

Treasure Islands

The Southern Strait of Georgia National Marine Conservation Area

BY TIM LYNCH

A golden sunset over the Gulf Islands — few scenes on our coast are as beautiful, and few mariners can travel these waters and not marvel at their luck at working in such surroundings. The Gulf Islands are indeed an environmental treasure, but they are under increasing pressure thanks to southern BC's growing population, especially in Victoria and Vancouver.

In an effort to protect portions of the southern Gulf Islands and surrounding waters, Parks Canada is currently working with the public to assess the feasibility of establishing a National Marine Conservation Area (NMCA) in the southern Strait of Georgia. This NMCA proposal is one of 29 NMCAs that Parks Canada hopes to create in the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic oceans, and the Great Lakes. When they are in place they will function similar to Canada's National Parks, providing future generations of Canadians with naturally evolving plant and animal ecosystems usually in unison with majestic vistas. Unlike the national park system, where commercialization and residential development is controlled, the NMCAs will serve to achieve a balance between the people and businesses already resident in the areas with the conservation of local marine ecosystems.

In order to accommodate the different kinds of environments within the designated areas, five zones are being proposed: Access & Services, Multiple Use, Conservation, Sanctuary, and Special Preservation. Human access and enterprise would be allowed with varying degrees in the first four zones. Access to the Special Preservation zone would be denied except for research and monitoring purposes. Defining the borders for NMCAs and how zones should be constituted and managed is a large part of the ongoing dialogue Parks Canada is having with all stakeholders.

BC's Most Heavily Travelled Coastline

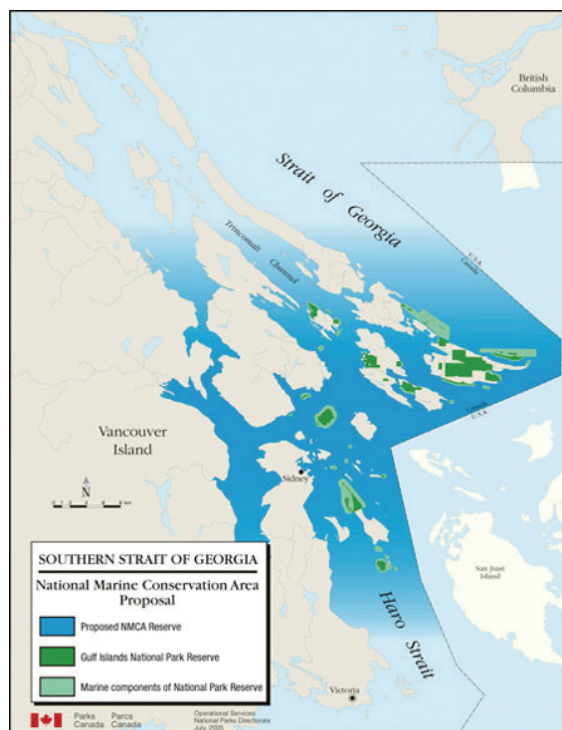
Following the signing of the Canada / British Columbia Memorandum of Understanding in the fall of 2003, a feasibility study was launched to examine the possibility of establishing a national marine conservation area (reserve). The MOU sets out the framework for Parks Canada and BC to work cooperatively to complete the study. In the conventional Parks Canada paradigm one envisages an isolated coastline

with vistas of majestic beauty making a journey to the location very worthwhile. People familiar with BC's west coast would be able to point to many areas where its pristine coastline should be preserved in their natural isolation.

At a Marine Mixer organized by Parks Canada and the BC Government in Vancouver at the end May, it became apparent to this author that the area being considered as one of Canada's Pacific NMCAs includes the most heavily travelled part of the BC coast line, the Southern Strait of Georgia. The proposed boundary encompasses an area of approximately 1,260 square kilometres and includes water surrounding both Saltspring and Galiano Islands, and abuts the east coast of Kuper and Thetis islands, thereby including the key features of Sansum Narrows, Porlier Pass and central Trincomali Channel.

The proposed boundary also identifies areas for further boundary refinement in Brentwood Bay, Sidney Bay, Cowichan Bay, Fulford Harbour and Ganges Harbour, subject to consultations with First Nations, local government, tenure holders, harbour authorities and other stakeholders. The proposed area also includes additional areas of Active Pass in the open Strait of Georgia along the coasts of Galiano and Valdes islands out to approximately the 200 meter bathymetric contour, north to and including Gabriola Passage, the Gabriola Reefs and the waters surrounding the Flat Top Islands. Also included are the waters connecting Gabriola Passage to False Narrow and Dodd Narrows, north of De Courcy Island. The southern boundary in the Strait of Georgia follows the Canada-United States boundary to south of D'Arcy Island, where the boundary closes to Gordon Head to the southern end of Cordova Bay.

When asked why this most densely populated and very busy area of the BC coastline was chosen, Bill Henwood, the person at Parks Canada who is quarterbacking this initiative,



The Southern Strait of Georgia National Marine Conservation Area (NMCA) comprises a series of discrete areas with various existing uses. To accommodate the different environments within the designated areas, five different conservation/usage zones are proposed.



The Orca Pass International Stewardship Area was constituted in 1999 by individuals and non-government organizations on both sides of the American/Canadian boundary, to preserve the unique marine ecology of Boundary Pass.

comments that “Everyone asks that question when they first come to terms with the area we are talking about.” He then quickly explains that the process is very much in the consultative phase, saying that “While Canada is committed to moving in the direction of Marine Conservation Areas, nothing about the proposed Southern Strait of Georgia NMCA reserve is set in stone at this time. Parks Canada is committed to securing input from all stakeholders who are likely to be affected by any future legislation that will arise from the consultative process; this would include anyone with a long-term business interest in or affiliated with the designated area above, on or below the water surface as well as on or below the seabed.”

