



Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary Society
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Vision 50 Community Listening Workshop: What We Heard

Introduction & Purpose

On September 13, 2025, the Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary Society convened a community listening workshop as a cornerstone of our Vision 50 project. The goal of Vision 50 is to provide a long-term vision and strategic framework that will guide the Society's work for the Nature Sanctuary over the next few decades.

Workshop participants represented a cross-section of Indigenous leaders, local government, conservation groups, educators, and community associations, as well as past and current Board and Staff members and long-term supporters, coming together to help shape the next 50 years of the Nature Sanctuary.

This document offers a high-level synthesis of the rich discussions, ideas, and aspirations shared during the workshop. The Society is immensely grateful for the time, wisdom, and passion shared by all workshop participants. A special thank you to Mo Dawson for the beautiful graphic recording of the event that accompanies this document.

The group's input provides a clear and powerful mandate as the Society moves forward in drafting a 50-year vision statement and strategic framework.

Overarching Themes

Across all group discussions, three themes were evident:

1. **Ecological Restoration:** The important work of restoring and stewarding the Nature Sanctuary's unique ecosystems, especially in the face of growing urban pressure on its boundaries and vital natural resources. There was recognition of the value of incorporating hands-on learning and volunteer opportunities directly into habitat restoration projects and activities to teach people about local ecosystems and ecological restoration practices.

2. **Relationships & Engagement:** The critical task of building authentic and meaningful partnerships with local First Nations, strengthening partnerships and collaborations with academic institutions, governments and local community organizations, and nurturing a broad community of active stewards. Partnerships and community building were viewed as key to advancing the Society's work in caring for the trails, infrastructure, lands and water of the nearly 170 acres (1,234 Saanich city lots) that is the Nature Sanctuary and for continuing our work as an anchoring place for community in service of deep care for nature.
3. **Building Capacity:** The often-undervalued work of prioritizing, nurturing and stewarding essential people, financial resources, administrative and IT systems required to achieve our vision.

Question 1: What do you think the Society's three major focus areas should be over the next 10 years?

When asked to identify the most critical focus areas for the coming decade, three priorities emerged, supporting the Society's current strategic focus and much of its successful work to date.

Ecological Restoration

Participants placed a critical emphasis on developing robust, transparent, and engaging monitoring systems for restoration work, focusing on tangible, measurable improvements to ecosystem health. Ongoing threats from contaminants in the Swan Lake wetlands ecosystem, invasive species, increased urban densification, regional climate change, and over-utilization of the site were flagged as important issues to address.

Key Ideas

- **Focus on Wetlands Health and Functioning:** Improve water quality in Swan Lake and the health of Blenkinsop and Swan Creeks to support native wetlands biodiversity and protect endangered wetland species.
- **Provide Robust Monitoring Programs and Use Monitoring as an Engagement Tool:** Develop and implement robust monitoring programs that not only track ecological progress on site from projects and activities, but also "draw people in," creating a deeper community of understanding of the challenges and successes.
- **Continue to Plant Native Species and Remove Invasive Species on Site:** Expand on the current habitat protection, invasive species removal, and native plant programs to help increase site biodiversity and promote long-term climate mitigation and community resilience.

Relationships & Engagement

There was a clear call to build upon our learning and teaching foundation and to create a broader, more deeply engaged and inclusive community of stewards, along with stable long-term partnerships.

Key Ideas

- **Centre Indigenous Partnership & Leadership:** Assist with developing Indigenous-led stewardship of the Nature Sanctuary, with a "First Peoples First" principle. Create culturally-safe spaces and support Indigenous-led projects like language immersion camps, traditional food and medicine gardening and cultural ceremonies. Move from an external, project-based approach to an internalized, relationship-based one. This requires building trust and respectful relations over time.
- **Community-Learning, Community-Stewardship:** Emphasize place-based, hands-on learning to foster a physical and emotional connection to the land and empower visitors to become active guardians. This is viewed as fundamental to the success in conserving and protecting the Nature Sanctuary.
- **Communicate the Sanctuary's Purpose and Identity:** Be proactive in educating visitors and the broader community about the purpose and community benefits of the "Nature Sanctuary", strengthening its identity as both a refuge for wildlife and centre for learning. Connect with and inspire our neighbours and adjacent landowners through targeted outreach and stewardship programs, perhaps similar to Habitat Acquisition Trust's "Good Neighbours" program.

Building Capacity

Participants were clear that internal capacity and clear priorities must underpin all potential focus areas. While not always visible, this foundational work is crucial for long-term organizational success and the protection and conservation of the Nature Sanctuary.

