

North Fork Wild

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

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By Jim Cooperman

It is not often one gets an opportunity to meet a true visionary and it is even more unlikely that one can witness someone's vision actually happen. Such is the case for Peter Jennings, a transplant from England who, on nearing the end of his life, is gifting his property so that his vision of seeing this remarkable landscape both protected and enjoyed by nature lovers can become a reality.

We visited with Peter last week, a true nature lover who, at 88 years old, is still fit and vital, in part because he continues to hike and improve the many metres of trails that crisscross his property. The property, he calls North Fork Wild, is mostly quite steep with numerous rocky cliffs that tower above the Perry River. It was last logged in 1968 and now the cedar and fir trees are growing quickly thanks to the wet climate.

We hiked with Peter along the trails that his close friend, Gerald King had constructed years ago. There are steep stairs cut out of the hillsides, pole railings and log bridges that Peter now slowly repairs. The main trail leads to a small sandy beach along the river and there are more trails that head up the hill to where there are sloughs and wetlands surrounded by some leftover hemlock trees that were too old and rotten to be logged.

Peter received his PhD in metallurgy and then at age 36 he immigrated to Canada to work for Noranda in Montreal. He made the decision at the age of just 49 to retire and move to British Columbia to live in the wilds and enjoy nature. After searching throughout the province, he discovered his slice of paradise in Craigellache, where he cleared land, gardened and built his home. Over the years, he has taught piano, written operettas, helped at the SPCA and has researched and written about the region.

One of his publications is a booklet entitled, "North Fork Wild," that describes in detail his property, the trails, the plants, the history, the local geography, and the efforts made to protect it. One key feature is the old packhorse trail built in 1924 that once extended 19 miles up the valley. It was used for fire protection and also served well for his former neighbour and hunting guide, William Boyes, who once led famed aviator tycoon, Howard Hughes to hunt up the valley.

Since the late 1990s, Peter has been working to seek permanent protection for his property's ecological values. A now defunct stewardship group, Turtle Island Earth Stewards, attempted to establish a conservation covenant, but the proposal was rejected because there were too many restrictions. Another effort that began in 2003 to gift the property to the Land Conservancy ended because he realized a local group would be the most appropriate steward for the land.

One of the best features of the property is that it is adjacent to crown land that includes the Perry River gorge and its series of 11 small waterfalls. As well, there is a large old growth management area to the north on both sides of the river, where logging is prohibited. One of the plans is to construct a walking bridge across the canyon to access the old trails along the gorge. This area is part of the CSRD park plan, so with the addition of North Fork Wild, this area may one day become our largest and most scenic regional park, which will also protect an ecosystem that includes rare mosses and ferns.

One might think it would be fairly simple to gift one's property for a park, however Canada's tax laws do not make it easy. Peter would be obligated to pay capital gains tax on the increased value of the property. To avoid the tax, he is now working to obtain a certificate from the Ministry of Environment that certifies the property as an ecological gift.

The other complication, is that Peter wants to hand over the property now so that improvements can be made and people can begin using the trails, however he needs to live there until he passes away. Hopefully, the lawyers now working on this gift can make it happen soon, so that Peter's vision can finally become a reality.