

Op-Ed – January 20, 2026

Protecting Nature by Building Community – An UNESCO Biosphere Region for Greater Victoria

In December, the Capital Regional District Board (CRD) quietly took a transformative step: it agreed to include the nomination of Greater Victoria as a UNESCO Biosphere Region in its strategic planning process.

The idea of designating Greater Victoria as a Biosphere Region has been discussed for a number of years. However, in August 2024 a coalition of ~70 local natural and cultural conservation groups met and formally passed a Resolution requesting that the CRD undertake this process.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are designations that promote biodiversity conservation while integrating human activities. These Reserves are connected through the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, which currently includes 727 sites in 131 countries.

There are two UNESCO Biosphere Regions on Vancouver Island - Clayoquot Sound and Mount Arrowsmith – along with nearby Howe Sound.

The driving force behind an urban Biosphere designation is the rate of growth in Greater Victoria. This urbanization represents one of the greatest challenges to the environment and human welfare where we live. An urban Biosphere Region is an opportunity to support long term sustainability through such practices as green infrastructure, restoring watersheds, maintaining our intact shorelines and modernized energy policies.

Throughout Victoria, communities are restoring creeks, wetlands, salt marshes, shorelines, and forests. Volunteers are pulling invasive species, planting native plants, monitoring salmon, and learning the names and stories of the land beneath their feet. These projects don't just heal ecosystems, they reduce climate anxiety, build social connection, and reconnect people to place. These restoration projects are vital mechanism for educating people, as well as creating opportunities for meaningful connections with nature, while mitigating and adapting to climate change. Importantly, many of these restoration projects are increasingly Indigenous-led, thus moving beyond symbolic reconciliation toward shared stewardship and long-term relationship building.

These activities are a big success story in Greater Victoria, and will be highlighted as a key part of the UNESCO application.

The core of the nomination will focus around Greater Victoria's existing conservation areas, for example: the Sea-to-Sea Green/Blue Belt, the three federal Migratory Bird

Sanctuaries, the CRD Regional Park system plus the other provincial parks, national parks and historic sites.

The application process itself is quite rigorous and will require about two years of aligning collaborative partnerships across multiple levels of government, First Nations, Environmental NGOs, community and resident groups in order to reach final consensus.

Such a consensus will complement current environmental stewardship efforts across the capital region and coordinate the current patchwork of programs, initiatives and projects across all levels of government, stakeholder groups and the private sector. So, the effort is certainly worthwhile.

A Biosphere is an opportunity to improve the relationships with the local First Nations, to support the academic community, and to work with the local tourism and business community. All this effort will work towards protecting the Nature in this City, the thing that leads so many of us to want to live here. And this is not branding alone. It is about protecting and celebrating our natural environment, and helping to ensure our children inherit a region that is healthier, more resilient, and more connected than we are today.

The CRD's decision to explore this path is only the beginning, and its success will depend on public support. The Greater Victoria NatureHood looks forward to supporting the CRD, and working with the community as the nomination process goes forward.

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