

# IMAGINE BC

*Dialogues on the Future of British Columbia*

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

## IMAGINE THE COWICHAN CONSENSUS REPORT

DUNCAN, BC | JULY 22–23, 2006



## “It was the idea of a dialogue that brought me here.”

On June 22 and 23, 2006 IMAGINE BC and the Cowichan community convened a dialogue among local leaders, thinkers, and activists to reflect on the future of the Cowichan region.

In keeping with IMAGINE BC’s goal to foster collaborative relationships that can respond with ingenuity and imagination to complex challenges facing BC communities, the group assembled to examine the ecological well-being of the Cowichan area a generation from now.

The IMAGINE THE COWICHAN dialogue was a natural outgrowth of several previous successful public forums in the region—The Social Planning Cowichan forum, Food Security forums, and Visions 2020. In fact, the following Visions 2020 statement about the natural environment underscored the dialogue:

*The Cowichan region preserves, conserves, protects and enhances its natural ecosystems and manages growth within this framework.*

With this vision statement as a guiding principle, two mayors, a First Nations leader, two teachers, a broadcast journalist, three builders, two economists, three farmers, a regional district area director, two chefs, a Chamber of Commerce representative, a community development specialist, a nurse, a city councillor, a corporate executive, two environmental consultants, and three community activists assembled to consider the following questions:

*What is unique to the Cowichan area in terms of ecosystems and their relationship to our culture and economy?*

*What future do you imagine for the area? What are your biggest concerns, hopes, and dreams?*

*What story or example might you share that illustrates signs of progress toward the future you imagine?*

*What new collaborations do you envision that will point our region in a good direction for the future?*

*How can we develop new understandings and activities based on these collaborations?*



## “This is an earth-shattering place to live.”

In the opening session on July 22, participants shared stories reflecting their passion for the Cowichan and its future. Some carried the memories of their ancestors who had inhabited the area for many generations. Others were born here, lived elsewhere for a number of years, and then returned in midlife with a profound attachment to their birthplace. Still others were newcomers who found in the Cowichan a sense of home and belonging that had eluded them elsewhere.

An overarching theme was the Cowichan’s beauty, its river, its forests, its fertile fields of fruit, vegetables, and fodder crops. Many acknowledged the powerful native heritage, the large multigenerational families who have made the Cowichan their home, the generosity toward newcomers, the abundance of talent dispersed throughout the area, and the active sustainability community. Recurring phrases such as “a sense of possibility,” “a diverse community,” and “a commitment to quality” resounded throughout the conversation as distinguishing attributes of the area.

**“I grew up here and was gone for 27 years. The more I travelled the more I realized that the place where I was born is the most beautiful place in the world.”**

— Rob Dawes  
Cowichan Green Community

**“There is something deep and authentic that draws me to the Cowichan Valley—sustainability movement, slow food, aboriginal community...it’s a very powerful place.”**

— Donna Morton  
Centre for Integral Economics  
and new Cowichan resident

## “I fear for what I am leaving for my grandchildren.”

The actual and potential loss of natural ecosystems was a strong theme in the opening session and throughout the following day. The erosion of Aboriginal peoples’ culture, ancestry, and language was strongly lamented. Others pointed to the demise of the family farm and the imminent collapse of the forest-based economy.

The prevailing emphasis on growth as opposed to sustainability was seen to negatively impact not only the environment but also the community. Several challenged the “false economy” predicated on real estate speculation, vineyards, golf courses and retirement developments. Concern was expressed over the influx of new residents with ready capital but with no ties to the community and no commitment to preserve the area or to make investments that create employment. The number of young people being forced to leave the region because of rising land prices was of grave concern.

**“The lake provided food and materials for everyday use and for special occasions. The eel grass, ducks, and salmon are indicators of the sad state of that ecosystem... If we’re going to have all kinds of people tracking through with ATVs, horses, how can we restore it?”**

— Larry George, *Land & Governance, Cowichan Tribes*

**“Half of the economic development being encouraged is counterproductive to the future of the community. I have to live with bad decisions made 30 years ago.”**

— Mayor Jon Lefebure, *District of North Cowichan*

**“My kids can’t afford to live here.”**

—Lynn Curtis, *Community Development Specialist*

## “How can we turn this huge ship around?”

Participants used the metaphor of a boat to link the complex ecological and economic challenges facing the Cowichan region with those facing the planet as a whole. In his talk on July 23, Bruce Sampson spoke of needing to “lift all the boats” in response to the imminent peak oil crisis and the inability of the planet’s finite oil resources to meet global demand.

Many expressed frustration toward humanity as a whole for having the knowledge to forestall a looming world-wide environmental catastrophe, but lacking the will to change the habits that contribute to it. Examples ranged from friends living by a bus stop but insisting on taking their car, to local governments penalizing organic farmers as opposed to those spraying pesticides, to superpowers questioning global warming while thousands of Africans are dying as a consequence of drought and malarial outbreaks.

