

Inter-Islands Forum, September 2005

Evaluation Report

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Introduction

In response to a variety of pressures facing the islands in the Islands Trust area (Strait of Georgia and Howe Sound), and following on from a series of citizens' initiatives in recent years to better understand the threats and opportunities facing our islands, the ROOTS Group on Salt Spring Island convened an inter-islands Forum in September of 2005. The thematic question we posed to guide the weekend's discussion was:

“What can we do as citizens and islanders to strengthen and invigorate the Islands Trust’s ‘preserve and protect’ mandate?”

A vigorous attempt was made to attract participants from all the major islands in the Trust area, and this objective was accomplished. There were 130 islanders in attendance, representing 14 islands. The participants included seven elected trustees and two senior members of trust staff.

Following a panel discussion on Friday night which helped to lay out the challenges facing the islands, the rest of the time (from Saturday morning to Sunday noon) was organized according to the principles of Open Space.¹ In response to moderator Chris Corrigan's introduction and invitation to participate, those present stepped forward to propose a wide variety of topics for discussion within the framework of the thematic question, generally offering to lead them. Those who were not convening a session in a particular time slot joined the discussion groups that interested them most.

In the interests of evaluating the results of both content and process, and providing guidance for future such events and other inter-islands work, ROOTS Group organizers asked those present to complete a 2-page evaluation form. Responses were received from 38 people, about 30% of those registered.²

Table 1: Islands Represented at the Forum and Distribution of Evaluation Responses

Bowen	2	Thetis	6
Gambier/Keats	2	Gabriola	2
Saturna	1	Hornby	2
N. & S. Pender	2	Denman	2
Mayne	3	Lasqueti	0
Galiano	5	No island specified	1
Salt Spring	10	TOTAL RESPONSES	38

¹ References.

² The evaluation form was not made available until the end, and then also electronically, which decreased the response rate.

Why did people come?

We asked participants why they had come to the Forum. The question which was posed as the theme for weekend's discussion ("What can we do as citizens and islanders to strengthen and invigorate the Islands Trust's 'preserve and protect' mandate?") was designed to attract people who were clear in their support for the general mandate of the Islands Trust, and ready to engage in active support. As organizers hoped, those who came fit the profile. Almost without exception, they said that they came to:

- discuss ways to support and strengthen the Trust mandate;
- address weaknesses in the Trust's performance and impediments to its effectiveness;
- take advantage of a rare opportunity to meet like-minded islanders from the region;
- build connections and solidarity among like-minded islanders.³

Some came with related but more specific objectives, such as:

- to explore the possibility of forming a permanent inter-islands organization through which citizens could support the 'preserve and protect' mandate of the Trust;
- to see how other islands were managing to combat the negative forces of development;
- to discuss loss of rural character, loss of ecological values, negative impacts of tourism;
- to talk about ways to make the Trust more functional (effective) and accountable to its mandate;
- to discuss issues concerning First Nations;
- to see how well the Open Space problem-solving process would work to facilitate discussion and action planning.

The goal of 'wanting to take action' was expressed in one way or another by most of those responding to this question.

Quotations from respondents

"I came because of concern about the future. I was hoping for a definition of what should be protected and a commitment to do so."

"I wanted to learn more about what I/we can do, specifically to save our islands from the spoiling that tourism and over-development brings."

"I was hoping for something solid re direction and next steps to come out of this, e.g. how will we actually go about assuring that the necessary changes are made to the Islands Trust Act?"

"I was hoping that an islands trust-wide watch dog and advocacy organization would be formed."

³ Summaries such as these are a product of the evaluator's analysis of trends and themes in the responses received (informal content analysis). Where the exact words of respondents are used, they appear in quotation marks.

"I was looking forward to meeting 'kindred spirits,' sharing common problems, and being affirmed in actions to take."

What people found valuable

The transcription of evaluation responses revealed that participants wrote more in answer to this question than any other, a strong indicator of a successful event. Their responses were as lively and varied as the participants themselves, but they tended to coalesce around six core ideas/items:

- the inspirational impact of talking and listening to other islanders;
- the (re)discovery of common passion and purpose in working with the Trust to protect the human and natural communities on these islands;
- the excitement of hearing creative new ideas, and finding grounds for hope;
- the power of imagining and defining shared action plans;
- the advantages of using the Open Space approach (for some, not all, a new concept which most found dynamic and empowering, especially as implemented on the Saturday);
- the positives of Forum organization, including: the draft discussion paper prepared by the ROOTS Group, the warm welcome, and the Saturday night entertainment.

Quotations from Respondents

(Question: What were the most valuable aspects of the forum?)

“Meeting people from other islands. Exchanging information and ideas. Being inspired by that.”

