

2025 State of Natural Features Report



Making a difference...together

September 2025

TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The CRD conducts its business within the Territories of many First Nations, including but not limited to BOKEĆEN (Pauquachin), MÁLEXEL (Malahat), paa?čiid?atx (Pacheedaht), Spune'luxutth (Penelekut), Sc'ianew (Beecher Bay), Songhees, SṪÁUTW (Tsawout), T'Sou-ke, WJOŁŁŁP (Tsartlip), WSIKEM (Tseycum), and x^wsepsum (Esquimalt) Nations, all of whom have a long-standing relationship with the land and waters from time immemorial that continues to this day.



Dancing Dragonflies by Chris Paul

The CRD commissioned WSÁNEĆ artist Chris Paul to create an image based on the idea of First Nation and Settler communities living side by side and our governments making a difference together.

Dragonfly is a symbol of change, transformation and swiftness. He represents a symbol of change in the view of self-understanding and the kind of change that has its source in maturity and insight into the deeper meaning of life.

It is our hope today that our work to change and transform will be swift, that as we mature we will develop insight that allows us to be poised for reconciliation and that we continue to build strong and meaningful relationships with local First Nations.

Cover photos:

Front: Matheson Lake Regional Park

Back: Mill Hill Regional Trail

Background

The State of Natural Features Report provides a comprehensive overview of the ecological values within the Capital Regional District's (CRD) regional parks and trails. It will inform the development of the Regional Parks Stewardship Plan—a key action in the CRD Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan 2022-2032. The Stewardship Plan will provide a holistic, evidence-based approach to the management of CRD regional parks. The plan will provide conservation and outdoor recreation management strategies in a balanced and complementary manner; to inform the planning, management and monitoring of the parks system.

The State of Natural Features report utilizes both internal and external data sources to better understand the state of regional parks and trails and the ecological health of natural areas within the region. The report set out the following objectives:

1. Provide an overview of the ecological features present within regional parks and trails using available data sets.
2. Summarize and discuss ecological threats both external and internal to regional parks and trails.
3. Discuss ways to protect features from ecological threats, such as through management planning and stewardship actions.
4. Identify the proportion of regional parks lands undergoing active ecological restoration and quantify the number of parks with active restoration sites.
5. Summarize ongoing research opportunities within regional parks and trails.
6. Provide recommendations for future monitoring, management and ecological health assessment work for future reporting.



Matheson Lake Regional Park

Eco-cultural Context

The report compiles western scientific methodologies and does not encompass other traditional ways of knowing, including Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Understanding of both bodies of knowledge and how they can be integrated and applied to support decision-making in regional parks and trails is an important next step. Future efforts to meaningfully integrate Indigenous knowledge in a respectful and equitable way would better inform management and planning decisions.

Capital Regional District Regional Parks

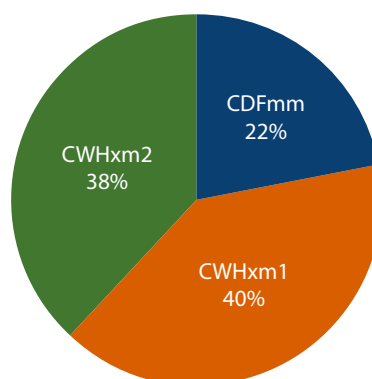
The CRD is responsible for managing 34 regional parks covering 13,400 hectares, which represents 6% of the regional land base. These range from small, coastal parks (East Point and Gonzales Hill regional parks, both less than 2 ha) to large swathes of forest (Sea to Sea and Sooke Hills Wilderness regional parks, both over 4,000 ha).

Natural features within regional parks and trails provide a way to assess important ecosystems and wildlife habitats for species and ecosystems of conservation concern. This includes the classification and quantification of ecosystems according to land cover, biogeoclimatic conditions and vulnerable or at-risk ecosystems. Vulnerable species and ecosystems face several stressors that threaten the ecological health and integrity of the regional parks and trails system. For example, the introduction of invasive plants poses a threat to native species within the system. The CRD is addressing these threats through ongoing research, park management and policy development.

Natural Features Summary

CRD regional parks and regional trails are located in two biogeoclimatic (BGC) zones: the Coastal Douglas-fir (CDF) and Coastal Western Hemlock (CWH). These BGC zones are further classified into the Moist Maritime (CDFmm) and the Very Dry Maritime (CWHxm1 and CWHxm2) subzones, with most parks occurring within the CWH subzones (78%). These CWH subzones are characterized by cool summers and mild winters and are in the rain shadow of the coastal mountains.

