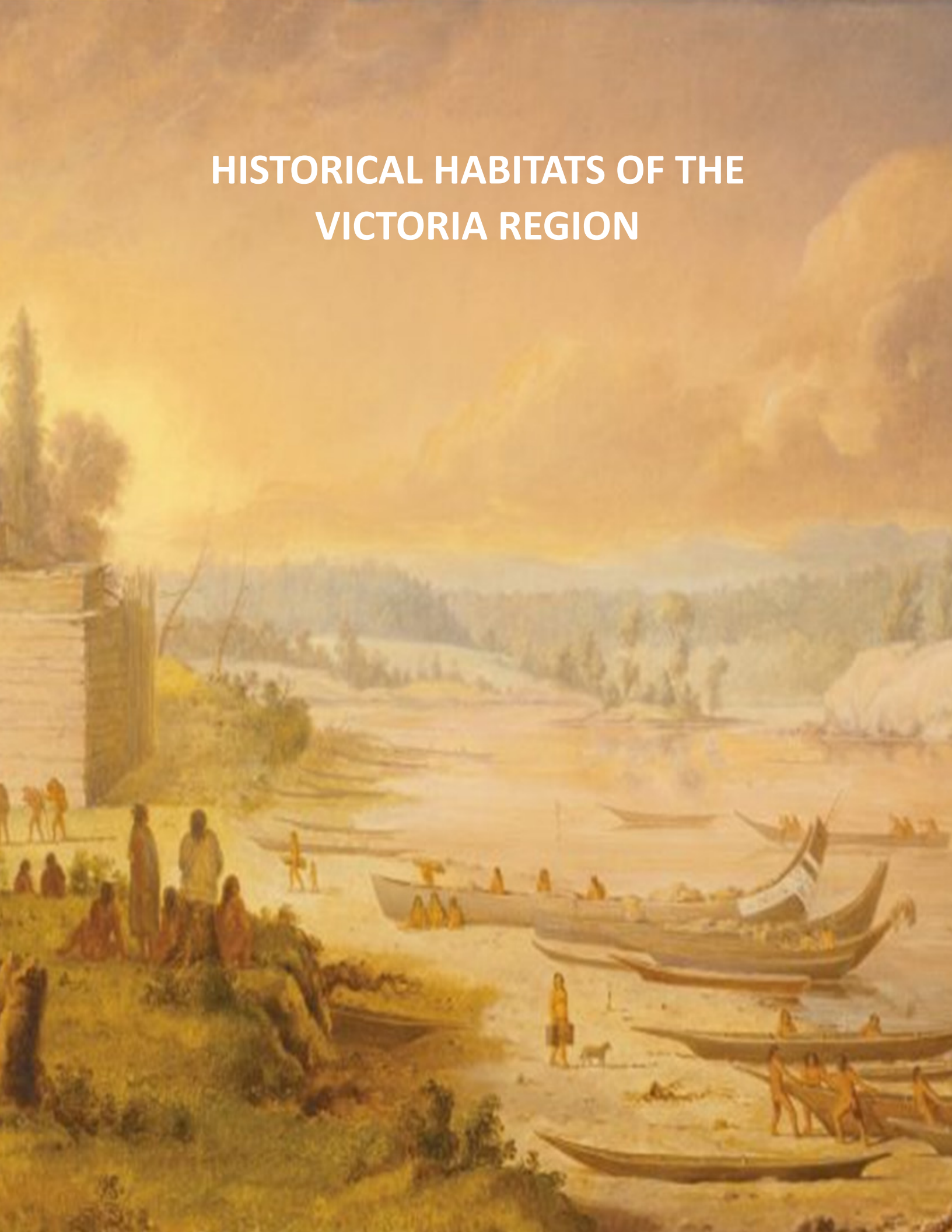


HISTORICAL HABITATS OF THE VICTORIA REGION



HISTORICAL HABITATS OF THE VICTORIA REGION

SITUATION BRIEF #6

Contributors: H. Roemer, D. Green, J. Sirois, A. Sesca, O. Sesca, P. Lambert, B. Peart, M. Segger

“When Europeans first arrived in Victoria in the early 1840s they found a landscape and vegetation that was quite different than it is today. James Douglas noted that more than two-thirds of the land between the Inner Harbour and Gonzales Point was “Prairie Land”.

For centuries, First Nations people had set fires throughout the range of Garry Oak (*Quercus garryana*) ecosystems to burn off trees and shrubs and promote the growth of edible root crops, such as camas (*Camassia spp.*) and Bracken Fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*), and to create openings for hunting ungulates, such as deer and Roosevelt Elk (*Cervus canadensis roosevelti*). This created the areas of prairie landscape noted by Douglas.

