

'Friends' of the Most Protectable Areas in British Columbia

By Peg Frank



The Friends of Ecological Reserves (FER or simply Friends) is a volunteer-based environmental organization originally created in the early 1980's to promote the interests of the ecological reserves program in British Columbia. We do this by raising public awareness of the program and by raising funds to be used to:

1. support researchers in and around ecological reserves;
2. support wardens and the warden function within ecological reserves;
3. prepare and circulate a regular newsletter
4. educate the public regarding the important features of ecological reserves, including plant and animal conservation.

We are now also finding ourselves dedicated to ensuring that those areas set aside in legislation as reserves for representation of provincial ecosystems and protection of species and habitats are acknowledged in provincial planning strategies as areas needing continued protection.

About 150 ecological reserves are scattered throughout the Province. This number changes when new reserves are created and when federal protection encompasses provincial reserves, such as the southern ridge of Saturna Island and Brackman Island, which now fall under the new Federal Marine Park. Ecological reserves provide protection for pine forests, bird colonies, basalt columns and riparian communities, among other important features or ecological communities. All reserves should have a local warden who makes regular trips to the reserve and an annual report to the Ministry responsible for the reserves, but many are without. Please contact us if you live near a reserve and would enjoy volunteering as a warden.

While membership in the Friends of Ecological Reserves society is open to anyone for a small annual fee, the number of members has seldom exceeded 200. This is likely because much of the membership plays an active role in Friend's annual activities. Many Friends are wardens, charged with ensuring stewardship of each of the approximately 150 Ecological Reserves. Some Friends sit on the Board and make decisions about research, annual priorities and field trips, among other administrative duties. Other Friends provide educational support on field trips. We have a wonderfully informative newsletter, which is sent to all members three times a year by regular post and is also posted on our web site.

Over the years, Friends have made contributions to many of the B.C.'s special places. The Khutzeymateen wilderness was one of the first areas where Friends focused its support.

Following that, wilderness and old growth forests on Vancouver Island, particularly intact watersheds, became a focus of research and advocacy work. Currently, the central coast has received much needed attention. At times the political climate has been favourable to establishing new ecological reserves, and Friends joined forces with other groups to promote protection of areas such as the Klaskish, Robson Bight, the Galiano bog and grasslands in the Chilcotin.

In the public education arena, Friends have created four poster/placemats that reflect the species and ecology of the province's Douglas Fir forests, Garry oak meadows, grasslands and alpine meadows. We also encourage members to participate in annual educational field trips to existing reserves and areas that represent ecosystems similar to those found within the province's protected ecological reserves. We are always available for public lectures on ecological reserves and the importance of the province's reserves, as well as the role that BC plays in the global protection of representative and unique ecosystems.

One of Friends greatest pleasures is to provide financial support to scientific research projects on, around and about ecological reserves. We do this through a simple annual application and granting process. Recently we have supported Dr. Jane Watson with her ongoing sea otter research; Dr. Tom Reimchen and Katie Christie and their coastal fish/forestry/ecology studies; and Erica Wheeler and her research on the rare slim-leafed onions. We have also supported research on the dynamics of Garry oak ecosystems and protected areas in the south Okanagan. Friends also provide funds for annual Vicky Husband Scholarships to students enrolled at the University of Victoria's Environmental Studies program.

This year is a very exciting one for Friends because we have a co-op student working with us to create a State of the Ecological Reserves Report. Morgan MacCarl, from the University of Victoria biology department, will take the time to look at each ecological reserve, its original goals and current management plans, as well as the provincial system as a whole. She will look at information available in government files and from wardens, as well as what research has been done and where more information is needed. Our crystal ball tells us that this report will provide information that will assist Friends and government in making decisions about where and what management activities and research are of the highest priority and where to best advocate for limited resources and what to support within our organization: research, additional wardens, public awareness, etc.

While ecological reserves have legislation which provides for their protection, Friends are concerned about activities around the reserves and the current de-emphasis on ecological values and long-term sustainability or the integrity of individual reserves and the system as a whole. We look towards a more informed and brighter future. For more information about the Friends please visit our web site at www.ecoreserves.bc.ca.