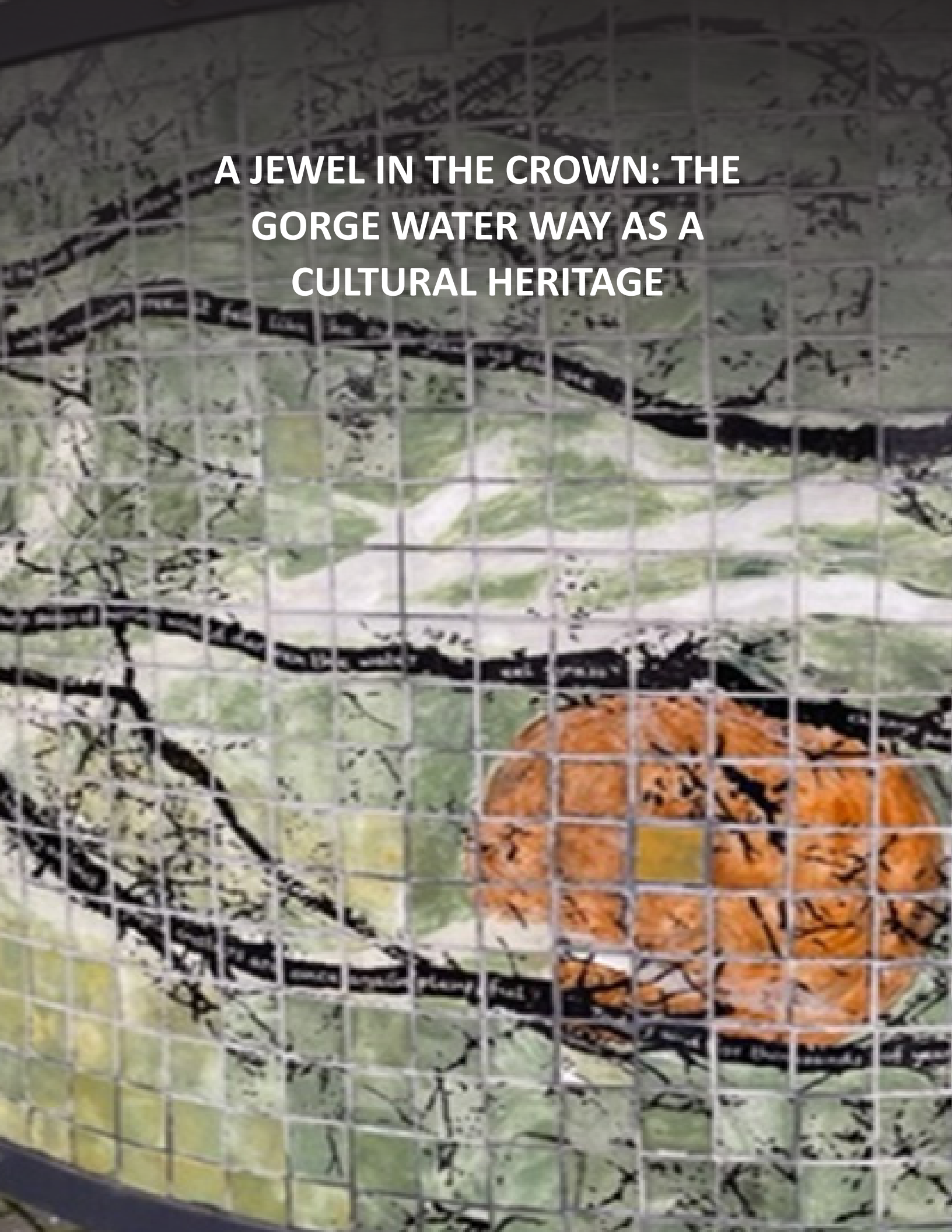


**A JEWEL IN THE CROWN: THE  
GORGE WATER WAY AS A  
CULTURAL HERITAGE**



# A JEWEL IN THE CROWN: THE GORGE WATER WAY AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE

## SITUATION BRIEF # 24

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*The body of water known simply as “The Gorge” (54.5 ha of water) to Victoria locals is a narrow tidal inlet that connects Victoria Harbour to Portage Inlet. The Gorge Waterway is defined as the inlet between Craigflower Bridge and the Selkirk trestle. It is important as a fish and wildlife habitat, for aesthetic and recreational values, and also for its rich history of Indigenous and settler use. However, it is also important that it is recognized as integral to both the human and natural history of the City as a single ecosystem and cultural landscape.*



For more than 4,000 years, the body of water, and the areas surrounding it, were a significant spiritual place and food gathering area for First Nations. The Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations' connection to the waterway remains strong today. It was also a critical transportation corridor linking Indigenous village sites to the Salish Sea. From the 1850s forward the Gorge provided access to the Settler agricultural industries established along the shores, then the mansions and country estates of Victoria's emerging plutocracy. As early as the 1860s the Gorge hosted First Nation's canoe races and later pleasure boating regattas that continue to the present day.



