

# Fragile cave ecosystems need protection: Fraser Hamilton Marsh preservation plans posed to B.C. Marsh proponents want it all

By Neil Horner - Parksville Qualicum Beach News - February 26, 2008

When Alberni-Qualicum MLA Scott Fraser walked into Environment Minister Barry Penner's office Thursday, he brought with him two different groups who had concerns to address.

"It was the invasion of the swamp people and the cave people," Fraser joked, speaking of his double delegation regarding protection of Hamilton Marsh and cave-bearing karst systems.

Although the Hamilton Marsh meeting (see related story) took up virtually all the time available with Penner, Fraser said he was still encouraged by the potential to get increased protection for the karst systems in British Columbia.

Accompanied by cave experts Reid Robinson and Paul Griffiths, Fraser spoke to senior staff member Dick Heath about the need to increase protection for fragile cave ecosystems.

"We showed them there was clearly a lack of any coordinated protection for caves and karst land and, comparatively speaking, we're behind the rest of the world on this," Fraser said. "We provided the minister's staff with proposed karst legislation that has been attempted before and we clued them in to other jurisdictions, like the U.S., which has national cave protection."

Although there is some limited protection for karst land and the caves it contains under the Forest Act and the Heritage Protection Act, Fraser said it's insufficient.

"I hammered the water aspect," Fraser said. "These are underground water systems and I pointed out they protect water systems on the surface, but just because you can't see them doesn't mean these shouldn't be protected as well. If you do an impact on a karst system, it can impact water miles away almost immediately, within hours."

Fraser said ministry staff seemed receptive to the idea.

"They did seem to understand there was a gap here that needed to be closed," he said.

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Proponents of the retention of Hamilton Marsh as a wetland came away encouraged after meeting with Environment Minister Barry Penner last week.

"We were very pleased," said Ceri Peacey, a member of the Friends of French Creek Conservation Society. "They paid very good attention to us and indicated an interest that their ministry would support this kind of effort."

The meeting was arranged by Alberni-Qualicum MLA Scott Fraser, who also came away encouraged.

"We met with Penner and senior staffer Dick Heath and talked about the importance of this wetland," Fraser said. "We took them through the history of trying to negotiate with Island Timberlands and impressed on them the marsh is in its most valuable state, for all kinds of reasons, as a wetland, so we must protect it for future generations."

Fraser said Penner responded that it appeared to be in the ministry's interest to protect the marsh.

"That's encouraging," he said. "We may get nothing but moral pressure from him, as he pointed out it's private land, but we pointed out that ... the impact of removal of this valuable wetland would affect the public interest." We got him involved, and that's good."

Peacey agreed.

"We drove home the fact that the whole 360.5 hectares should be preserved and not logged," she said. "We want the whole thing. We don't just want a portion of it."

Earlier, Fraser presented a stack of postcards in the legislature sent to him by area residents in support of preserving Hamilton Marsh and gave a brief member's statement to his legislative colleagues on the subject.

"It was a one-two punch," he said. "We don't expect anything concrete from the initial meeting, but the minister is now going to have to assume some sort of responsibility and he has indicated it's in his ministry's interest to do so."

Barry Penner was unavailable for comment on the meeting at press time.

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