

Habitat Classification of the Fraser River Surgeplain

FRASER RIVER SURGEPLAIN

The Fraser River delta is the most valuable fish and aquatic bird habitat found on Canada's west coast.

The estuarine zone of the Fraser River provides vital rearing habitat for all salmon species, thus helping to make the Fraser River the greatest salmon producing stream in the world. Marshes and sloughs of the surgeplain are host to the largest overwintering concentration of waterfowl in Canada. During migration, millions of other birds rely on the delta for resting and feeding. The estuary presently supports a commercial crab and shrimp fishery, and has a tremendous potential for shellfish production and seafood culture, particularly if sewage treatment is improved.

Over a million Greater Vancouver residents now live on the edge of this rich area and their demand for space and facilities is placing tremendous pressure upon its productive capacity. Already, over four-fifths of the sloughs and marshes of the estuary are lost to dyking and filling. Much of the remainder is damaged by sewage pollution, countless shoreline developments - including marinas, dredge spoil dumps, log booms and harbour facilities. Pressure for additional development continues. Proposed encroachments on relatively undisturbed portions of the surgeplain and foreshore areas include dyking, airport expansion and further industrialization.

Many existing developments would have been better located elsewhere, but many people remain ignorant of the economic and social value of the marshes and sloughs.

The true value of the surgeplain has recently become known to planners, developers and the general public who realize that the remaining habitat must be preserved now or dependent populations of fish and wildlife will be lost forever.

LEGEND

ESTUARINE ZONE

Present Estuarine Zone

Highly productive aquatic environments found only where salt and freshwater mix. A great variety of fish and wildlife utilize these areas during all or part of their life cycles, particularly because of the richness of the food supply. Of particular note is the importance of this area for millions of wintering aquatic and predatory birds and also its importance as a feeding and rearing area for millions of migrating salmon and other fish.

Policy: Since these areas are vital Fish and Wildlife habitat which are very easily degraded, the Fish and Wildlife Branch opposes any incompatible developments or activity.

Degraded Estuarine Zone

Prior to dyking in the late 1800's and early 1900's, the estuarine zone of the Fraser River occupied most of the surgeplain west of New Westminster. The estuarine zones of the Serpentine-Nicomex Rivers were combined and occupied most of the surgeplain within 2 miles of Mud Bay. Dyking has stopped the dynamic-like processes within the reclaimed portions of the estuarine zone. However, their potential remains and such areas hold the highest capability for marshland enhancement of all degraded habitat.

Policy: The Fish and Wildlife Branch will promote the acquisition and enhancement of selected portions of this degraded habitat (Upland) to offset losses of habitat within the remaining estuarine zone.

Upland Zone

The Upland area is largely within the degraded estuarine zone and has been identified as having the highest potential for wetland habitat enhancement.

RIPARIAN ZONE

Present Riparian Zone

Productive river floodplain which provides for the passage of nutrient-rich water needed to sustain the estuary. This area contains freshwater marsh and slough habitats important to fish and aquatic bird migration and rearing.

Policy: Most riparian areas have been degraded. The Fish and Wildlife Branch will work to protect remaining slough and marsh habitats and encourage compatible shoreline development throughout the area. Selected portions of degraded habitat have been acquired and are being managed to offset continuing losses within the Riparian Zone.

Degraded Riparian Zone

Portions of the Delta and surgeplain on which urban, industrial or agricultural development has resulted in a reduced capacity of the land and water to support fish and wildlife populations. Remnant populations of the more tolerant fish and wildlife species remain along with a few species which benefit from such modifications. Agricultural portions of this area provide for significant nesting and feeding opportunities for migratory birds.

Policy: It is the policy of the Fish and Wildlife Branch to encourage resource enhancement programs on these areas and to make recommendations for more efficient use of existing developed areas in order to prevent further degradation on remaining Intertidal habitat. The Branch identifies the benefit of agricultural lands to some migratory and upland birds.