The establishment of the Japanese tea-house and gardens by the Takata family in 1907 (recently restored by the Municipality of Esquimalt) confirmed the water-way as Victoria's primary pleasure park. From the 1890's to the 1930's, the Gorge Waterway was a place for swimming schools and competitive swimming for national titles. In subsequent years, residential and industrial development along the Gorge lead to questionable water quality and hopelessly littered

shorelines. In contrast, the Selkirk Trestle, iconic of its type, references the confluence of Island railway lines serving the early industrial uses of the harbour.



Community involvement in enhancing and protecting the cultural and natural features of the Gorge was established under the Gorge Waterway Initiative (GWI), formed in 2005. GWI coordinates information exchange, initiates restoration projects and provides education and outreach in the community.

The Gorge is part of an interlinked network of Migratory Bird Sanctuaries, reaching from Portage Inlet at the head of the Gorge, out through Victoria Harbour and stretching around Victoria's coast-line to the eastern extremity of 10 Mile Point. Established in 1923, it was one of the first established after Canada signed the Migratory Bird Convention with the USA in 1916, and passed the Migratory Birds Conservation Act in 1919.

Extensive eelgrass meadows are one of the most important biological features of the Gorge. These plants provide sheltered habitat for fish such as juvenile Pacific salmon and cutthroat trout. The rhizomes (branching roots) of eelgrass are important for trapping sediments and reducing shoreline erosion.

Kelp beds provide important habitat and a food source for fish and

marine invertebrates. Oysters were an important food source for First Nations and non-Indigenous residents alike. Olympia oyster beds are now rare on the west coast of North America.



Victoria Harbour and Gorge Waterway encompasses a cluster of major sacred and historic cultural sites including First Nations burial Islands (i.e. Halkett Island), Tillicum Reversing Falls, and village sites, also O'Reilly House, a Provincial Heritage Site, industrial heritage including the Selkirk Trestle, the restored Tanaka Japanese Gardens in Gorge Park and the Craigflower School House and Craigflower Manor, National Historic Sites. Many of these sites and natural features are linked by the Saanich's Gorge Walkway, Esquimalt's Gorge Park, and Victoria's Harbour Walkway/Trans-Canada Trail.

A major feature of the upper Gorge is the waterside linear park walkway created by the Municipality of Saanich. It stretches from Craigflower School House to below the "Reversing Falls". Along its stretch, including Craigflower Bridge, an excellent interpretive signage program, developed in collaboration with First Nations, explains both the human and natural heritage of the Gorge.

The Greater Victoria Harbour Authority has developed a similar, and equally engaging interpretive public signage program starting at the Ogden Point Breakwater at the harbour entrance through to the Inner Harbour Marina.



## Observations

- A primary recommendation of the UNESCO Victoria Heritage Project should be to treat Old Town, the Victoria Harbour and the Gorge Waterway as a single cultural landscape and core component of the World Heritage Site Listing.
- District of Saanich interpretive signage programs on the Gorge should be extended to encompass the harbourside shore access points in both Victoria and Esquimalt.
- The rich intangible heritage of the Gorge/Harbour should be remembered

and commemorated through a public education program focusing on Esquimalt and Songhees sacred sites and traditional uses such as canoe races, water sports, and community festivals.

## References

- CRD <https://www.crd.bc.ca/education/protection-stewardship/harbours/gorge-waterway/history-to-present>
- Victoria and Region Community Green Map <https://crdcommunitygreenmap.ca/location/gorge-waterway>
- Government of Canada ... Wildlife and habitat conservation <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/migratory-bird-sanctuaries/locations/victoria-harbour.html#toc2>
- Esquimalt First Nation Community Engagement: <https://www.esquimaltnation.ca/our-nation/language-culture>