

Our Backyard

A NEWSLETTER ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN SAANICH



Volume 26 | Issue 1 | February 2026

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Highlighting ĆENI, ILĆ EKĀTEL, ENEĆ Garry Oak Ecosystems

By Dominique James



Playfair Park Camas Meadow

The WSÁNEĆ people have a strong cultural, spiritual, and ecological connection to Garry Oak ecosystems. These unique areas in the Pacific Northwest are crucial for their community, providing food, medicine, and spiritual significance. Through traditional methods, the WSÁNEĆ actively work to restore and protect these landscapes, keeping them resilient against environmental challenges for future generations.

The WSÁNEĆ worldview on Garry Oak ecosystems reflects a deep cultural, spiritual, and ecological connection to the land, particularly the ecosystems that sustain their communities. Garry Oak (*Quercus garryana*) ecosystems are unique and contain biodiverse habitats found in the Pacific Northwest that the WSÁNEĆ people highly value for their ecological significance and cultural importance.

Key elements of the WSÁNEĆ worldview on Garry Oak ecosystems include:

1. Cultural and Ecological Significance

Garry Oak ecosystems are recognized as vital to the WSÁNEĆ people, providing a variety of resources that support their way of life. These ecosystems include not only the oak trees themselves but also the surrounding grasslands, wetlands, and shrublands that form unique habitats for many plant and animal species, including several that are rare or

Dominique James is a member of the WSÁNEĆ Nation, currently residing on the WJOŁEŁP Nation of her maternal family home of the Sampson family and also tied to the BOKÉCEN Nation on her paternal side. Dominique has many skills and talents, from plant propagation to cultural knowledge and plant uses, and is always eager to share her knowledge. Dominique is a passionate SENĆOŦEN speaker, having worked at the LÁU,WEL,NEW Tribal School in the SENĆOŦEN LENONET SCULÁUTW immersion program.

endangered. The WSÁNEĆ people have historically used these ecosystems for hunting, gathering, and fishing, with Garry Oak groves and their associated landscapes providing food sources, medicinal plants, and materials for tools and shelter.

2. Sustainable Resource Use

The WSÁNEĆ have long understood the importance of maintaining the health of Garry Oak ecosystems through careful and sustainable resource use. Traditional practices, such as cultural burning, were used to maintain the oak savannas and prevent them from being overtaken by encroaching shrubs and forests. This technique encouraged the growth of the oak trees and camas while fostering a biodiversity-rich environment. These practices were deeply connected to the seasonal cycles of the land (WSÁNEĆ 13 ŁKÁLJ) and were intended to ensure that resources were used in a way that allowed for regeneration and continued abundance.

3. Interconnectedness of Species

The WSÁNEĆ worldview emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings, and Garry Oak ecosystems are no exception. The oak trees, along with the numerous plant species and wildlife that depend on them, are viewed as part of a larger, balanced ecosystem. The WSÁNEĆ recognize that the health of the Garry Oak ecosystem is tied to the

well-being of the species it supports. For example, the acorns of the Garry Oak were an important food source for Indigenous communities, and the trees themselves provide habitat for numerous species of birds, insects, and mammals. Maintaining the health of the oak ecosystem is understood as essential for supporting these relationships.

4. Spiritual and Cultural Connection

The WSÁNEĆ people have a spiritual relationship with the Garry Oak ecosystem, viewing the land, trees, and plants as living entities with their own spirits. The oak trees are often regarded with reverence, and the ecosystems they inhabit are seen as sacred places. For the WSÁNEĆ, caring for these ecosystems is not just an ecological responsibility but a spiritual one, rooted in respect and reciprocity with the land.

5. Restoration and Conservation Efforts

As part of their ongoing efforts to restore and protect their traditional territories, the WSÁNEĆ people have been involved in Garry Oak ecosystem restoration projects. These initiatives often focus on removing invasive species, restoring traditional burning practices, and reinstating native species that are crucial for the health of the ecosystem. There is also a strong emphasis on educating the wider community about the importance of these ecosystems and the need to protect them.

