of riparian or cultural significance... zoning to separate uses that may not be compatible. Mountain biking for example is better served if separated from walking trails... areas off limit; number of commercial white water, tubing and other organised activities limited with no go zones for preserving areas where there is sensitive ecologies... Designated trails and designated nature preserve areas (especially along river's edge) that prevent excessive trampling of native vegetation...*

### **Visitor Information and Interpretation**

Visitor information and education was frequently mentioned as a strategy to protect park values. Suggestions ranged from providing further informational and interpretive signage to supporting additional nature interpretation and education opportunities in the park.

*...Education on stewardship, leave no trace ethics, etc. is important... Better signage to educate people on proper use of the Park and the river... Improved interpretive signage at the trailhead and parking lot area... identify and mark sensitive ecosystems, provide signage and education to the public on habits such as respecting wild animal behaviour, fire safety, garbage disposal, etc... A nature interpretive Center with educational programs would be a good step... active on site education programs...*

### **Conservation Management Strategies**

A range of conservation management strategies were identified in the comments. Restoration of fish habitat, riparian areas, and disturbed sites was mentioned. Suggestions for research and monitoring included: baseline plant and wildlife species inventories; groundwater and surface water quality monitoring; as well as a partnership with, and monitoring by, Cowichan Tribes

guardians. Pursuing the acquisition of additional park land, in order to further protect the riparian corridor along the Cowichan River, was also proposed.

*...A baseline inventory of all plant and animal species would be very helpful... ...Environmental values could be enhanced if the protected corridor was wider... A partnership with Cowichan Tribes would benefit the FN community and BC Parks...*

Strategies to minimize impacts from recreational use were identified. One suggestion was to develop a river access plan, with designated trails and river access points, in order to limit riparian impacts. Another suggestion was to use split rail fencing to keep people out of sensitive riparian areas. Invasive plant management was also flagged as an important conservation strategy. As well, partnerships were identified as a valuable approach to conservation and overall park management.

*It would be nice to see a controlled access plan or signage that limits access to the river to specific areas, rather than a free-for-all... ...Restoration of riparian zones... ...There is an invasion of knotweed along the river... ...The threat of invasives should be highlighted. Dedicated funding to identify and address invasive vegetation (e.g., knotweed) through the length of the river would be great. It's only going to get harder to address.... ...seek out opportunities to form and maintain partnerships with other agencies and user groups...*

## 2.6 Views Regarding Appropriate Park Uses and Development Levels

Comments on most of the existing recreational uses in Cowichan River Park are described in Section 2.2, Views Regarding Important Recreational Values. This section focuses on additional comments not yet summarized regarding appropriate types and levels of recreational opportunities, as well as facility development.

### **Campgrounds and Campsites**

Most comments regarding campgrounds and campsites focused on maintaining current or limited levels of campground development. Some respondents expressed an interest in additional campsites in the park, with an emphasis on wilderness, walk-in, or bike-in camping opportunities. A few responses identified camping as not an appropriate use in the park.

*...Limited camping and hiking is fine within strict limits to protect the environment, wildlife, and local residents... ...Leave this campsite as a wild, natural site...Camping here should be considered wilderness camping... ... I am receptive to some remote, hike-in campsites to service those that are using the Trans-Canada Trail... ...More wilderness or walk in campsites for canoeist/kayakers hikers; horseback riders etc.*

### **Trails, Day Use Facilities**

A number of comments expressed a need for increased maintenance, repair and improvement of park trails; however, some responses also described the trails as well-maintained. A few comments supported additional trail expansion or development. Some other day-use facility

improvements were also mentioned in a few comments - examples included: playgrounds, universal accessibility improvements, river viewing areas or platforms, as well as additional picnic areas and washrooms/pit toilets. A few people also proposed pedestrian/cycling (and horse) bridge crossings at key locations across the Cowichan River.

