

Place Narrative Assignment:

Swan Lake Nature Sanctuary

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Ethnoecology: ES 321

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## Place name's sake

The origin of Swan Lake's English name is left uncertain. In a practical sense, many believe that the name is credited to the Trumpeter Swans who'd often visit the lake. However, in a more historical light, it is thought that the name's sake of the lake extends from James Gilchrist Swan, an American ethnologist who devoted his time throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century to exploring indigenous peoples, their lands, and their cultures along the Northwest coast. (*Why Swan Lake & Christmas Hill – Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary*, n.d.). The traditional name of Swan Lake and the Indigenous lands which it covers is traditionally written as Kosampson (Morrison, 2015).

## Geographic Setting

The area of and around Swan Lake encompasses traditional lands significant to the Esquimalt, Lekwungen, Songhees, and WSÁNEĆ nations, who have resided on and lived off these lands for thousands of years. These nations repay their duties to the land through environmental stewardship and continuing to carry out their traditional land ceremonies, transcending their historical ties to present day (Morrison, 2015). The physical Geographic setting of Swan Lake is North East of the Gorge waters and Portage Inlet, where the Patricia Bay highway and McKenzie Ave cross. Swan Lake is one of many pieces of the Colquitz River Watershed, water enters the lake from the east through Blenkinsop Creek and exits through Swan Creek on the west side of the lake where it then joins with Colquitz River until it reaches its final output destination of Portage Inlet (Ungstad, 2012).



Figure 1. Map of Swan Lake Watershed. Photo taken from info sign at Swan Lake (Bottay, 2022).

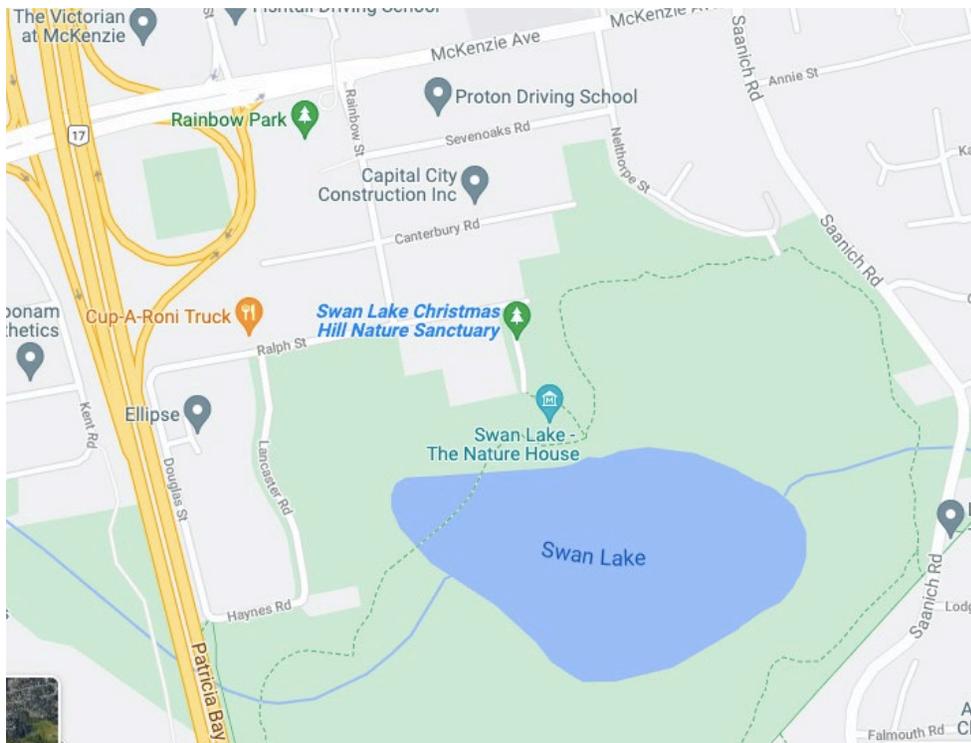


Figure 2. Screen capture from google maps. Geographic location of Swan Lake. (Google Maps, n.d.)

