

Galiano Restorative Learning Centre – restoring nature and restoring people

By Helen Hall

The Galiano Conservancy Association is starting to realise a long held dream. In 2000, the Conservancy came up with the innovative and exciting idea of developing the Galiano Restorative Learning Centre. They have been working towards its development ever since, and in February 2012 took an important step forward, with the purchase of a spectacular waterfront property that will become its future home.

The property includes over two kilometres of undeveloped waterfront, endangered old growth Douglas-fir, arbutus, Garry oak and associated species at risk. It also incorporates a working farm, two streams and a cove perfect for launching canoes and kayaks. The land not only provides a stunning natural setting for the centre, but also has huge potential for developing a wide range of educational activities.

The centre is a bold and far-sighted project. Its development has been inspired by the organisation's existing highly regarded education program. As Ken Millard, Director of the Conservancy explains, "We have been delivering education activities for over a decade now, and it is seeing the benefits that these activities can bring to participants, particularly disadvantaged youth, that has inspired the dream of developing the learning centre." For some time the Conservancy has been working with youth from urban areas (Galiano is conveniently situated midway between Vancouver and Victoria) to engage them in ecological restoration work. They get their hands dirty, but importantly the activities also build teamwork, self confidence and leadership skills.

Ken adds: 'Our programs allow youth to experience and learn about ecological damage hands-on. By participating in group personal reflection, they build courage to help them understand damage they find elsewhere in their lives. In other words they are not only helping us to restore ecosystems, but in doing so are restoring themselves and their communities,



which is why we have called it the restorative learning centre.'

The proposed new centre will allow the Conservancy to significantly expand its existing education program, giving young people and others the chance to take part in multiday educational activities. The centre will also aim to run tailor-made programs for a wide variety of community groups, to serve as a research facility for students, and to provide restorative retreats for adults.

This exciting project is a unique move for a local land trust, but then the Galiano Conservancy has always sought to try new things – its ecosystem restoration work has been nationally acclaimed.

The Galiano Conservancy now hopes to lead the way through the creation of the learning centre and the development of its pioneering education program. In doing so it will join a global movement that is increasingly recognising the restorative benefits of nature to people. There is a need here to remind people of what the writer Richard Louv calls vitamin N – the nature cure – the value of nature itself for

our wellbeing. Or as Rachel Carson once said "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."

Although the planned construction of the centre is some years off (as the Conservancy works to get the funding in place), the organisation is now starting the exciting process of developing detailed plans for the centre, the land and the programs it is going to deliver. It will be seeking to work in partnership with educational organisations, funding partners, conservation bodies, local people and others to ensure the project can realise its full potential. If you are interested in finding out more about this exciting project, or want to get involved please contact Ken Millard, for information: conservancy@galianoconservancy.ca or phone 250 539-2424

Helen Hall, a British Ecologist, is on a six-month sabbatical from her job in England. She is currently volunteering with the Galiano Conservancy Association.