

# Citizens fight against Oyster channelling

nt Islands, North Vancouver Island and West Coast



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WEDNESDAY, MAY 2, 1973



Six conservation and citizen groups joined forces Monday to oppose the proposed construction of a deep sea test channel in the Oyster River area.

The representatives of the six groups met with the Environmental Committee of the Comox Strathcona Regional Board and with George Ward Holdings Ltd., the developers of the proposed channel in a discussion session to sort out the existing problem.

Ward, the owner of Pacific Playgrounds complex at the mouth of the Oyster River, wants to build a deep sea channel which would allow boats from his marina to get to and from the ocean during both low and high tides.

At present, the channel from the marina allows boats in and out only at high tides.

The conservation groups fear the channel will violate gazetted park reserve in the area and will also damage the estuary.

The test channel Ward is now proposing would be built this summer. During the winter, Ward's engineers would study the effects of storms on the channel and the effect of the channel on the mouth of the river itself.

The environmental committee, although it has no real power to make a decision on the test channel, will study the reports of both opponents and proponents of the channel and will make its recommendation to the department of lands, in whose hands the final decision rests.

Bruce Tait, the civil engineer who will design the breakwaters and the channels for Ward's marina, said Ward will only be adding to what nature has already built.

"There is a spit of land south of the Oyster River about 1,000 feet long which has built up over the years.

"We're not building a new item, only utilizing what already exists," Tait said.

The test channel is to be 50 feet wide, four feet deep and not more than 200 feet long.

Duncan Hay, also an engineer and an expert on the currents and tides of the west coast, told the conservation groups the test channel would be built mainly to get an idea of what kind of offshore and onshore movements would be created by the tides and currents.

"We have to build the channel to find out what will happen. No one can exactly predict the effects of the channel. Only by the test channel can we make predictions," Hay said.

But the conservation groups and citizens of the Saratoga Beach area don't want to take

any risks, even with a test channel.

"I don't think anyone can say what will happen if that channel goes in.

"We don't know until it's in and if the effects are bad, then it's too late," Bert Sewell, representing the Saratoga resort owners, told the environmental committee.

Mrs. Richard Murphy of the Campbell River Tyee Club told the committee her group was mainly worried about the effects on the salmon that the digging of the channel would have.

A biologist from the fish and wildlife branch of the provincial government said he had no doubt that the channelling would change the mouth of the river.

"Everything you do to a stream changes it, we just have to decide what is an acceptable level of change and what isn't.

"We do know that generally, channelling is bad for fish production."

Janet Evans, representing the Mitlenach Field Naturalist Society said the group was concerned about the violation of the public access to the beach in the channel area.

A gazetted park reserve running from Miracle Beach to the Oyster River was set aside in 1937 for the recreation and enjoyment of the public.

Ward told the groups that in no way would the public be cut off from the beaches. He said he would make sure the access road would always be there.

Jack Hames, representing the Courtenay Fish and Game Society said he would like to register his protest to the main channel. He said he could make no comment on the test channel.

Father Charles Brandt, a resident of the Oyster River area and the secretary of the Vancouver Island Steelhead Society, presented an in-depth brief to the meeting in opposition to the main channel and the test channel.

Father Brandt said his group feels that with upstream logging practices and the proposed diversion of water by the Campbell River water board, the channelling of the estuary "will be the straw that broke the camel's back. If this goes ahead, the river will be a write-off."

The Oyster is the only river from Kelsey Bay to Courtenay that has not been tampered with to any large degree by ferry slips, floatplane docks and dredging.

"We feel this untouched estuary and park reserve would serve as an example of an ecologically undisturbed estuary.

"We feel that the . . . environmental committee cannot and should not sanction the proposed test channel or the further development of the deep sea channel."

Brandt said that permission has already been given for the

test channel, but neither Ward nor members of the environmental committee had heard about that decision.

The regional board committee is expected to make its recommendation at the next board meeting one month from now.

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