## Ecological History and Significance

The body of Swan Lake was formed in a glacial depression left behind after the last ice age, ~12,000 years ago. Throughout the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - in the midst of the ignorance that pre-ceded the environmental movement sparking in the 60's - Swan Lake and the surrounding ecosystem was treated with limited respect even though it's part of a large watershed. Swan Lake saw constant runoff from surrounding farms, wineries, dairy farms, and sewage plants, and if that wasn't enough people thought it was ok to treat the lake and their own personal garbage disposal site (*Urban Oases of Victoria - Swan Lake*, n.d.). By the 1960's the lake had been majorly devastated by pollution and was seriously lacking in terms of biodiversity and ecological integrity of the watershed ecosystem (*Urban Oases of Victoria - Swan Lake*, n.d.). Thankfully, in the 1970's, the District of Saanich took control over the watershed and its associated regions, including Swan Lake. Following this, the Lake began to be ecologically restored and while it is still not at a point of being fully ecologically sound, its health has made great improvements in recent decades (*Urban Oases of Victoria - Swan Lake*, n.d.). A large factor in the lake's resurgence was naming it a Nature/ Bird Sanctuary in 1975, where from that point on the lake has been regarded as a refuge for migrant birds and other local plant and animal species where their protection and maintaining the health of the lake is top priority. (*Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary | Eco Learning Hive*, n.d.).

## Cultural History and Significance

The cultural history and significance of Swan Lake is layered and diverse, but in general the history of the land in terms of use and ownership follows suit for the histories of most treaty lands in BC.

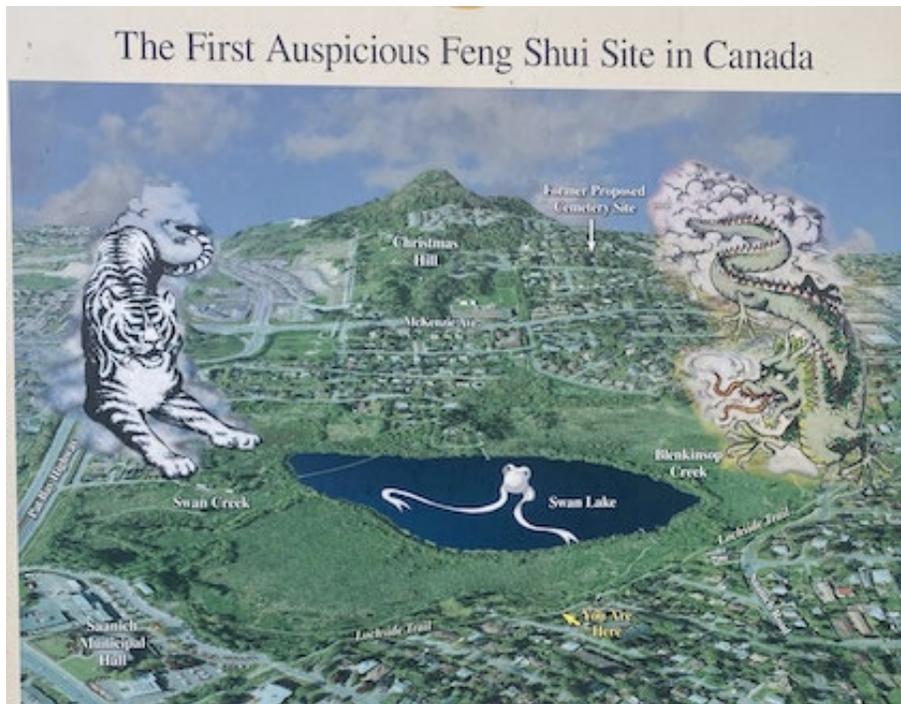
From a western, colonial position the land of Swan Lake was 'purchased' by the Hudson's Bay Company from the Kosampson tribe (now known as the Esquimalt Nation) in 1850. The terms of this purchase were contingent on that the "*Village Site and enclosed Fields are to be kept for our own use, ['our', being the Kosampson tribe], for the use of our children, and for those who may follow after us, and the lands shall be properly surveyed hereafter*" (Morrison, 2015). This agreement meant that the indigenous tribes who occupied that land could

