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Lower Cowichan River side and off channel habitat restoration projects will be showcased during the North American Indigenous Games (NAIG) being held in Duncan, BC this August.

DUNCAN: Fish habitat improvement projects initiated two years ago on the lower Cowichan River, a Canadian and BC Heritage River are continuing this summer.

The multi-year initiative is aimed at restoring extensive, productive habitat lost due to flood control dike construction in the late 1970's.

Work began early July one of three sites, the Five Fingers Hatchery Channel. All construction is expected to be completed on Five Fingers, John Charlie's Channel and the Bonsall Slough by early September.

Expansive restoration work has been undertaken at the Five Fingers channel over the last two summers including the creation of year round, high-quality groundwater fed rearing and spawning channels and ponds, that provide excellent habitats for salmon and trout alongside the Cowichan River. Work was also completed to stabilize a severely eroding bank along the dike, which was threatened in high flood events.

"We were eager to continue this work as the first stages of the restoration has already proved successful as hundreds of chum began spawning in new off channel habitat almost immediately following the construction last year." Said Tom Rutherford, Fisheries Biologist and Living Rivers First Nations Legacy Program coordinator. He added, "one year later, high densities of juvenile coho can be observed in the constructed habitats. These types of off channel rearing areas are thought to be limiting to wild sustainable coho production in the Cowichan River, making this type of restoration particularly important.

This summer project work is being undertaken on Bonsall Slough, which is currently isolated from the mainstem river. The plan is to extend and connect the slough to an existing downstream pool, which will increase the amount of quality habitat available and provide for secure juvenile out migration.

The slough was historically used as coho brood collection for Cowichan River Hatchery and supported coho and chum spawning and rearing.

John Charlie's off channel habitat restoration will focus on low-lying areas that can be excavated into year round fish habitat and connected to a restored side channel.

Restoration proposed for the Cowichan River Five Fingers Channel Head pond includes excavating a year round groundwater fed feeder channel and connecting low lying floodplain areas.

"It is estimated that through the restoration efforts beginning in 2001, over 20,000m² of high quality spawning and rearing habitat has been created at Five Fingers Channel, with many additional wildlife and riparian restoration benefits." Said Sean Wong, Sr. Biologist, Ministry of Transportation and Highways.

Recent research indicates these areas are also critical to the first freshwater life stages of Chinook salmon.

This type of off and side channel restoration has been identified as a priority for the Cowichan watershed by the multi-stakeholder Cowichan Stewardship Roundtable planning process which included Cowichan Tribes and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO). The current projects represent an extensive partnership involving the Ministry of Transportation and Highways, Cowichan Tribes, Living Rivers – Georgia Basin/Vancouver Island, DFO, Pacific Salmon Foundation, Cowichan Valley Naturalists, Cowichan Native Plant Nursery, and Cowichan River Hatchery. The project will provide for employment and career development training opportunities for Cowichan Tribes members on fish habitat restoration through the Living Rivers First Nation Legacy program and Ministry of Transportation Environmental Enhancement Fund.

Future plans include installing a smolt enumeration fence toward the outlet of Five Fingers Hatchery Channel that will help quantify fish production from this restored complex that was cut-off and became virtually non-productive prior to restoration efforts of DFO and Cowichan Tribes that began in 2001. Interpretive signage will be also be unveiled this fall.

Cowichan Tribes are currently hosting the North American Indigenous Games, during which lower Cowichan “Living Rivers” salmon tours are being provided. The tour will offer a chance to see first hand some of the salmon restoration work being undertaken by Cowichan Tribes and other partners. Participants will have an opportunity to learn about the importance of Pacific salmon to the Cowichan ecosystem and the Cowichan people and see the results of the efforts of the community to ensure there are healthy salmon populations now, and for future generations.

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