

## **Kus Kus Sum not recommended by the Finance Committee but recommended for a \$50,000 by the Conservation Committee**

Whether today or a century ago, industrial development in BC has generally not been kind to our rivers and coasts.

This is especially true in estuaries, the highly valuable, naturally rare zone where the ocean meets the freshwater flowing out of rivers. Although estuaries make up only 2.3% of BC's coastline and are among the most productive habitats on Earth, they have also been the historic location of choice for our timber industry's infrastructure. Log booming and processing facilities once dictated how early coastal communities developed along BC's waterways.

As our industrial economy changes over time, former economic hubs like mill sites are increasingly becoming vacant land. When you add modern regulations, market forces and insurance requirements to the picture, we now have a one-time opportunity go back and restore some estuaries to their natural state.

It is the best investment money could make for present and future generations – even though the price tag of unpaving paradise is not cheap.

### **Eyesore to innovation**



While mills still operate in the estuaries of some major BC rivers, new economic and ecological priorities are creating space for a 21st century solution to decline: large-scale habitat restorations that offer a range of benefits to community partners. Restoration is also becoming a powerful way for everyday people to help reverse what's been lost to earlier generations of development.

The Comox Valley's forestry heydays have long since evolved into a mixed urban-rural economy. The former Field sawmill at the mouth of the Courtenay River is now dismantled. The remaining acres of pavement are considered the biggest eyesore in the community. The site was on sale for a decade before Interfor chose to work with local conservation group Project Watershed and the [K'ómoks First Nation](#) (KFN) in an attempt to achieve "a conversation outcome" on the property.

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After two years of negotiations, the Field sawmill acquisition and restoration project was publicly announced in September 2017 to local enthusiasm. The property has been re-named "Kus-kus-sum" to honour KFN's historic uses of the area. Before settlement, the location housed mortuary burial trees across from a former village. The present-day chance to restore Kus-kus-sum and respect the land's history offers the hope of healing, and supports KFN priorities for cultural protection as well as resource enhancement and stewardship.

Although the Courtenay River once supported all five species of Pacific salmon, sockeye no longer return and summer Chinook are nearly extirpated. This decline in what is traditionally known as "the Land of Plenty" is especially noted by KFN, whose members know the K'ómoks Estuary as central to regional identity.

Despite more than a century of development in the surrounding lands, the K'ómoks Estuary is second only to the Fraser River Estuary in supporting the highest concentrations of migratory birds in BC's part of the Pacific Flyway. And it remains in the top five of only eight Class 1 estuaries in BC based its size, species, water bird density and herring spawn. However, Project Watershed's most recent Vision and Guiding Principles for the Estuary is brutally honest: "unless we do something quickly to turn things around, we will lose this precious feature of the Comox Valley community."

A Project Watershed inventory of more than 40 projects for the K'ómoks Estuary quickly identified the sawmill site as a key area of damage and a top priority. The long-term vision includes connecting Kus-kus-sum to the adjacent and protected Hollyhock Marsh to create a valuable habitat corridor, which will go on to support birds, salmon, other fish species, pollinators – and people.

The City of Courtenay is the third partner in Kus-kus-sum, and not only due to benefits like cleaner air and water. The growing municipality sees a financial and risk-reduction upside, since softening the landscape will provide flood mitigation services (the mayor declared the last state of emergency in 2014) and help buffer future extreme weather events, especially convergences of high tide, heavy rainfall and storm surges. City officials call Kus-kus-sum an innovative and cost-effective way to "address the twin problems of ageing infrastructure and ecosystem decline."

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The irony is not lost on KFN or Project Watershed that they must pay market value and restore the sawmill site, only to give it back to benefit the whole community.

Before the pavement is removed, and the land re-contoured and vegetated with thousands of shrubs, trees and marsh grasses, \$6.5M must be raised to cover total project costs, with at least \$500K from the local community. The deadline to raise these funds is in 2019.

The final stage of the restoration proposes removal of an infamous salmon “killing wall” where both out-migrating juveniles and returning spawners (and other fish) are easily preyed on by seals. This “negative habitat” has channeled the Courtenay River, increased flood risk upstream and degraded salmon runs since 1949.

After nearly 75 years, tides may soon flow again over Kus-kus-sum’s shoreline.

This is a generational moment for the Comox Valley to create a legacy based not on conquering nature, but a new era of collaborating to restore our relationships with the land and each other.

Kus-kus-sum shines a light for many estuary communities in the province. But it is an example in innovation and leadership for the whole country.

One of its greatest values is that it’s literally creating common ground where citizens can imagine together with First Nations partners what a healthier, more inclusive and sustainable future looks like.

To learn more, or sponsor Kus-kus-sum habitat features, visit [www.kuskussum.ca](http://www.kuskussum.ca)