



Graduates of BCIT’s ecological restoration program attach logs to boulders in the Seymour River estuary on Aug. 8. They are restoring the habitat to protect salmon from predators such as seals and geese.

Photograph by: Nick Eagland , The Province

Most British Columbians take pride in the province’s nature, but to John Taft, it means so much he walked away from a promising career to help save it.

“I love eating salmon and I thought I should actually do something to earn my right to have them for dinner as often as I want,” Taft said, standing in the bed of the Seymour River wearing a hard hat, workboots and shorts Friday afternoon.

Behind him, seven fellow graduates from BCIT’s ecological restoration degree program attached logs to boulders with two-part epoxy and stainless-steel cable, while two backhoes moved more logs closer to the area where the team is working on an ambitious project — restoring a habitat to protect growing juvenile salmon.

For years, Taft worked at a desk as a corporate purchaser, but his interest in biology, ecology and conservation led him to enrol in the program and leave his job behind.

And over the weekend, he and his fellow grads were able to put their new educations to good use.

Under the supervision of Dr. Ken Ashley, director of the BCIT Rivers Institute, and Dave Harper, an ecological restoration instructor at BCIT, the grads are restoring the Seymour River estuary so juvenile salmon will have a better chance at surviving the two-week long transition period when they adapt from fresh to salt water.

Brian Smith, manager at the Seymour Salmon Hatchery, said the hatchery has released close to 500,000 chum, 35,000 coho and 30,000 steelhead smolts into Seymour River so far this year, but seals, cormorants and geese often eat them before they can reach the Burrard Inlet.

The BCIT project will be “extremely important” in the spring of 2015, he said, when the hatchery begins to release them again.

“Unfortunately, up until now, when they stopped here, there was absolutely zero cover for those migrating smolts, so they were sitting ducks for predators,” Smith said. “So these structures that we’re putting in will give these guys a place to hide, a place to stay, get a little bit bigger and get used to the salt water before they continue on their migration to the ocean.”

Dr. Ashley said estuary restoration is new in B.C., but a key step in rebuilding declining salmon populations.

“What we’re doing is providing that habitat complexity,” Dr. Ashley said. “A normal estuary should have vegetation up to your neck, walking through it, and it should just be a mass of logs and boulders, a really rich habitat.”

He said the “master plan” is to restore all four estuaries on the North Shore — Seymour River, Mosquito Creek, MacKay Creek and Lynn Creek.

That plan might be possible, in part, because of a disaster.

In 2007, contractors breached the Burnaby pipeline and spilled oil into the Burrard Inlet. Oil giant Kinder Morgan and two B.C. contractors were found responsible and ordered to pay \$447,000 to the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation as part of a creative sentencing agreement.

The foundation awarded \$200,000 to Burrard Inlet restoration projects and part of that was devoted to the Seymour River estuary restoration.

Over the next year, that money — and donations from organizations such as Fisheries and Oceans Canada — will help the grads plant and maintain vegetation to protect the salmon.

“If this is done right, this will be a meter-high sea of green in here,” Dr. Ashley said.

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