Area of Biogeoclimactic Zone (ha)





Mill Hill Regional Park

Sensitive Ecosystems

Sensitive and other important ecosystems can be found in all regional parks. The presence of these ecosystems indicates a variety of habitats that support distinct flora and fauna. Sensitive ecosystems are particularly vulnerable to threats such as habitat loss, climate change and invasive species. It is important to preserve these diverse ecosystems to support regional biodiversity and ecological health.

In the regional parks system, mature forest, old forest and sparsely vegetated ecosystems are the most commonly occurring sensitive ecosystems, covering over 3,803 ha (28%), 1,584 ha (11%) and 410 ha (3%) of regional parks, respectively. Forests are considered “mature” when the average stand age is at least 80 years whereas old forests are stands that are over 250 years old. The oldest forested stands can be found in Sooke Hills Wilderness (411 years) and Sooke Potholes (256 years) regional parks. Sparsely vegetated habitats include open habitats, such as coastal sand dunes, spits and inland cliffs and bluffs. Other sensitive ecosystems that occur in regional parks include herbaceous, intertidal, riparian, woodland, wetland and cliff.



Western Painted Turtle, Pacific Coast population

Species at Risk

CRD regional parks and trails are critically important for biodiversity conservation in the region, as they represent some of the less impacted areas from human development. Parks provide habitat within an urban landscape for a diverse array of species including plants, birds, mammals and other wildlife, and represent some of the best available habitats in the region.

Regional parks and trails are home to 161 documented occurrences of species at risk, comprising:

- 144 provincially listed species, and
- 61 species protected under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA).

In addition, Critical Habitat—essential for the recovery of 25 federally listed species—has been identified within 28 regional parks, encompassing a total area of 8,574 hectares. Furthermore, 20 provincially red-listed ecological communities are known to occur within these protected areas.

The presence of such a wide range of at-risk species and sensitive ecological communities highlights the ecological significance of regional parks and trails. It underscores the urgent need for strategic management and conservation efforts to safeguard these vital habitats and ensure the long-term survival of the species they support.

Ecological Threats

Parks and trails play an important role in protecting biodiversity, preserving ecosystems and maintaining healthy natural environments. However, simply designating these areas as protected doesn't shield them from threats. These threats can come from outside the parks—like climate change—or from within, such as invasive plants.

To keep parks and trails healthy and sustainable over the long term, it's important to understand these threats and how they interact. This helps guide effective and flexible management strategies.

Threats outside of parks include climate change, adjacent development, changes to wildfire regimes and changes to hydrology. Threats inside the park include invasive species, visitor use disturbance and infrastructure development.

Ecological Research

The parks and trails are often used as sites for research, providing valuable spaces for both observational and experimental research. Research conducted in regional parks and trails can contribute to national or global programs, provide valuable opportunities for post-secondary students, or answer specific questions of local interest. All research activities are subject to park rules, regulations and bylaws and go through the relevant privacy review process.

Research work conducted by CRD staff or contractors provides the bulk of site-specific knowledge for CRD Regional Parks. For example, prior to acquiring new land, information on ecological values is collected to aid in decision-making.

In 2021 the CRD Board approved the establishment of two full-time permanent Conservation Technician positions and these roles allow Regional Parks to undertake more internal research focusing on priority items for conservation and park management.



Staff monitoring rare plants at Witty's Lagoon Regional Park



Volunteers and staff doing restoration work

Ecological Management

CRD staff are working under the direction of the Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan (2022-2032) which identifies priorities and actions for the next 10 years. Additional protections and management tools can be used to preserve the ecological integrity of regional parks and trails, with widespread benefits for the entire capital region. Staff support ongoing restoration and habitat enhancement, in partnership with other organizations and volunteers to maintain, restore and enhance natural and culturally important features.

The CRD aims to monitor, assess, restore, enhance and protect the ecological integrity and biodiversity of regional parks and trails in the region. This includes monitoring for ecological changes and trends, assessing for the presence of known threats, taking action to mitigate threats, and restoring, enhancing, and protecting ecosystems and habitat for ecologically and culturally important species. This approach to stewardship aims to ensure the overall health, function and integrity of natural areas both within parks and trails and the surrounding region.

Conclusion

CRD regional parks and regional trails protect a wide variety of ecosystems and species and support regional biodiversity and ecosystem services. Parks provide a refuge for at-risk species (both federal and provincial) and habitat that is critical to their recovery and help to connect a regional landscape of natural areas.

Understanding the natural features within the parks is important for informing decision-making and developing policies that guide the management of the regional parks and regional trails. The CRD supports protection of natural features through partnerships, research, ecological monitoring and knowledge sharing, planning and stewardship.



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