continue to use the land as they had been, however now they would use the land alongside the European settlers. Following this purchase, Swan Lakes history took roots in hospitality. In 1864, on the south side of the lake the Swan Lake Hotel was built (Ungstad, 2012). The hotel was known for entertaining guests in all seasons with fishing in the summer, skating in the winter, and dancing year-round providing fun, active outlets for its guests. Tragically, the hotel burnt down and was rebuilt twice before closing for good in 1897 (Ungstad, 2012)..

From an indigenous view, Swan Lake is a place of cultural significance to nations including the Lekwungen, Esquimalt, Songhees, WSÁNEĆ peoples. In particular, the Songhees people had a prominent presence in the Swan Lake area. Swan Lake was once a frequented hunting, fishing, and foraging ground for the Songhees people. Infact, over the years of restoring the lake a number of spear heads and arrows have been uncovered which provide evidence to this history (Morrison, 2015). The Songhees people gathered and prepared a medley of local plant species in which they used for food and medicine. These species include the camas lily, wild onion, western crab apple, chocolate lily bulbs, Oregon grape, salmonberry, elderberry, Pacific blackberry, red huckleberry, thimbleberry, and fern rhizomes (Morrison, 2015). The Songhees people also gathered cuttings from species such as cat-tails and swamp rushes and used them for building shelters, mats, baskets, and traditional clothing (Morrison, 2015). The Songhees nation would also capitalize on the abundant bird populations over their winter and spring migrations through hunting and collecting eggs as forms of sustenance. In doing this, the people of the nation were sure to use the birds they hunted for their full inherent value; feathers and bones were used for spiritual and ceremonial use and also incorporated in the makings of traditional dress (Morrison, 2015). Similarly, any larger mammals that the Songhees may have hunted such a deer were used in full; their meat as sustenance, hides were turned into clothing, and various tools were made from their antlers (Morrison, 2015)

A third cultural history associated with Swan Lake is with the *Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Victoria*, who purchased a portion of Swan Lake from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1891. The association had hoped to build a cultural cemetery on the purchased plot of land but local farmers on the land opposed it for ecological reasons. To commemorate the land and their culturally significant intentions for it, the association deemed swan lake an "*auspicious Feng Shui site*", the first in Canada in fact. The Feng Shui of the site is understood through the topography of the area. The lake hill to the east is represented by a Green Dragon,

indicating nature, health, and tranquility; the lower ridge to the west is symbolized with a white tiger, denoting power and army; and the lake itself linking the two is embodied by the luminous pearl, which promotes wisdom (Information retrieved from info sign located at Swan Lake, 2021)



*Figure 3. Representative Map of Swan Lake Feng Shui. Photo taken from info sign at Swan Lake. (Bottay, 2022)*

### Contemporary ecological significance

Contrary to its past of being used as an unsanctioned garbage dump, Swan Lake is now regarded as an ecologically significant site as it is a known nature and bird sanctuary which seeks to encourage the protection of the watershed ecosystem and promote biodiversity.

The sanctuary is home to a diverse range of water and avian birds including: ducks, geese and swans; cormorants; bitterns and herons; new world vultures; hawks and eagles; falcons; pheasants and grouse; new world quail; rails and coots; cranes; plovers; sandpipers and phalaropes; gulls and terns; pigeons and doves; barn owls; typical owls; nightjars;

hummingbirds; kingfishers; woodpeckers; tyrant flycatchers; shrikes; vireos; jays and crows; larks; swallows; chickadees; long-tailed tits; nuthatches; creepers; wrens; kinglets; thrushes; mimidae; starlings; wagtails and pipits; waxwings; wood-warblers; tanagers; emberizids; cardinals; blackbirds and orioles; finches and crossbills; and old world sparrows (BirdChklst, Saunders Data, PDF shared by Cara Gibson, Nature Sanctuary Executive Director).

