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**Reimagining Skwácháys:
Restoration strategizing & experimentation for the vestigial and
resurgent wetlands of
central Vancouver as contemporary culture**

For much of the last 10,000 years, what is today central Vancouver was a maze of saltwater inlets, mud flats, estuaries, and streams emptying into what today is called False Creek -- and largely shared and jointly stewarded by tx^wməθk^wəy^{əm} (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətəl (Tsleil-Waututh) communities. In 1932 the City of Vancouver recognized the area 'Skwachice' supposedly meaning 'deep hole in water' in Squamish. In 2019, Squamish activist and language guardian, Khelsilem stated that the mudflats that once existed around False Creek were called Skwácháys, meaning “water coming up from ground beneath.”

This exceptionally productive set of ecosystems extended hundreds of hectares and is bounded by today's Main, Union, Clark, Great North, and 2nd At the end of World War I, a new transcontinental train station was built on the northern of two points on either side of the narrow channel of sea, called KIWAHUSKS (roughly beneath today's Main Street / Science World Skytrain station), that fed Skwácháys. Elevated train tracks began to criss-cross Skwácháys, the marine and tidal areas were soon filled with garbage and soil, the area became of limited interest for railway speculation, and within a decade the marine ecosystems were erased and the wetlands largely covered.

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The loss of Skwácháys, especially important for its food resources and cultural significance, represents one of the most egregious government assaults on the tx^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̄wx̄wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples and reparations are inevitable -- as is the re-establishment of most of the ecosystems of Skwácháys through sea level rise and freshwater flooding from extreme rain events. Because of the poor quality of the fill that was used to fill the sea and the many channels, many areas are sinking and have been effectively unbuildable. But because of accelerating land values and shortages for building sites in central Vancouver, vestigial marshes are seeing massive, boat-like architectures that will supposedly float above the resurgent wetlands. Even in this optimistic trajectory, Venetian-type canals would be inevitable. So far, there are few parks and areas of native habitat. Most problematic has been the new building without consultations with and reparations to the tx^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk̄wx̄wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations.

The still underwater project was begun in 2017 to observe the centennial of the erasure of Skwácháys. Over the last five years, losses and new opportunities have been sketched and mapped. And underlying these studies has been an investigation of how postcolonial recombinations of traditional Salish knowledge and stewardship practices, the expanding and decolonizing field of ecosystem restoration, and contemporary culture spanning environmental design and site-based art extending to decolonial forms of land art, could provide a creative space to re-imagine a resurgent Skwácháys. This video is an introduction to a past and future world that will transform the roles of knowledge keeping, ecological science, environmental design, and contemporary art just as the land again becomes wet, tidal, and even marine. After a review of the destruction of Skwácháys, I will be exploring the relevance of baseline areas, with similar conditions to what was destroyed in Skwácháys. Finally, I will be asking both ecological restorationists and site-based artists and designers to begin to think about locations for some channels to be dug, for where surface freshwater and sea can meet, and to select three native species, formerly common in

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Skwácháys, with which to initiate an ecosystem restoration process that could well take a century. And underneath these questions are larger ones about the roles of science, design, and art in hastening ecosystem restoration processes that are taking place without direct or planned human intervention.

Skwácháys is also a laboratory for intercultural and intergovernmental cooperation (and lack of cooperation) Skwácháys formed as a space of Salish intercultural dialogue (involving three languages) and shared harvesting and stewardship. Today many of those ancient practices could be re-established with consultation and with the leadership of the tx^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk^wxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. But how do ecological restoration scientists and land artists, from a range of backgrounds associated with many different migrations including Indigenous people from other parts of the region and country, how can we intervene in spaces and processes co-owned by Indigenous, municipal, regional, and national governments?

Today, sea levels are rising, drainage pipes around Skwácháys are overflowing from extreme rainfall events, and people in central Vancouver are demanding more open space, green space, re-establishment of Indigenous food resources, and natural habitat. But without some careful and coordinated work over the next century involving tx^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sk^wxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) leadership along with ecosystem restoration scientists, land artists, environmental technicians skilled in a wide array of practices especially propagation and protection, landscape architects, and community activists, the neighbourhood could remain an ecological desert.

For the ecological restoration science students who join me on field studies in October 2022 and after, I have two suggestions on how to organize your own investigations as part of these massive and indefinite restoration projects spanning neighbourhoods and cities -- where key ecological infrastructure will take decades to rebuild. Given that much of the restoration interventions coming years for this area will be small-scaled, site-specific, community-based, and often only partially coordinated regionally,

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what are the locations of three channels that could be re-dug and re-established -- especially in relationship to the areas most vulnerable to both seawater and freshwater flooding? And based on your functional goals for these passages, that re-establish the merging of freshwater and tidal ecosystems, what could be three species, terrestrial, estuarine or marine -- plant or animal, to begin re-establish and defend?

One kind of place to look for possible candidate species for some initial restoration interventions are partial baselines. A natural baseline is some kind of protected ecosystem that is relatively natural and well-defended aside for global change especially related to climate. But natural baselines rarely capture and maintain cultural landscapes such as food gathering sites that were major parts of Skwáchá'ys. And there are so few intact and not degraded estuaries and wetlands around the Salish Sea. But even partially intact tidal flats, estuaries, and wetlands can tell us a great deal about what to begin to begin to re-establish.

The most important Salish fruit and flowering tree (crucial for a number of pollinators and frugivores) in Skwáchá'ys was Pacific crabapple, *Malus fusca*. Ripe fruit can be propagated from seed, typically by planting in October, but growing out is a difficult art. This species probably reproduces more vegetatively from twigs.

Underlying all of this recent work around Skwáchá'ys, in the still underwater project, are the questions of where does the art-making in land art and other site-based environmental art end, and the science and traditional knowledge begin? The second, coupled question is that of when in the process of research, strategizing and planning for an ecological restoration project also become art and very creative contemporary culture. Surveying, invasive species eradication, choice of species to re-establish, propagation, management, and protection all involve human values, cultural practices and aesthetics that are rapidly being decolonized as increasing parts of Skwáchá'ys are flooded, and after a century of active erasure, still underwater.

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