Some spoke of needing to live with the discomfort of our individual and collective sense of helplessness at humankind’s resistance to change. It was seen as an essential step toward discovering solutions that transcend the polarities that have divided us.

**“We’re on the bridge of a supertanker. The current economy has created huge inertia and people don’t like change.”**

— Mayor Jon Lefebure  
District of North Cowichan

**“I used to work on a 10,000-ton ship. You have to know where you’re going. If you try to go directly there, you’ll never make it. Directing that kind of boat takes tens of thousands of changes of course. Only the very last turn takes you to the original place. Any wrong turn can have disastrous consequences.”**

— Lynn Curtis  
Community Development Specialist

## “People who are making a difference”

Emerging from discussions about the problems were a number of observations of recent developments that offer hope for a sustainable future in the Cowichan area:

- the new farmer’s market in Duncan.
- considerable increase in organic farming in the area.
- a new forest practices code based on the ecosystem rather than the timber supply system.
- the burgeoning slow food movement.
- the Land Conservancy’s purchase of the Keating farm as an agritourism site.
- O.U.R. Ecovillage being granted a zoning variance to develop a site for teaching ecological ways of living.
- the new 400-member Vancouver Island Maple Syrup Producers Association, emerging from sustainable practices taught at Malaspina College’s Master Woodland Manager Program.
- significant reduction in water usage in Chemainus despite an increase in population.
- BC Hydro’s commitment to zero net environmental impact as part of a global footprint reduction network.

**“I appreciate the richness of the market. I don’t have to go to Victoria to sell product any more.”**

— Graham Myers, Farmer

**“People come to our village, and have an experience and it changes their sense of perceived privilege. They see practical living examples of how they can live more sustainably.”**

— Brandy Gallagher-MacPherson, O.U.R. Ecovillage

**“It takes time to change direction in a big organization but when it shifts it can make a big impact, not just in BC but as a global player.”**

— Bruce Sampson, BC Hydro

## MODELS FROM ELSEWHERE

Participants cited a number of strategies used elsewhere that could address some of the challenges facing the Cowichan region.

- To achieve investor or inversionista status in Costa Rica, newcomers must invest \$50,000 US in authorized tourism projects, \$100,000 US in authorized reforestation projects or \$200,000 US in other authorized local businesses (e.g., ornamental plants, fruits and vegetables, spices and processed foods).
- A land-based salmon farm in Agassiz, BC alleviates environmental contamination through closed environment farming practices. Waste water from the farmer's coho salmon tanks is used to irrigate his wasabi and watercress crops.
- The city of Curitiba, Brazil integrates sustainable transportation considerations (i.e., well-planned public transit) into business development, road infrastructure development and local community development.
- Bologna, Italy sustains a robust economy with 40% of its activity being small self-employed artisans. These enterprises cooperate with a number of other small firms to create value-added products that link quality producers and secure global markets.
- Aboriginal communities in Canada and throughout the world have traditionally employed a “long now” perspective in planning land and resource use. Such a view takes into account the voices of the dead as well as the voices of the not yet born.

## “Change needs to come from all directions at once.”

On the afternoon of July 23, participants convened in small groups to brainstorm ideas, priorities and actions for enacting the Cowichan region's optimal future. Here are some of the ideas that arose from these discussions:

- Develop a comprehensive regional growth strategy, which would include agriculture, transportation, water management, etc.
- Celebrate the aboriginal cultural distinction and create bridges between cultures.
- Encourage diversity of small business. Explore joining together small businesses and producers into cooperatives.
- Strike a balance between land uses. Relax regulations to encourage innovation and different ways of development. Base decisions on lifecycles as opposed to short term gain/solutions.
- Retain the region's agrarian identity. Establish land conservancies to allow people without capital to enter farming, with provisions to protect the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) and large farm operations.
- Brand the Cowichan region so that it has its own identity worldwide, seeking permission from First Nations for the use of the name.
- Give Cowichan municipalities a “slow community” designation, guided by 6–8 core principles that support a diverse, sustainable community.
- Attract people to the area who are committed to contributing to the economy. Identify and support those realtors who are supportive of this idea.
- Expand the tourism economy to include winter eco-recreation opportunities—e.g., capitalizing on the Cowichan's designation as an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International.
- Subsidize mass transit and establish transportation zoning that allows for spots for bicycles, smaller vehicles, shared rides, etc.

**“Why do we hear the Cowichan referred to as the new Provence or Napa North?... We are creating something really great here. Why not be known for that? To be equated with quality with one or two brands that leap off the page, that'll mean something.”**

— Mara Jernigan  
Fairburn Farm Culinary Retreat and Guesthouse

## “Not the same opinion but the same mind.”

In the concluding plenary session, individual participants presented statements encapsulating the kind of future they envisaged for the region.