*...Limit the amount of new trails and where possible improve them to limit the erosion.... Some of the trails board-walks and stairs need repair, some soil erosion occurring... ..ensure that there are opportunities for people with disabilities to enjoy recreation within the park... .. Better maintained and leveled trails so more people can use them for even short walks (e.g., for seniors, partially disabled)... .. Hiking trails of all levels should be encouraged...*

### **Paddling**

A number of responses focused on paddling, including year-round white-water paddling. Interest was expressed in development of additional facilities to support paddling – examples included minor upgrades to parking and river access points, year-round amenities (e.g., toilets), as well as installation of hanging slalom gates and/or play wave/play features.

River safety was also raised as a concern. Suggestions include installing additional signage to increase awareness of the hazards through Marie Canyon, particularly to direct paddlers to the calm pull-out location before the rapids. A concern was also raised regarding the risks to paddlers when woody debris / log jams impede safe downstream movement. Occasional removal of dangerous logs was proposed.

*...Allow access for kayaks and canoes at selected (existing spots). Hardpath areas for access to discourage access at more sensitive spots. Proper trail maintenance and signage will reduce the number of extra paths leading to essentially the same place... ..I think that the addition of hanging slalom gates and/or a play wave on the Cowichan River could encourage positive recreational use of the park in a way that is not environmentally damaging... ..My biggest concern personally is the area of the river Marie's Canyon. There is signage there but it is very easy to miss...I think better signage in that area would be a huge benefit as there is a very calm pull out area before the rapids but the rapids begin very suddenly around the corner.*

### **Cycling / Mountain Biking**

A considerable number of respondents mentioned cycling or mountain biking. These comments reflected mixed views. Most responses described cycling and mountain biking as an appropriate use. However, some of these responses indicated cycling should only be allowed on designated trails or only on the adjacent Trans Canada Trail (Great Trail); and also that cycling trails should be away from sensitive riparian areas. A number of these responses identified cycling or mountain biking as not an appropriate use in the park, listing concerns around compatibility with pedestrian use, as well as impacts to natural values from trail development and use.

*...Hiking, dog walking, equestrian trail riding, cycling and mountain biking are all acceptable but should be controlled to specific trails so they do not conflict... The river trail is adequate for hiking while the old rail grade supports bikers and horse riding... ...Mountain bikes, I've noticed, tend to create trails which subsequently become highly eroded because they follow the fall line of a slope. Environmental damage from these can become acute. If mountain biking is allowed, some areas of the park should remain off limits! ... Mountain biking trails should only be provided if they can be located outside the riverine zone. ... definitely NO mountain biking... Keep the bikes on the Trans Canada Trail and away from the river...*

### **Equestrian Use / Horse Trails**

The comments also reflected mixed views on equestrian use and horse trails. Of those who mentioned horseback riding in their comments, most described this as an activity they currently enjoy and as an appropriate use in the park. However, some of these responses listed horseback riding as not appropriate. For the most part, these comments did not distinguish between use of the adjacent Trans Canada Trail (TCT), or Great Trail, where horseback riding is allowed, and use of park trails, where horseback riding is currently not allowed. A couple of responses identified a specific interest in additional horse trailer parking for horseback riders using the TCT.

*What I value most is the Trans Canada Trail. I am able to drive my mini horse on the old rail bed and it makes a lovely outing for both of us... ...Horseback riding and horse corrals should be considered... ...designated horse trails... Be careful with mountain biking and horse riding as they can damage the environment severely and rapidly if not controlled....*

### **Motorized Use**

A large number of responses made reference to motorized off-road vehicle use (e.g., ATVs, dirt bikes), and all but a few described this as not appropriate use. Some of these responses also described use of motorized boats on the Cowichan River as not appropriate. A couple of responses identified a specific interest in additional ATV trailer parking for ATV users accessing areas adjacent to the park.