6. Knowledge and Stewardship

The WSÁNEĆ have a deep well of Traditional Ecological Knowledge regarding Garry Oak ecosystems. This knowledge is passed down through generations and guides their practices of stewardship. Elders and knowledge keepers continue to share information about the management and restoration of these ecosystems, ensuring that future generations can maintain the balance between human needs and the health of the environment.



7. Biodiversity and Climate Change Adaptation

Garry Oak ecosystems are considered biodiversity hotspots, supporting many species that thrive in the open, sun-drenched areas provided by the oak savannas. However, these ecosystems are increasingly threatened by urban development, invasive species, and climate change. From a WSÁNEĆ perspective, the preservation of these ecosystems is critical not only for cultural reasons but also for maintaining biodiversity and ecological resilience in the face of environmental challenges. The WSÁNEĆ people view the preservation and restoration of Garry Oak ecosystems as an act of resilience, ensuring that these valuable habitats continue to provide for both humans and wildlife.

The WSÁNEĆ worldview on Garry Oak ecosystems is a holistic one, recognizing the deep interconnections between humans, other animals, plants, and the land. These ecosystems are not only important for their ecological role but also for their cultural and spiritual significance. For the WSÁNEĆ people, caring for Garry Oak ecosystems is an ongoing practice of stewardship, guided by Traditional Ecological Knowledge, respect for nature, and a responsibility to future generations.

Exciting Launch: Saanich Naturescaping Program



Explore the magic of Naturescaping and turn your outdoor space into a vibrant home for wildlife and native plants. With diverse designs and local greenery, you can create a thriving ecosystem right at home. Already started? Join the Saanich Naturescape Program for additional resources, workshops, and community connections.

What is Naturescaping?

Naturescaping is all about transforming your outdoor space into a vibrant habitat for wildlife while boosting native biodiversity. By integrating diversity, layers, edges, and native plants into your landscape design, you create a thriving ecosystem right at home.

Why Naturescape?

Embrace the joy of nature in your backyard! Naturescaping not only supports the environment but also fosters well-being for you, your family, and your community.

Who can participate?

Anyone with access to an outdoor space connected to your home! Whether this is a big backyard, a small grassy patch at the side of your home, or even an apartment patio, any outside space can be made more welcoming to wildlife through native plants, habitat structures, water sources, or feeders.

Where to Learn More:

Visit the [Saanich Naturescape](#) page on our website for the complete program booklet, inspiring project examples, checklists, and an array of resources—from bird box plans to native plant lists. Whether you are just starting and looking for inspiration or are a seasoned gardener looking to incorporate some wildlife-friendly approaches, there is something for you.

Starting January 2026, Saanich residents who are putting Naturescaping practices into action can join the registered Saanich Naturescape Program!

Participants receive:

- Yard signage and regular email updates with tips
- Exclusive access to workshops and learning opportunities
- Invitation to an annual Naturescaping gathering
- Community connections with fellow Naturescapers in Saanich

To join, ensure you have three existing Naturescaping practices already started and are ready to expand them. Discover more on our [Naturescape](#) page and apply today!

Gabo Creek update

In summer 2025, Saanich Parks worked with the Peninsula Stream Society to restore Gabo Creek, improving stormwater control and fish habitats. The project saw great success, as more Coho salmon and Cutthroat trout returned to the creek. Supported by various partners, this effort highlights the benefits of collaborative restoration and community involvement.

Gabo Creek Restoration: Summer 2025

In the summer of 2025, Saanich Parks and Public Works partnered with the Peninsula Stream Society for a significant restoration of Gabo Creek. Building on efforts from 2024, this initiative improved stormwater management and flood resilience in the Colquitz River watershed. It contributed to the restoration of critical habitats for Coho salmon and sea-run Cutthroat trout, aligning with the Biodiversity Conservation Strategy's goals of ecosystem connection and restoration.

Project Achievements:

- **Restoration Success:** In August, the team restored 170 meters of Gabo Creek, adding to the 200 meters enhanced in 2024. Improvements included sediment removal, pool reshaping, spawning gravel additions, and the installation of large wood and rocks for vibrant fish habitats.
- **Positive Outcomes:** Monitoring revealed nearly 270 coho fry and 35 cutthroat trout thriving in the restored section this year, a major improvement from 2024's results of no coho and 35 cutthroat.
- **Community Involvement:** Community planting events were held in the fall to complete the riparian restoration.