Key Ideas

- **Include Local First Nations Traditional Ecological Knowledge:** Develop organizational capacity and experience to respectfully and meaningfully integrate local First Nations Traditional Ecological Knowledge and calendars into site restoration, monitoring, hands-on learning activities and educational exhibits, recognizing the deep, ancestral connection to the land.
- **Support New Initiatives:** Strategically plan for and develop the financial and human resource base required to support new Indigenous-led and community-based projects and learning programs, ensuring all collaborations are reciprocal and sustainable.
- **Acknowledge the Journey:** Recognize the emotional, social, financial and physical challenges associated with long-term ecological restoration work, and the impacts of climate change and

urban densification—the "uphill battle"—and the need to celebrate and communicate incremental successes to maintain community and organizational momentum and inspire hope in the community.

Question 2: What are the strategies to achieve success in the focus areas that you have identified?

The second question focused on identifying strategies to achieve success in the identified focus areas. Some key takeaways from the group discussions are noted below.

Ecological Restoration

It was recognized that both improvements in operational capacity and relationship-building are required to support more robust program delivery and new initiatives.

Key Ideas

- Actively include both Western science/academic research and local First Nations Traditional Ecological Knowledge in our planning, program delivery, education, and monitoring efforts.
- Design ecological restoration projects that are accessible and provide meaningful opportunities for hands-on learning and connection, turning our engagement efforts directly into community action.
- Improve the integrity, area or viability of biodiversity of local habitats (Garry Oak meadow and wetland ecosystems).
- Convert property acquisitions to land uses that directly support ecological restoration and community learning activities.
- Design restoration projects with long-term goals and climate resilient approaches to ensure enduring success beyond the initial intervention phase.

Relationships & Engagement

The most crucial strategy identified was the need to invest significantly in building authentic, trust-based, and mutually beneficial relationships with First Nations, partners, volunteers, members and the broader community.

Key Ideas

- Dedicate Staff and Board capacity specifically to developing and maintaining key partnerships to advance the goals of the Society, with a strong commitment to shared leadership and decision-making with Indigenous partners.
- Clearly and compellingly articulate the purpose of our work. Use powerful storytelling, visuals, infographics, and short videos to help the community understand the "so what?" behind our ecological goals and inspire them to act.
- Be intentional in forming partnerships with universities (e.g., UVic, Royal Roads), schools, and other organizations to expand our capacity for research, monitoring, and education without overwhelming our core staff.

Building Capacity

To achieve our vision, the Society must both be both resilient and well-resourced. Participants emphasized that our vision and ambition must be matched by deliberate strategic choices to strengthen operational capacity over the long term.

Key Ideas

- Secure access to larger, reliable funding streams to ensure long-term financial sustainability. Suggestions included developing a legacy donor program, building a larger endowment, seeking multi-year capacity-building grants, and exploring innovative partnerships for community contributions.
- Simplify our key operating systems and make them more efficient so that Staff can focus their efforts on program delivery and services.
- Invest in Staff and Board development, including providing essential training in decolonization and reconciliation for Board members.
- Support Staff training that encourages a high professional standard in designing, implementing, overseeing and monitoring ecological restoration projects.
- Ensure the Society has the administrative and operational support needed to manage complex projects and relationships effectively.

Question 3: Based on what you have heard today, what are your aspirations for Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary Society for the next 50 years?

When asked to look 50 years into the future, participants shared a bold and inspiring vision for what the Nature Sanctuary could become, weaving ecological restoration, relationships and engagement, and capacity together for greatest success.

Key Ideas

- **A Model of Urban Restoration & Reconciliation:** The Nature Sanctuary is seen as a thriving "Urban Field Station" and a globally recognized model for restoring urban wetlands and Garry Oak meadow ecosystems. Its success is "franchised" and shared widely, demonstrating how ecological restoration practices are grounded in relationships with Indigenous Peoples, local communities, plants, and place.
- **An Expanded and Connected Landscape:** Adjacent land parcels have been acquired to secure the boundaries of the Nature Sanctuary and to create strong natural corridors to other natural areas.
- **A Thriving Hub of Biodiversity and Culture:** The Sanctuary of 2075 is a permanent, thriving home for species at risk. Swan Lake wetlands ecosystem health has been restored, and native species populations are thriving. It is also a protected space for cultural practices, where Indigenous ceremonies are a normal and celebrated part of life on the Nature Sanctuary.
- **A Centre for Place-Based Knowledge:** It is the ecological stewardship hub for the region, where Indigenous knowledge and Western science are woven together. A native plant nursery provides barrier-free access to plants and seeds for the entire community.
- **An Enduring Legacy of Shared Stewardship:** Above all, the aspiration is that the Nature Sanctuary is "still here" and thriving, with strong and enduring community commitment to conserve and protect this place; where "caring for this place is a shared project" that instills hope and fosters intergenerational stewardship.

Conclusion

Across all group discussions, the interconnectedness of the three core themes was paramount. Relationships are the foundation upon which all success is built. Building Capacity is the key that unlocks our potential. And this work comes together in the service of Ecological Restoration, turning our vision into a tangible practice of hope.