While I myself did not observe all of these bird species in my visit, all of these bird species come and go from swan lake as they please in their migratory routes, and are protected under the nature sanctuary. Many of these species can be spotted throughout the sanctuary in wetland areas and on the lake itself. During my time at Swan Lake, I was able to spot dozens of Mallard Ducks (*Anas platyrhynchos*) (*Birds, Reptiles & Other Vertebrates Portal | Britannica, n.d.*), both male and female; a handful of large cormorants (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*)(*Birds, Reptiles & Other Vertebrates Portal | Britannica, n.d.*) resting on the dock; one annas humming bird (*Calypte anna*)(*Birds, Reptiles & Other Vertebrates Portal | Britannica, n.d.*) fluttering in the trees; and countless chickadees (*Poecile paridae*)(*Birds, Reptiles & Other Vertebrates Portal | Britannica, n.d.*) darting all around.

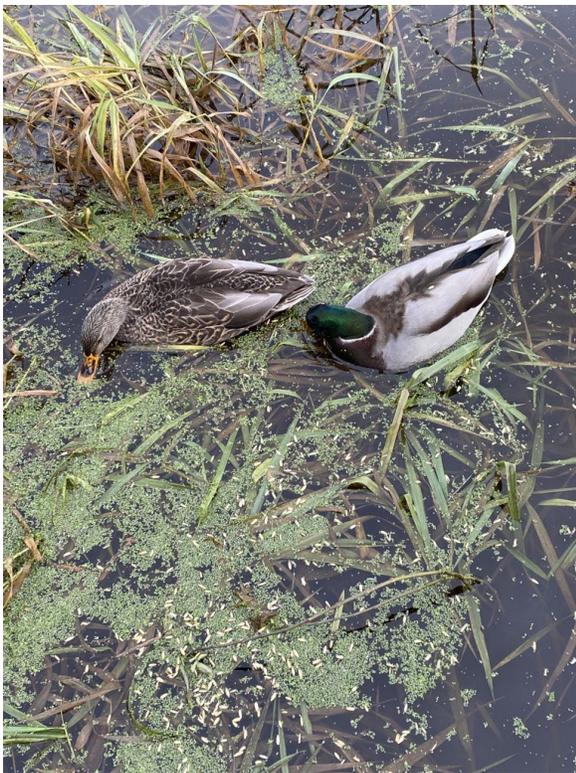


Figure 4. Male and female Mallard Ducks in Swan Lake. (Bottay, 2022)

Swan lake is also home to an ensemble of plant species also under the protection of the nature sanctuary. In the lands surrounding the lake and wetland area there is rocky outcrop substrate which houses Garry Oak and Arbutus trees as-well-as a small collection of Douglas and Grand Firs in the more forested region of the lake (Morrison, 2015). In the lower wetlands surrounding the lake there is a shrub layer including plant species such as: native willows, red osier dogwood, hardhack and black cottonwood, as-well-as an unfortunate abundance of the invasive reed canary grass. This grass was introduced into the area because it was a known to be a species that is tolerable to winter flooding, however, this species was more persistent than predicted and began to run rapid. Closer to the edges of the lake you can find a range of species of low-lying shrub willow: Pacific, Sitka, Geyer's, and Hookers; as well as a few large weeping willow trees which were introduced to aid in waterflow. Getting right down the shores of the lake you can find tall cattails, bulrush and yellow pond lily intermixed with the invasive reed canary grass (Morrison, 2015). While I did not explicitly identify all of these plant species myself during my time at Swan Lake, their presence is very apparent all around the lake.



*Figure 5. Photo of Swan Lake wetlands. (Bottay, 2022)*

Given the diversity of both bird and plant species within the Swan Lake area and sanctuary, it gives great promise to the ecological resurgence of the lake. In comparison to its level of biodiversity in the 1960's it is apparent that the conservation efforts being made by the sanctuary have been very effective.