“Reaffirming our commitment to ‘preserve and protect’ and the Trust in a tangible way.”

“Learning with a sense of hope, renewed by so many committed, passionate, fun people.”

“Terrific preparation [by the ROOTS Group organizers]!”

“Movement toward inter-island action and connection.”

“Participants taking responsibility for action plans.”

“Realizing that we have more powers than we think.”

“Realizing (again) the magnitude of the problems we have to overcome.”

“The knowledge that no island has to act alone.”

“It was definitely something to build on.”

What was achieved

A number of participants pointed out that the real test of what the Forum achieved will only be discernible in the future, based on tangible results—e.g., protected environments and traditional communities, slower and more appropriate growth, effective controls on tourism, an Islands Trust organization that is accountable to the mandate and more effective at resolving conflicts.

Many others named achievements they saw in the 2-day event itself:

- renewed energy, re-invigoration, raising the level of hope;
- getting a lot of new and/or creative and/or solid ideas recorded (e.g., ROOTS discussion paper, Forum reports, Sunday's action plans);
- forging new connections, finding common cause and making commitments to work together in the future on an inter-islands basis;
- the beginnings of an organized citizens group involving all the islands that supports the Islands Trust's object of preserve and protect;
- the realization that there is an 'island identity' in language and culture—we may live on separate islands but we're not alone!

The tone of responses to this question was one of relief, of determination and of hope. Participants clearly felt that there was strength in numbers, and that the natural isolation of islands life led to feelings of disconnection and powerlessness, which the Forum helped – at least momentarily – to overcome. They expressed a strong need for on-going connection. In the words of one, *“Too few opportunities exist for all the islands to meet together.”* Another said, *“...these conversations have been great, I mean that, but they are just a beginning—we have to keep talking.”*

Quotations

“Perhaps [the Forum will turn out to have been] the beginning of a network of people and processes that will create a sustainable and effective engagement with the Trust and with the broader public on the ‘preserve and protect’ mandate.”

“[The achievements have been:] establishing a broad network of islanders; hearing the voices of concerned islanders; creating action plans.”

“We isolated islands now have a strong connection with each other, and a resolve to create a positive future.”

“Hard to tell what the outcomes will be, yet; outcomes are the results of actions taken on an issue, not whether people had a good time thinking about them.”

Out of 37 respondents, 31 people (83.8%) came away from the Forum with a personal commitment to, or an idea for, action. There were approximately 48 ideas/plans for action listed. These ranged from investigating the possibility of doubling the number of trustees on each island, to establishing an email-based network for those who want to discuss First Nations/Trust issues, to deciding to run for office as a trustee. The majority of the ideas, however, revolved around communication and education: e.g.,

- *“Coordinating public awareness and media materials amongst the islands, possibly to include community-developed awareness brochures;”*
- *“...we began [talking about] a possible small-scale discussion on Saturna starting with a report from participants at this meeting;”*
- *“Start participation in educating fellow islanders;”*
- *“Helping to get more coverage of the Preserve and Protect effort in publications such as Island Tides;”*
- *“Start a government lobbying group”.*
- *“To share the written material with others.”*

What could have been done better?

Taken all in all, participants made extremely positive comments and observations about the inter-islands Forum. When asked the question, *“what do you think was unsuccessful or could have been done better?”* they also had a long list. In particular, they offered specific suggestions to improve the Open Space process; identified problems with the Friday night panel; and expressed disappointment with the final segments of the event on Sunday morning.

The most significant dissatisfactions centred on the Sunday morning sessions, for which the goal was “action planning.” Participants agreed that this was one of the most important objectives of the Forum, and that it is always extremely challenging. It is especially challenging if the goal or hope is for strategic or integrated planning in what is clearly a very complex field, Trust governance. As some respondents pointed out, the format on Saturday allowed for a wide-open and wide-ranging set of discussions on the Saturday. To bring it all together and give it coherent form in the limited time available on Sunday morning was, in retrospect, too ambitious. Most people would have liked more time, more focus and more direction.

- *“Sunday was a bit of a letdown.”*
- *“Not enough time in Day 2 for [action planning]. Needed a full day.”*
- *“The Sunday morning should have been handled differently, to [get us into] action oriented discussion. The facilitation should have been far more directive.”*
- *“The movement into action on Sunday should have been better structured: too little time, too little facilitation, too little focus.”*
- *“We needed more time at the end to get to synthesis.”*
- *“Needed more thought on consolidating or grouping concerns, giving them a framework.”*
- *“Some important topics that were raised by many groups on Saturday got missed on Sunday.”*
- *“Sunday should have been a time for an informal vote on top 5 actions to be taken forward from the discussions.”*
- *“We seemed to dissipate rather than conclude. There was a kind of panic as discussions ended on Sunday and it may be that time pressures prohibited a more coherent conclusion....”*