I began to appreciate the rationale for choosing the Southern Strait of Georgia after hearing Bill Henwood describe the future 25-year vision for the NMCA as “one of the most vibrant and productive ecosystems on Canada’s Pacific coast.” He stressed that the area “is healthy and able to provide a range of ecological and social services for its resident population and stakeholders, for Canadians and for visitors from around the world. The establishment of the NMCA Reserve has made a significant contribution to this recovery, and is recognized as a world model in achieving a balance between protection and conservation that together effectively supports the ecologically sustainable use of the region’s marine resources.”

Stakeholder Participation

The challenge, Henwood says, is getting important stakeholders to free up time in their busy schedules and become involved in the consultative process. He agreed that such actions by government could be seen as Ottawa dictating to fishing and marine communities on the west coast how they should go about doing their business. At the present stage, the process is completely open and all comments and suggestions are taken into account in the overall formulation of policy that will support the final legislation. Lewis Bubl ,

Commercial Fisheries Advisor to Parks Canada said “It is critical for BC fisherman to become familiar and understand what is being proposed for the Southern Strait of Georgia NMCA. All stakeholders in the Area will be expected to abide by whatever legislation developed by this process. Rather than see such direction as being typical government interference, it would be more constructive to be actively involved in these earlier policy formulation stages of the process in order to help create something they can live with.” Rob Paynter from the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Land’s Integrated Land Management Bureau said “Such recreational business interests, as fishing, whale watching, or scuba diving, will be affected by NMCAs and its different zone areas. It is preferable that such business interests become actively involved in this process than complain when the legislation is passed.” There was agreement that any local marine operator renting a boat would be responsible for ensuring that their tenant is familiar with travel limitations within the Area.

Facing Reality

The temptation is to see NMCAs as another excuse for government to interfere with fishing and marine folk going about their business. There are many instances where actions taken by the government in Ottawa, 2,000 miles from BC’s coastline, have not proven to be in support of BC marine communities. The NMCA initiative is not this type of government “interfering” initiative. NMCAs are part of a universal trend among most consumers in advanced countries in support of preserving natural ecosystems. The reality is that Canadians in general and most other peoples want to see their governments take actions that will support sustainable user friendly environments. When governments sense the trend of public opinion, they decide to take the lead. Resources are allocated to facilitate due diligence in support of an outcome that will be favourable to the majority. Anyone who feels threatened by such instruments of democracy must become involved in the policy formulation phase and make their position clear. To complain after the legislation is passed is too late.

Pride of Ownership

A major part of the initiative supporting NMACs is an educational program that targets all ages living within the Southern Strait of Georgia and further across BC. Given their respect for nature and the natural environment it is likely that the vast majority of British Columbians will buy into the concept of an internationally recognized marine conservation area being located at their front door. Assuming a pride of ownership will likely lend support to compliance with the regulations supporting the pending legislation, particularly as future generations more readily adopt the concept of protecting and conserving this irreplaceable marine ecosystem, complemented as it is by natural landscapes and seascapes vistas in the uniquely BC marine and coastal environment.


Law Enforcement

In the future all nautical charts, virtual and in hard copy, will list NMCAs and their respective zones. Navigational technology such as GPS will be available for determining the location of vessels around and within NMCAs. Given the establishment

of a local pride of ownership it is expected that compliance will be high among local residents and most visitors. That said, laws are only as affective as the policing system established to enforce them. As was discussed in the article about VPD Marine Unit, (**Mariner Life** April 2007) law enforcement on water is a challenging exercise. The law enforcement role of Parks Canada wardens in National Parks has recently been reviewed by the Canadian Appeals Office on Occupational Health and Safety. The Office has decided that they are no longer to serve as Peace Officers with arresting powers, and are not allowed to carry any armament. Primarily, the RCMP is responsible for law enforcement on Canada's water ways. Given the limited resources allocated for such purposes other alternatives are being considered. These considerations are part of the ongoing debate around maritime security and law enforcement on water that is under review with respect to the roles and responsibilities of the RCMP, DFO Fisheries Officers, Canadian Forces, and Canadian Coast Guard along with the local constabulary such as the VPD Marine Unit.

International and Aboriginal Obligations — The Orca Pass

In the fall of 1999 local individuals and non-government organizations on both sides of the American / Canadian boundary came together to preserve the unique marine ecology they share with nature. Recognizing that pods of Orcas, among other threatened marine species, transit the Boundary Pass between the Canadian Gulf Islands and the US San Juan Islands, they constituted the concept of the Orca Pass International Stewardship Area. A common sense of gratitude among all people in sharing with nature a distinctive maritime ecology was complemented by the involvement of American Coastal Salish tribes and local Canadian First Nations. These grassroot alliances have created a unique multi-cultural and spiritual experience.

The more you come to understand the philosophy of purpose of NMCA and Orca Pass initiatives, the more you appreciate that aboriginal folk were right all along. Initiatives like the NMCA and the Orca Pass serve to constitute a way of reconciling the expectations of the region's current inhabitants (and the fast-paced demands of modern society) with the values and beliefs spoken about by aboriginal elders in terms of living in balance with the land, water and air. Beyond the sciences being used to rationalize such initiatives, this ecological dream has a hereditary obligation to become a reality. 

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For articles on BC fishing and marine Policy see
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For Information

Strait of Georgia NMCA website
www.pc.gc.ca/straitofgeorgia

Orca Pass International Stewardship Area
www.georgiastrait.org/orcainfo.php

BC Nature website
www.naturetrust.bc.ca/