The following statements were unanimously supported by the group:

**“I envision progressively decreasing our per capita ecological footprint.”**

—*Denis Berger, Environmental Health Coach*

**“The Valley would capitalize on its natural resources and retain its agrarian quality. It would develop in such a way as to take into account current and new generations. Biodiversity would be an important value. Another priority would be resolving issues concerning the Cowichan River, which is almost trashed. In conjunction with First Nations people, we would manage the flood plain/riparian area as a Commons. We would give the First Nations other lands, in keeping with their needs for growth.”**

—*Jim van Barneveld Jr.  
Cowichan Agricultural Society*

## “The next step is to expand the dialogue.”

There was general agreement about needing to involve a broader cross-section of the community in future dialogues about the area. Including youth and more First Nations people was considered essential. It was also deemed important to extend the geographical distribution beyond the Cowichan Valley to the rest of the region, such as the Upper Basin.

Two key questions arose from the dialogue that could be seeds for further conversations about the area:

*How do we balance local and global concerns? How do we change our perspective from thinking about just our own family to thinking about other people's families?*

*How do we get the buy-in at the community level?*

**“There are people who have not gone to university who can't talk easily about what is happening to them. They don't get invited here. These are the people we have something to learn from. We can't afford to leave them behind. They matter. You don't build on people who aren't part of the discussion.”**

—*Dominique Colin  
Economic Development for First Nations*

### PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

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- Very exciting at the end of the day to feel the energy and collaboration between people that, I think, came to realize they have a common denominator in their interest to promote sustainability.
- Since no specific resolution was solidified, it is critical that the process be moved one step farther to develop a concrete strategy to disseminate the dialogue into the greater community in a way, that they can digest and take individual actions on.
- I valued hearing from the variety of informed, committed community members, learning how they 'see' the valley and the future.
- I was pleased to see some realism about the state of the environment, not just a merry sunshine point of view.
- Important to blend or encourage participation from local leaders and get a good cross section of people. Could be a very powerful group for change.

## “With an open heart and an open mind we can work together as one.”

Productive relationships among participants were seen as a essential to creating a sustainable future in the Cowichan. A number of opportunities for further collaboration emerged:

- There was a shared intention among representatives of the City of Duncan, North Cowichan municipality, and the Cowichan Regional District to combine forces in devising a regional growth strategy for the area.
- O.U.R. Ecovillage and BC Hydro agreed to work together to offer Natural Step workshops to municipalities seeking to reduce their environmental footprint.
- There was discussion about participants getting together to present some of the suggestions arising from this dialogue to municipal governments.

**“Your community is as wide as your awareness is and your willingness to take responsibility.”**

— *Lawrence Lampson, Camphill Biodynamic Farm*

**“If they see lots of people getting engaged, governments will follow. This is absolutely critical. Change has to happen with all of us. It creates the tipping point.”**

— *Bruce Sampson, BC Hydro*

### PARTICIPANTS

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**Joanna Ashworth**  
Simon Fraser University

**Denis Berger**  
Environmental Health Coach

**David Burhoe**  
Maxwell International Baha'i School

**Dominique Colin**  
Economic Development for First Nations

**Lynn Curtis**  
Community Development Specialist

**Rob Dawes**  
Cowichan Green Community

**Loren Duncan**  
Regional District Area Director

**Paul Fletcher**  
Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society

**Brandy Gallagher-MacPherson**  
O.U.R. Ecovillage

**Don Genova**  
Pacific Palate Enterprises

**Larry George**  
Cowichan Tribes

**Liz Hammond-Kaarremaa**  
Malaspina University College

**Mara Jernigan**  
Fairburn Farm Culinary Retreat and Guesthouse

**Pete Keber**  
BC Chamber of Commerce, South Cowichan

**Mayor Phil Kent**  
City of Duncan

**Lawrence Lampson**  
Camphill Biodynamic Farm

**Mayor Jon Lefebure**  
District of North Cowichan

**Thomas Marek**  
Cowichan Green Community

**Kate Miller**  
Ecologist Consultant

**Donna Morton**  
Centre for Integral Economics

**Graham Myers**  
Farmer

**Bruce Sampson**  
BC Hydro

**Emmy Sampson**  
Cowichan Green Community

**Donaleen Saul**  
Writer

**Jim van Barneveld Jr.**  
Cowichan Agricultural Society

# NORTH GROWTH FOUNDATION



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FOUNDATION



Western Economic  
Diversification Canada

Diversification de l'économie  
de l'Ouest Canada

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MORRIS J. WOSK

Centre *for* Dialogue

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

## IMAGINE BC

c/o Morris J Wosk Centre for Dialogue  
Simon Fraser University Vancouver  
515 West Hastings Street  
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6B 5K3

[www.imaginebc.ca](http://www.imaginebc.ca) | [imaginebc-info@sfu.ca](mailto:imaginebc-info@sfu.ca)