It is worth noting, for the record, that technical problems with photocopying on Saturday night meant that the record of the day’s sessions was not available that night as had been intended, in order for participants to prepare for Sunday. Participants and organizers alike had only a brief time on Sunday morning to read the extensive session notes generated, assess the rich array of ideas on the table, and try to bring it all into focus. Well-focussed, specific action plans were still possible and many were forthcoming; integrated, strategic planning was not. Although that may have been a disappointment, it points clearly to the work that remains to be done, utilizing the energy and commitment generated by the Forum. As one respondent said, *“Someone should take the ideas generated, separate them out, rank them, winnow them, etc.”* It remains to be seen just how, and by whom.⁴

Respondents also made comments and suggestions about the Friday night panel session:

⁴ Note: it had not been clear to all participants that the SSI-based ROOTS Group had taken responsibility for putting on the Forum, but not for implementing a long term agenda inter-islands

- *“The Friday night panel was well-intentioned but a little unfocussed, a little flat.”*
- *“A freer exchange among panellists and more direct Q&A [was needed] on Friday night.”*
- *“The degree of control over the discussion was too tight.... Many people [in the audience] wanted to ask questions and ended by feeling ‘handled’.”*
- *“I feel that the panel discussion should have had a non-participant as a moderator so tougher questions could have been asked.”*
- *“The speakers were invisible to those at the back of the room and since some didn’t use the microphones the essence of their speeches was lost.”*
- *“Opening night was great but it would have been nice to have a social afterwards.”*

Other valuable observations and suggestions were:

- *“Many sessions got off the topic of “strengthening the Trust” into community action initiatives. Perhaps with another brand of facilitation (or more direction) we might have stayed more on topic.... Perhaps there should have been 2 sets of workshops: one on issues, one on general strengthening.”*
- *“Groups should have stayed small, and not merged; smaller groups allow more discussion.”*
- *“Small group leaders needed direction on how to make discussions effective.... I would recommend short meetings with [them] and a sheet of printed material outlining leadership skills for effective small groups.”*
- *“The leader should not have been the scribe.”*
- *“Needed better summaries of discussion – hard to avoid bias by enthusiastic group leaders.”*
- *“Scribes should have been given 5 minutes at the end of the discussion to [draw agreed conclusions] for the record.”*
- *“Recorders editing and typing notes had to miss other Forum sessions.”*
- *“[It would have been helpful] for trustees to tell the group about on-going ventures that represented ideas being suggested.... There were 3 or 4 times when it was obvious that the audience or group did not know about the Trust’s work.”*
- *“I heard that some of the attending trustees felt attacked which is truly unfortunate.”*
- *“Food was mediocre... Cafeteria did not seem to be environmentally aware: e.g. did not seem to be recycling or composting.”*

The two issues raised in relation to dialogue with trustees appear to be particularly important in relation to future inter-islands forum planning.

Open Space

The Open Space format was, in general, judged favourably by respondents, who included self-described ‘doubters’. In answer to the question, “how effective” do you think it was, using an approval scale of 1 – 5, 28 out of 34 people (82.4%) rated it at a 4 or a 5.

0	1	2	3	4	5
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1	-	-	5	19	9
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We also asked if respondents would recommend Open Space for future, similar events. Not quite as many said yes.

Yes	No	Yes/No; unsure
26	4	5

Many respondents identified strengths they saw in the O/S process, and some named weaknesses they thought could be improved for future conferences. The main strengths identified can be grouped into three themes:

- the agenda was not imposed but set and driven by participants;
- the process was very inclusive of both people and ideas: everybody got to have a say;
- because O/S places primary responsibility for what happens on those present, participants were more engaged and committed to subsequent action.

In the words of one participant:

It's a very good [approach] because it places responsibility on the individual rather than providing a consumer model where the delegates can be passive. It also puts its emphasis on respecting individual thinking and action choices rather than presuming to teach, lecture or impose. I think this model is effective in creating involved and motivated participants.

The open, free-wheeling and stimulating character of the O/S approach, while greatly appreciated for its strengths, was also the basis on which some people said they would not recommend it for the future, or would only if some changes were made. Their themes were:

- it's a good way to get started but to 'go deeper' we need something else next time;
- too easy to get off topic; not enough capacity for necessary technical analysis;
- a greater input of skilled facilitation is needed to get beyond discussion (even though stimulating) to analysis, priorities and action planning;
- the need for skilled facilitation is critical at the end in order to have an overall outcome;
- there appears to be no way of controlling 'grandstanders,' handling strong emotions and disrespectful behaviour;
- problems with facilitators, scribes and time allocations need adjusting.