*...I don't think there should be any motorized vehicles in the park, as in atv's etc... ...no motorized vehicles allowed on the park land except for parking lots and access roads to the park... ...ATVs, dirt bikes and motorized vehicles should not be allowed... ...No motorized vehicles on trails, with the exception of park staff and electric motorized carts for people with disabilities...*

*Note: Motorized vehicles are not allowed on Cowichan River Park trails or the adjacent Trans Canada Trail, with the exception of self-propelled wheelchairs or other similar conveyances.*

### **Hunting**

Most of the comments regarding hunting identified this as not an appropriate use in the park. A few comments expressed support for hunting in the park. *Note: Cowichan River Park is currently closed to hunting.*

## 2.7 Views on the Existing Cowichan Fish and Game Association Facility

The majority of responses submitted made reference to the Cowichan Fish and Game Association (CFGAs) facility currently operating in the park. Views on this facility were divided. Of those who referred to the CFGAs in their comments, most described use of the facility as a valued recreational activity and an appropriate use in the park. However, a similarly large number of respondents stated that the facility is not an appropriate use in the park. Many reasons for these views were provided.

### ***Reasons for Views that the CFGAs is an Appropriate Use***

Of those describing use of the CFGAs facility as a valued recreational activity and an appropriate use in the park, the most commonly mentioned reasons included:

1. The role of the facility in providing a safe place to teach, learn and practice responsible firearm use. The facility was frequently described as offering a safer alternative to target shooting on backroads, logging roads or gravel pits;
2. The range of activities offered by the CFGAs, including shooting, but also fishing and outdoor education, community service and trail-building, stewardship and conservation activities (e.g., litter pick-up, fisheries enhancement), and opportunities to socialize (e.g., Seniors Horseshoe Club).
3. The use of the facility as a place for training by the RCMP and others.

*My family and I use the park regularly and we enjoy the many trails as well as the Cowichan fish and game club which we shoot at for family enjoyment quite often... ..It's important to the community to have a gun range here as it offers a controlled environment for safe target shooting without endangering the public... ..I would like to see the Park enjoyed by as many as people as possible and I am sure a fair agreement can be reached for all parties...*

*...Cowichan Fish and Game club has a long history of community service, trail building, river cleanup, protecting fish habitats... .. I have many friends who enjoy the use of the range for shooting and socializing at the club... ..The Seniors Horseshoe club is an active chapter of the Cowichan Fish & Game...*

A number of these responses also expressed the view that the land where the facility is located was added to the park with the express understanding that it could continue to operate, and is therefore an appropriate use in the park.

*Cowichan River Park is important to me as a member of Cowichan Fish and Game which was first established in 1937. In recent years, BC Parks acquired and leased part of the park to Cowichan Fish and Game on the understanding that the club could continue as a shooting range.*

### **Reasons for Views that the CFGA is Not an Appropriate Use**

Of those describing the CFGA facility as not an appropriate use in the park, the most frequently cited reasons included:

1. Concerns regarding on-site lead levels, as well as concerns that the site where the facility is located may be a source of lead contamination affecting the surrounding environment;
2. Concerns regarding noise levels and noise-related disturbance of neighbouring residents, park users, and wildlife;
3. Safety concerns, particularly views regarding risks posed by stray bullets.

*...Potential lead pollution on the gun range, and from projectiles that escape the gun range has nearby residents concerned that there may be a danger to human health and the environment in the park. ...The existing private shooting range within the park is totally inconsistent with park values, socially with regard to noise and environmentally with regard to deposition of lead and other heavy metals...*

*...We live across the river from the gun range and are constantly barraged by noise... .... Noise from gunfire is intensely loud, and it spreads well beyond the boundaries of the Gun Club shooting ranges in all directions for long distances. The unpreventable noise of gunfire pollutes the peace and quiet of the natural environment beyond the park boundaries and is alarming and intrusive to other park users and anyone in the surrounding area...*

*...There is also the safety matter of fugitive bullets found outside the Gun Club's fenced boundary...  
...Stray Bullets have been found in trees just outside the unmarked boundary for the gun range within the park...*

A number of these responses also expressed the view that the facility is not compatible with the purpose and roles of Cowichan River Park, and is therefore not an appropriate use in the park.

*The shooting range within the park is inconsistent with the purpose of the Park Act and conflicts with the role of the park to protect nature and provide for nature experiences for park visitors.*