The nature sanctuary, in 2010, published a *Swan Lake Ecosystem Management Plan* which includes 6 goals for the future of swan lake:

1. Manage ecosystems in a preservative and restorative orientation that supports resilience to disturbance.
2. Work with land stakeholders on implementing policies and practices to improve hydrology and water quality.
3. Maximize local public engagement in the continued restoration of the ecosystem.
4. Orient the sanctuary around education and learning
5. Continue active research on the area as well as reflect on and learn from archived data
6. Maximize public enjoyment and engagement in the sanctuary while maintaining ecosystem preservation.

(Lise Townsend, 2010).

*(Management Plans – Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, n.d.)*

These goals provide a great foundation for the management on Swan Lake and have proved to be both attainable and sustainable in terms of management that seek to uphold the status of the sanctuary while continuing to strive for further improved health of the ecosystem.

### Contemporary cultural significance

Presently, the cultural significance of Swan Lake exists mostly in the frequent users of the lands such as varying levels of bird watchers, those connected with the sanctuary house, and members of the public who use the trails recreationally. Swan Lake has an impressive network of trails and boardwalks that circle the lake as an extension of the Lochside trail, as-well-as inviting benches and sitting rocks dispersed around the lake for those who wish to sit and take in the peace of the nature. There is a great devotion to bird watching that goes on at Swan Lake. There are bird watching walks organized by the sanctuary that run twice a week as well as countless

members of the public that come to the lake with their cameras and binoculars as they please. There is also an education presence at the lake through the sanctuary house. Inside the house they offer interactive displays that work to educate the public on the species at the lake and the innerworkings of how the area is managed. There are also a number of educational and recreational kids' camps offered through the sanctuary that expose the camp goers to the nature and beauty of the area as well as the concepts of ecological protection and preservation.

In terms of contemporary indigenous presence on the lands there is minimal active representation from the nations themselves other than the working relationship between the nature sanctuary and the indigenous nations whose land it is on. This is apparent in the recognition and acknowledgement of the land use and rights. This being said, in the recent results of the 2021 nature sanctuary supporter survey, there was an overwhelming desire from the public for indigenous-led programming and education through the sanctuary. It is no doubt that this would be a tremendous addition to all the sanctuary has to offer (Supporter Survey Results, 2021).

### Personal impressions of place

Following this report, my personal impressions of Swan Lake have only heightened. I was first made aware of Swan Lake as being an extension of Lochside trail which I frequently walk, run and cycle. In November I moved into a house by Uptown Mall, at this point I realized I was lucky enough to be within a 15-minute walk to the trailhead of Swan Lake, this proximity encouraged me to go and check it out. My third, more coincidental, exposure to Swan Lake was hearing from my mother about how she used to walk Swan Lake regularly with her grandma in the 1970's-80's when she was living in the area, this would have been in the period where environmental restoration of the lake was taking off. Now, I am lucky enough to be able to frequent Swan Lake on a weekly basis as it is a perfect walk for a study break from school.

My most recent trip to Sawn Lake, which began as a reconnaissance mission for this report, started with a stop in off the trail at the nature sanctuary house where I was able to walk around the house and interact with their educational tools. While being there was lucky enough to speak with Cara Gibson, the executive director of the sanctuary house. Cara was pleased to hear about this assignment and my interest in Swan Lake. She was incredibly helpful in my

research process by forwarding a checklist of bird species within the sanctuary, and a handful of other resources used throughout this report.

Continuing on with my walk around the lake, I was passed on the trail by two self-proclaimed “hobby bird watchers” with large cameras in tow. These two bird watchers were delighted to stop and chat and even pointed out a few bird species as we talked. I wish I had caught their names or had even taken a photo of them because they in themselves were truly a thing a beauty. In our conversation, one of the bird watchers laughed to himself and said “There aren’t many birds to watch now, but in the spring when they return all they do is eat and reproduce” the other man laughed in response and said “Well isn’t that what life is all about, anyways?” I joined them in their laughter.

I thought this conversation was a great way to wrap up my visit to Swan Lake and conclude this report. At the end of the day this beautiful sanctuary is a place to honour the past and present of the land, the species, and each other. How lucky are we to get experience a space such as Swan Lake.

Citations:

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