

Bringing Home the Bears

Homalco First Nation's Orford Fish Hatchery and Wildlife Tours

Surrounded by the dramatic scenery of the Orford River Valley on Bute Inlet, Homalco tour guides are telling visitors from all over the world about the history and culture of the First Nation while they watch fat, glossy bears feeding on wild salmon in the sunlit river. The tourists are completely rapt in the scene, mesmerized by the confidence and pride in the voices and faces of their young guides. "You can really see the pride as they recount our stories," says Homalco Councillor Alison Trenholm happily. "It makes the tours such a rich experience for everyone."

"The Orford River Valley is right in the heart of Homalco's traditional territory," adds Homalco First Nation Councillor Bill Blaney. "For our young people to be able to work as tour guides there is very important. It's reconnecting them with our culture at the same time as it is educating visitors about our history and our connections to this place. It's really making a difference."

The success of Homalco's ecotourism venture in the Orford Valley is all about connections. It's also the result of a steadfast vision and years of hard work. By the 1980s, years of heavy resource extraction in the Orford River watershed had taken a heavy environmental toll. Wild salmon stocks were declining rapidly and the bears that depended on them for food were starting to vanish. That's when Homalco Chief Richard Harry stepped in, establishing a fish hatchery on the river with the help of private funding and support from Fisheries and Oceans Canada. "If it hadn't been for that intervention," believes Shawn O'Connor, Homalco's economic development consultant, "there would be no salmon on the Orford River today."

As production from the fish hatchery

relieved pressure on the wild salmon population in the river, the local bear population became more active and started to regain strength. Initiating bear watching tours as an economic development initiative integrated into fishery conservation regime was a logical next step.

Homalco Councillor Mary-Ann Enevoldsen is happy about the environmental and economic benefits, but also because of what has been regained culturally. "You can't separate those three things in a place like Orford," says Enevoldsen. "Without the fish hatchery, we wouldn't have the bears returning to eat the salmon. Without the bears, we don't have the tourism business. The business is helping grow capacity, create employment for our youth, build their confidence to work in other tourism businesses, and be proud of their heritage." Visitors, says Enevoldsen, are as fascinated to learn about Homalco culture as they are to see the bears. "We hear from them that they really like to hear the First Nations perspective on the story of this place."

Their investment partners have been very important to their success, says Alison Trenholm. Homalco has obtained funding from the Coast Sustainability Trust and Fisheries and Oceans Canada, among others, matching it with their own funds and project funding from their Coast Funds allocation. "The support from Coast Funds as we've developed the project has been tremendous," adds Alison Trenholm. "Without that kind of support we would not have advanced this far so quickly. It's greatly appreciated."

To further its ecotourism

business Homalco has developed regional partnerships with other tourism operators, lodges and businesses in the area, and has been supported with invaluable business advice and guide training from nearby Sonora Resort. These kinds of relationships are positive for everyone, says Bill Blaney, as Homalco's operations have also generated economic benefits for other tourism operators in the area. "They really respect what we're doing. It gives everyone a great sense of pride in our work," says Trenholm.

Homalco has ambitious plans to continue expanding its work with both the fish hatchery and the tourism business. "This is just the beginning," says Bill Blaney. "I think everything is possible for us now. It's in our hands to carry it forward into the future, and that's what we're going to do."

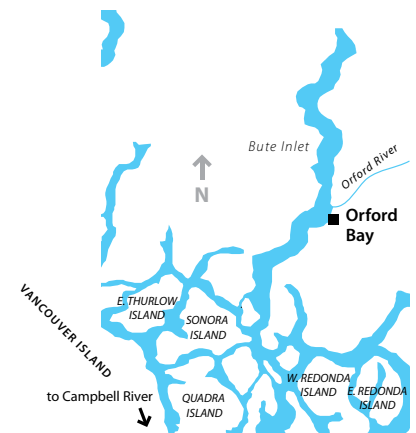


Photo by Neil Philcox