

Canadian Wildlife Service
3567 Island Highway West
Qualicum Beach, B. C.
V9K 2B7

June 11, 2003

Jeanie Lanine
Woodward & Company
844 Courtney Street, 2nd Floor
Victoria, BC, V8W 1C4

Re: Walker Hook Sensitive Ecosystems

Dear Ms. Lanine,

I am writing in response to your request for information on the significance of the sensitive ecosystems on Saltspring Island's Walker Hook tombolo and area. Our Sensitive Ecosystems Inventory (SEI) maps show that there are three ecosystem types represented within the area of the proposed development by Sablefin Hatcheries—salt marsh wetland, sparsely vegetated gravel spit and a coastal bluff/woodland complex. The SEI was conducted by Environment Canada and the BC Ministries of Water, Land and Air Protection and Sustainable Resource Management (1993 and 1997) to encourage conservation-based land-use decisions.

Throughout the Gulf Islands we found few remaining examples of the three sensitive ecosystem types that occur on Walker Hook—only 1.9% of the entire Gulf Islands contains either wetland, sparsely vegetated or coastal bluff ecosystems. All categories of wetland are particularly rare on these dry rocky Gulf Islands, and salt marshes such as the type at Walker Hook constitute only a fraction of that. The two other ecosystem types are similarly scarce throughout the region.

Every effort should be made to protect wetlands in a natural state because they provide critical support to both wildlife and people and are particularly vulnerable to human disturbance. They are nodes of high biological diversity and support a disproportionate number of rare species or plant communities.

Since wetland processes are highly complex their natural hydrological processes must be maintained—any changes to wetland hydrology have significant impacts on the viability of any wetland. Water quality must also be maintained as even limited changes in nitrogen or phosphorous levels can reduce the zone in which specific wetland inhabitants can live. Efforts should be made to avoid nutrient loading and the introduction of substances that would harm the fragile wetland system.

Coastal bluffs are also rare and fragile and their shallow soils and species inhabiting them are susceptible to damage from any form of human intrusion. They are also choice nesting sites for a number of birds including some provincially rare species.

Similarly, sparsely vegetated spits such as the one at Walker Hook are rare and highly unstable landforms that can be easily disturbed or destroyed. There are a number of species, some of them rare, which are unique to these habitats—a large variety of migrating and wintering shorebirds and waterfowl frequent these spits and some even nest there.

In recognition of the high conservation value of this site, the federal/provincial Georgia Basin Ecosystem Conservation Partnership identifies Walker Hook as a high priority site for acquisition, covenant or other form of protection.

If the proposed facility cannot be relocated to avoid impacts to these sensitive ecosystems, we recommend that qualified professionals conduct hydrological, engineering and environmental impact studies and work to incorporate designs that are sensitive to the existing natural ecosystems.

In summary, our primary concern is that these rare and ecologically fragile ecosystems be protected. To this end the Canadian Wildlife Service has a policy of not condoning any further loss of sensitive ecosystems. We believe these remaining ecosystems could be our collective legacy to future generations.

Sincerely

Peggy Ward
Ecosystem Mapping and Conservation

cc. Ken Brock, Head, Habitat Conservation, Canadian Wildlife Service.
Andrew Robinson, Environmental Assessment Coordinator, Canadian Wildlife Service.