

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

An Eden where the river meets the sea; Environmental groups have done much to save the Heart of the Fraser. What's needed now is a collaborative effort by the many governments responsible for one of the world's great rivers

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VANCOUVER -- Mark Angelo had been paddling for a month down the Fraser River and was aching for the comforts of home when he came around a bend just south of Hope. Suddenly his spirits lifted as the sky opened up over the great, glacial flood plain that is the Fraser Valley - and he found himself gaping in wonder.

Here, when the sun falls into the Pacific, the light angles up under the clouds, at times turning them as red as the flanks of spawning salmon. Along the shore, groves of ancient black cottonwoods line the banks, their leaves shimmering in the wind.

After the drama of Hell's Gate in the darkness of the Fraser canyon and the breathtaking sweep of the Cariboo-Chilcotin dry lands north of Lillooet, Mr. Angelo had not expected to be stunned by such wild beauty on the back doorstep of Metro Vancouver.

It was something he's never forgotten, and which today is driving his effort to try to save the lower river from the threats of development in the rapidly growing Lower Mainland.

"I was amazed," he says of his 1975 experience. "It was my first trip down the entire length of the Fraser ... and I just never anticipated finding what I think is the most beautiful stretch of the river, right there, where the river runs into the most heavily populated region in the province."

That trip convinced Mr. Angelo, chair of the Rivers Institute at the British Columbia Institute of Technology, that the Fraser is one of the world's great rivers, and no stretch is richer than the length through the Fraser Valley.

"I call it the Heart of the Fraser," he said, reciting a title that has become a rallying point for a remarkable effort to save large sections of the river between Vancouver and Hope.

The Rivers Institute, Nature Trust of British Columbia, North Growth Foundation, Ducks Unlimited and others have been working together, lobbying governments for protective measures and raising funds to acquire key pieces of private lands.

Over the past few years, the Nature Trust has bought six pieces of property, including 201 hectares on the Chehalis River, 25 hectares in McGillivray Slough and 22 hectares at Harrison Knob, a hump of land near the confluence of the Harrison and Fraser Rivers where there are ancient burial grounds.

Ducks Unlimited has saved 125 hectares at Nicomen and Norrish Creeks, and together with the District of Mission and the Stave Lake Salmonid Enhancement Society, protected another 52 hectares at Silverdale Creek Estuary.

Mr. Angelo said he hopes Bristol Island, a popular fishing place near Hope, Mariah Slough, near Agassiz, and Stawberry Island, near Dewdney, can all be secured "for the next stages of the Heart of the Fraser project."

Those are just small pieces in the puzzle, however, and Mr. Angelo is hoping a long list of private and Crown lands can be set aside over the next several years.

"It would take tens of millions to get all the land that is needed," he said. "That's a lot, but we've got a priority list and we are going after it a bit at a time."

Mr. Angelo said what's needed most, besides donations, is a method of getting all the different municipal, regional, provincial, federal and first nations governments together.

"The river runs through a lot of different jurisdictions and we desperately need a mechanism so that we can all work together collaboratively," he said. "Right now there are a lot of projects under way in a lot of different areas, but we need to somehow bring it all together."

In Metro Vancouver, the idea of neighbouring jurisdictions working in a shared forum on waste and transit issues is well established. Why can't all the government bodies from Hope to Metro Vancouver get together weekly or monthly to talk about saving one of the world's great rivers?

"Few places on Earth have such a rich, intact river system immediately adjacent to a major urban centre," said Mr. Angelo. "The Heart of the Fraser, with its complex system of islands, gravel bars and vegetation, supports an amazing array of life. ... A lot of people, if you ask them where B.C.'s single biggest salmon spawning run is, will say the Adams River. But it's not. It's the lower Fraser, where you get 20 million pink salmon spawning some years. I can go out there and paddle it on a weekend and see deer, bears, even cougars. Not enough people in Vancouver know what a remarkable, beautiful and wild place it is - but we're trying to change that."

Thirty-six years ago, Mr. Angelo paddled into the Heart of the Fraser for the first time, and fell in love with it. He says his dream now is to make sure his grandchildren have the same chance.

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