The oldest detailed map of the Victoria region was drawn in 1842 by Adolphus Lee Lewis, who accompanied James Douglas when reconnoitering the area for construction of the HBC fort.

It shows the extent of cleared areas, forests, Garry Oak trees, and riparian zones. European settlers eventually halted the burning by the Aboriginal people. Shrub- sized Garry Oaks, then larger oak trees, rapidly became established. Photographs and maps made 20 to 40 years after Lewis’s map showed a far more

extensive distribution of Garry Oak trees. Further succession resulted in Douglas-fir-dominated communities on many sites.

(B. Costanzo, D. Eastman, C. Englestoft, R. Hebda, F. Hook, M. Gorman, C. MacDonald, D. Polster, T. Lea, C., S. Smith, K. Vaino, C. Webb. Restoring British Columbia's Garry Oak Ecosystems. 2011. <https://goert.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/GOERT-Restorating-BC-GOE-2011.pdf>

Historic and surviving Garry Oak Ecosystems include Garry Oak Woodlands, Garry Oak Savannahs, Oak Forest, Prairie Grasslands, Douglas Fir Woodlands, Climax Douglas-Fir Forests, and Vernal Pool habitats. Reaching back in time to establish and the physiography that attracted people to what we now call Victoria constitutes a core theme in the region's history. The location has been inhabited for thousands of years. So, what is it that has enticed and



Portion of the 1842 Adolphus Lee Lewis map of Camosack showing the harbour, Gorge waterway, the proposed location of Fort Victoria, and general vegetation. Courtesy of the Hudson Bay Company Archives. Provincial Archives of Manitoba. Map Collection G.2/25(T11146).

kept people here: resources, safe harbour, weather, trade, family ties? Linking these myriad themes is Victoria's renowned salubrious climate, a rain shadow zone in the lee of the mainland Olympic and Vancouver Island Mountains. It has a mild, winter-wet, summer-dry modified Mediterranean climate. The area is comprised of inner coast and islands with elevations ranging from sea level to 550 m on ridge tops and mountains peaks. Geologically, this region is complex. It is composed of a folded and faulted sedimentary basin, metamorphic contact zones with exotic terranes, granitic intrusions, and both glacial and colluvial deposits.

Garry Oak Community Types classified by Restoration Ecosystem Units:

- Deep Soil, Average Moisture Garry Oak Communities
- Deep Soil, Wetter Garry Oak Communities
- Shallow Soil Garry Oak Communities
- Shallow Soil Seepage Communities
- Maritime Meadow Communities
- Vernal Pool Communities
- Coastal Bluff Communities
- Douglas-fir communities



A failed effort of to create a U.N. Biosphere Reserve in Greater Victoria began as a conversation about 10 years ago. A number of considerations were developed at that time.

Greater Victoria has one of the most impressive natural environments in urban Canada, with one of Canada's oldest formal parks (Beacon Hill Park, 1859), and the oldest Migratory Bird Sanctuary in Pacific Canada (Victoria Harbour MBS, 1923). Many of the birds were skilfully illustrated by one of the world's foremost wild-life artists, Oak Bay resident J. Fenwick Lansdowne (1937-2008). An interpretive tribute to Lansdowne is located in Queen's Park, Oak Bay).

Urban renewal is unfolding in Victoria. The restoration of nature in the region is a serious component of this renewal. Well interpreted public access sites such as the Gorge Water Way park and Swan Lake and Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary are good examples. Local municipalities are reassessing their parks holding for potential habitat restoration, particularly Garry Oak ecosystems.

Habitat restoration has preserved numerous animal species including Marbled Murrelets, Heermann's Gulls, Brant, Western Purple Martins, Victoria's Owl-clover, Olympia Oyster, Northern Elephant Seal. Garry Oak and coastal



ecosystems (maritime meadows, eelgrass marine meadows, kelp forests, clam beds) are not often found with an urban environment. There also numerous Ecological Reserves and IBAs (Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas). We have compelling stories and assets.

Observations

- Previous efforts to include Victoria within a World Heritage Biosphere should be taken into account in any further developments of the nomination of Victoria for World Heritage Listing.
- Recently excellent natural history interpretive signage programs undertaken by Saanich and more recently Victoria, which include references to First Nations traditional resource uses, should be encouraged and expanded. On-line reference maps featuring this material, and the research behind their creation, would be an added educational tool.

References

Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society <http://www.garryoak.info>

Gary Oak Recover Team. *Restoring British Columbia's Gary Oak Ecosystems: Principles and Practice*. Victoria, 2011.

Turner, Nancy J. (2014). *Ancestral Pathways, Ancestral Knowledge: Ethnobotany and Ecological Knowledge of Indigenous Peoples of Northwestern North America*. 2 vols. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. ISBN 978-0-7735-4380-5.