To quote two respondents at more length:

"...The introduction of a non-traditional workshop approach requires the presence in each group of an 'arms-length' person trained to listen carefully, make sure each person's presentation is clear to everyone else, elicit comments from those who are silent, teach a bit about developing consensus, and focus the group toward an 'end product.'"

"[Open Space is] a great way to stimulate discussion but I'm not sure we should do the same again – I'd like to see a professional facilitator move the group a bit further along, otherwise each year we'll end up with notes,

thoughts, recommendations, next steps etc – and each year they’ll look pretty much like the ones from the previous year. I’m for working on strategy, work plans, specific tasks, timelines, deliverables....”

The ROOTS discussion paper

The discussion paper, which was distributed to those registered about 2 weeks in advance, was very well received. Of those responding to the evaluation, 89.2% found it valuable.

Yes	No	Yes/no	Unread
33	1	1	2

Almost as many (82.9%) thought that, yes, the paper should be further developed.

Yes	No	It depends
29	2	4

They provided many suggestions for editing and/or building on the paper as presented, the full details of which will be provided to the ROOTS Group for consideration. Comments ranged from the enthusiastic, to the editorial, to the critical. The breadth of participants’ responses highlights an underlying issue: the need to decide the purpose and intended audience for any future version of the paper. Some respondents, who thought of it as a guiding paper for an emerging inter-islands organization, focussed on the need for a more inclusive set of references to all islands’ experience (not just Salt Spring’s) and more detailed recommendations for action; others, who thought of it as a potential “think piece” and educational tool for the public, focussed on the need to make it more readable, crisp, engaging, leavened with photos, etc.

Its immediate purpose, however, was to provide a shared basis for discussion at the Forum, to offer a framework for thinking about change (‘what we can do with the tools we have now’ and ‘what powers we need from the provincial government’), and to stimulate the inter-island exchange and development of ideas at the forum. In that, it seems to have been quite successful. One respondent provided a summary of most views as follows:

“Comprehensive and well-presented. Reading it I thought you had already done the work of the Forum! It was excellent from an educative and focusing perspective. The most important thing now is to incorporate salient outcomes from the Forum into an expanded paper, and to form a citizens’ group to support and further the Trust mandate, support the newly-elected P&P Trustees, and act on issues raised in the expanded material. An umbrella group, with funding, would be necessary, for instance, to move ahead with our action group’s initiative to produce public awareness materials beyond what the Trust might take on (or to act as a citizens’ resource group for material the Trust might produce.)”

The future

Organizers asked about ideas for future forums, in the expectation that this new tradition⁵ will continue. Suggestions tended to fall into three groups:

⁵ Two citizen-initiated conferences in the last two years, and one that was Trust-sponsored to which a second will be added in 2006.

1. building on the 2005 Inter-islands Forum by analyzing its results and developing a more structured agenda for a Forum that goes deeper into the best ideas, and has a better chance of producing a strategic action plan at the end;
2. more specific and detailed analysis of how the Trust could work better on a day-to-day basis, including issues of effective communication with the community, conflict resolution mechanisms, more effective Town Hall meetings, consensus decision-making, a more appropriate 'rural' planning framework, etc.
3. topic specific suggestions such as: enforcement, affordable housing, OCP development, effective lobbying, controlling tourism, strengthening inter-island connections, reforming the planning process, responding to the anticipated provincial government discussion paper on Trust reform.

A more detailed record of these ideas will be available from ROOTS in the near future.

Conclusions

That the Forum was a success (at least in the short term) is not in doubt according to evaluation responses. It appears to have had two great achievements:

- √ The first was to help build a highly desired sense of inter-islands connection and potential for supportive action in furtherance of shared 'preserve and protect' values. That new or renewed sense of possibility was enormously positive and energizing for those who came – many often weighed down by feelings of despair about the capacity of the Trust model of governance to live up to its potential as something more and different than a standard, municipal-style model of local and regional government, with a genuine capacity to preserve rural and environmental values.
- √ The second was to generate and circulate ideas – ideas that, in many cases, need to be further developed and tied to sustained action in order to achieve their potential, but ideas “with legs” as the saying goes. The will to work on these ideas appears to be there – a strong pulse among respondents, a solid grounding for “next steps”.

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that a gathering like the one held on Salt Spring in September of 2005 is an unusual thing. It is rare, in this age of political cynicism to find a broad swathe of people (except in political parties) who are passionate about *government* – not just specific issues but the vision, structure and mechanisms by which a group of communities and landscapes can be managed. The Islands Trust as an idea – not always as practice – inspires a great deal of passion; many people on all the islands within its boundaries fervently want it to live up to its promise. It is to this end that the Forum was dedicated, and it is to this end that those who came seem willing to commit some portion of their life energies.

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