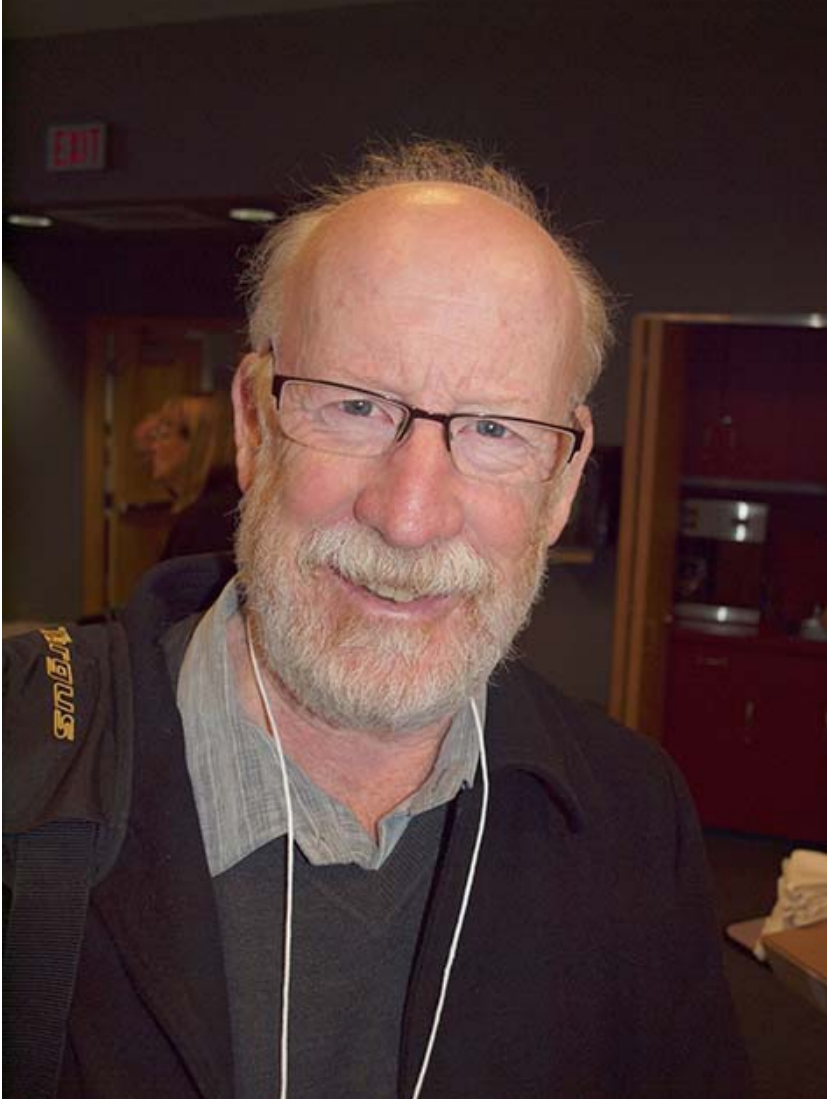


Wetland loss blamed for most endangered species in Okanagan



By Kelowna Capital News

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The Okanagan Wetlands Strategy currently underway is a great start to turning around the trend of wetland devastation in the valley, according to locally-born ecologist, bird biologist and nature writer Dick Cannings.

He was in Kelowna last week to speak at a half-day public wetlands workshop that was part of the first phase of the Okanagan Wetlands Strategy, a valley-wide, collaborative effort of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, B.C. Wildlife Federation and the Central Okanagan Regional District.

Although wetland losses have slowed and some restoration work has been completed, they are still being lost.

For the 60 or 70 who attended, Cannings listed and described some of the top 30 species which are now in danger due to the loss of habitat in the Okanagan, at times imitating a bird's trilling song or call as part of his description.

Included were four on the endangered list, five that were threatened, five of special concern, 18 on the provincial blue list and 11 of the red list, he said.

They include four amphibians, one turtle, 12 bird species, 10 dragonflies and three molluscs.

Habitat degradation and loss is the reason for most of the issues those species have had to deal with, but some face competition from non-native or transplanted species, he noted.

Neil Fletcher, wetlands education coordinator for the BCWF, says the work that's underway could become a guiding document for the Okanagan leading to changes in laws and policies that can help to protect the remaining wetlands.

"Hardly anyone is entrusted to protect wetlands," he commented, adding, "Most of our laws protect private interests, so it's death by a thousand cuts for wetlands."

In addition, government cutbacks have meant there are fewer government stewards, so today we must all take responsibility, he commented.

"First Nations are long-standing stewards of wetlands," he added.

There is much that can be done to improve the situation, he said, including controlling invasive species; mapping wetlands; monitoring wildlife populations; education and advocacy; holding cleanup days and coordinating volunteers.

"It's all about partnerships and about working together," he said.

The community has to show support for wetlands before the politicians will realize they are important, he pointed out.

Ecosystems biologist Josie Symonds with the Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations Ministry said the Okanagan has a disproportional amount of the province's species at risk, and many of those are associated with wetlands.

A cattail marsh, for instance, supports 67 species at risk in the Okanagan.

Many species can be protected if we manage wetland losses, he said.

Kelowna's wetlands now have much stronger legislation protecting such environmentally-sensitive areas along with mapping that locates the city's sensitive ecosystems, reports Todd Cashin, the city's environment and lands manager.

Only one per cent of Kelowna's land base has wetlands remaining on it, although most of downtown and much of the land around Mission Creek were historically wetlands.

Of what remains, he said 24 per cent are natural, 74 per cent are modified and two per cent constructed.

It's important to do an ecological goods and services evaluation to show the worth of such ecological features, he noted.

Information on the valley's wetland is still being gathered and the public is asked to help out by completing a short survey at: surveymonkey.com/s/okanagan_wetlands_strategy_phase1

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