Key Improvements:

- Removed excess sediment
- Restored fish spawning and refuge areas
- Introduced in-stream features to slow and filter water
- Enhanced biodiversity with new riparian plantings

Funding Partners:

The project was funded by the District of Saanich, BC Salmon Restoration and Innovation Fund, Pacific Salmon Foundation, and Destination Greater Victoria. It exemplified the prioritization, protection, and restoration of freshwater habitats per the Biodiversity Conservation Strategy.

These efforts created a thriving ecosystem in Gabo Creek, showcasing the power of collaborative restoration.

Saanich Parks Volunteer Spotlight



Lindsay Coulter has been Lead Steward for the *Pulling Together* Program at Haro Woods, located in the Cadboro Bay neighbourhood of Saanich, since 2018.

Lindsay helps engage school groups from nearby areas in stewardship activities to help care for this cherished woodland park. Beyond her work as a Pulling Together volunteer, Lindsay describes herself as an educator, writer, soul activist, mentor, culture mayor, facilitator, naturalist, and equine facilitated wellness student. Find out what motivates Lindsay and what she enjoys about her volunteer work with Saanich Parks.

What motivates you to volunteer with Saanich Parks?

Restoring natural spaces in my backyard is work I can't **not do**. I consider Haro Woods and Goward Park as the lungs for my family, the flood control for my home, and the regulator of temperature for my comfort.

We've long understood that Vitamin "N" (for "nature") is essential for healthy human function. Nature is good for learning, health, and well-being! The healing and spiritual perks of time in nature are also acknowledged around the world. Being regularly immersed in the outdoors can reduce stress and symptoms of attention-deficit disorders

AND boost immunity, energy levels, and creativity. Plus, children who spend time in nature are far more likely to care about protecting it later in life.

What do you enjoy most about volunteering with Saanich Parks?

I seek to inspire others to claim sane leadership and find better ways to be in this world together using skills of compassion and insight. To prepare for chaos, I believe in creating a good human society wherever we are, whenever we can, with the people and resources available to us now.

I think kids and adults of all ages need to spend time outside. I'm happy to volunteer my time and go into the wet and cold to make sure more kids get out from the fluorescent lights and the four walls of their classrooms, to experience the living world.

Tell us about one of your most memorable volunteering experiences with Saanich Parks.

I love the discoveries that can be made during a one-hour session with a class! Once, students found a deer pelvis. Another time, I found a rat skull, and we

saw a pair of Great Horned Owls and their three young owlets. And on yet another visit, it was a dead mouse, rat, and owl pellets. Of course, there's amazing fungus too, like Elfin's Saddle and Cat's Tongue.

Any final thoughts?

We can take steps to reconcile our relationship with our non-human kin. Then we'll do less harm to ourselves, others, and the planet. Each day, find mystery, magic, seek beauty and awe. Being in nature takes you out of yourself, and it's in nature that you realize there's more in the world than yourself.

Thank you, Lindsay, for all that you do to care for Haro Woods and to engage our youth in the ethic of care for these special places!



EVENTS



Saanich Recreation Trails & Treks

<https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/parks-recreation-community/parks/events-in-park/trails-treks.html>

Saanich Parks Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteer with the Pulling Together Team

Enjoy some fresh air, meet new people and help restore ecosystems by removing invasive species in Saanich parks and natural areas. Find a work party happening near you and get started today!

Saanich Parks Educational Opportunities

An Introduction to Naturescaping (FREE) Lecture 50yrs+

Thu. Apr 16 | 2:30-3:45pm | Cedar Hill Recreation Centre

Join a Saanich Environmental Educator to learn about the Naturescape initiative and its importance. Discover how you can create a wildlife-friendly yard that supports biodiversity and reduces water use.

Cover photo: Frozen alcove of Colquitz River at Cuthbert Holmes Park



Keep up to date on local community stewardship projects and environmental issues.

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