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Daphne Bramham: Protecting metro's endangered rivers requires 'more precautionary approach'

Opinion: Even before climate change, rivers were threatened by sewage runoff, toxic spills and being hemmed in by pavement. Now big, more preventive changes are needed

Daphne Bramham

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Mark Angelo, chair of the Outdoor Recreation Council of B.C., beside Stoney Creek, one of B.C.'s endangered rivers. PHOTO BY K. ANGELO

Human activity has long endangered rivers with incursions of agriculture, dams, dikes, diversions, deforestation and urban development.

Rivers have been paved over, polluted and rerouted. Now they're threatened by the human-caused climate change that has already resulted in heat domes, droughts, wildfires and catastrophic flooding.





Floods are now Canada's most common and destructive "natural" disasters. Across the country, rushing waters are increasingly likely to overflow barriers, scour riverbeds, change river courses, wash out roads, bridges, homes, barns and destroy people's livelihoods and wildlife habitat.

They are dramatic and widely covered events. Often overlooked are the smaller, more frequent events that threaten to destroy some of our most important waterways.

That's what is highlighted in the [Outdoor Recreation Council of British Columbia report](#) to be released Monday on B.C.'s most endangered rivers: Stoney Creek and Surrey's Tatalu (Little Campbell) River.

Stoney Creek runs along the Coquitlam-Burnaby border. A tributary of the Brunette River, it is one of Metro Vancouver's most important spawning grounds for salmon, trout and lamprey.

When there's heavy rain, untreated sewage bubbles up through manholes covers from an overflowing sewage trunk line, spewing toilet paper and human waste onto roads. Eventually, the muck seeps into the creek.

Expanding the Stoney Creek trunk sewer line is in Metro Vancouver's proposed 2022-2026 capital plan.

It's hardly a unique problem.





A sewage spill from Stoney Creek, a tributary of the Brunette River that runs along the Coquitlam-Burnaby border. PHOTO BY GEORGE KOVAIC

In 2019, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities found that 30 per cent of water and sewage infrastructure is in need of repair at an estimated cost of more than \$50 billion. (So, too, are 40 per cent of municipal roads and bridges, while the forecast cost to municipalities of natural disasters was expected to rise \$5 billion annually to \$20 billion by 2050.)

The only thing that makes sewage failures unique here is that you see them in real time on Metro Vancouver's website .

Last Wednesday around 3 p.m. in the midst of the third atmospheric river to hit in less than two weeks, a dozen locations were flagged and a 13th had overflowed within the previous 48 hours.

Sadly, sewage overflow is not the worst thing that happened this year to Stoney Creek.





A fish kill from Stoney Creek, after a July spill dumped an unknown amount of toxic concrete wash into the storm sewer's catch basin. PHOTO BY GEORGE KOVAIC

In July, a contractor doing geotechnical work dumped an unknown amount of toxic concrete wash into the storm sewer's catch basin.

It decimated the food chain, killing untold numbers of nematode worms, mayflies, damselflies, small shrimp and hundreds of fish.

According to the report, the investigation was delayed because of staffing constraints at Environment and Climate Change Canada. Hobbled by its inability to quickly collect water samples, it also lacks the capability to test dead fish.

Eventually, the City of Coquitlam identified the culprit and levied the maximum fine allowed by provincial law, a paltry \$500.

"I would argue that a stream like this is of immense value," said Mark Angelo, chair of the Outdoor Recreation Council. The fine "needs to be high enough to be a deterrent, and I would say that that's at least in the tens of thousands of dollars."

The Tatalu is 30 kilometres long and another of Metro Vancouver's most productive salmon streams. Underneath, an aquifer plays an essential role in regulating the river's levels and temperature.

Soon, much of it could be covered with cement and asphalt and the river constrained by a commercial/industrial development following a recent decision by Metro to extend Surrey's urban containment boundary.



The Tatalu (Little Campbell) River in Surrey, one of B.C.'s most endangered rivers. The Tatalu is 30 kilometres long and one of Metro Vancouver's most productive salmon streams. PHOTO BY CHRISTY JUTEAU

As a result, 2.45 square kilometres encompassing parts of the river, forest and agricultural land is one step away from being developed as a commercial and industrial centre. Surrey council's final vote is scheduled for January.

It has faced huge opposition from the community and dedicated, volunteer stream keepers who have worked hard to restore and protect it.

It is also notably opposed by the Semiahmoo First Nation, which was not consulted even though its members rely on the river for food security.

The issues that threaten these two rivers endanger many others as well.

What's needed, according to the report, are changes across all levels of government.

Those include: More staff and better testing equipment at Environment and Climate Change Canada,

provincial legislation to increase fines for polluters, better regional protection for nature lands bordering urban areas in urban areas, requiring proof that crucial sewage infrastructure can handle added capacity before new developments are approved, and more extensive consultation with communities, especially First Nations.

Angelo said that the past year in British Columbia “highlights clearly that we need to deal with climate change in a more aggressive way. We have to go beyond words and deal with it in the strongest way possible.”

That means ensuring infrastructure is adequately designed and maintained. It means more cautious and careful development along rivers and in floodplains, if it’s done at all.

It may mean moving existing dikes and setting them back farther — as Burnaby has done in several places — to accommodate fluctuating flows and protect both aquifers and wildlife habitat.

“We need to look to nature a little bit more,” said Angelo, who is the founder of World Rivers Day that is celebrated in more than 100 countries on the fourth Sunday in September.

“So much has been built based on assumptions about the climate of the past and that is so much different than the climate of the future. Particularly now, we need to take a more precautionary approach.”

dbramham@postmedia.com

twitter.com/bramham_daphne

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