

Ghost ecology, living map

SOME YEARS AGO, I became aware the land on which my house is built was once a marshy wetland, part of an inland waterway that people used to travel between Ross Bay and Victoria's Inner Harbour. The former canoe route is traced today, in part, by the asphalt smoothness of May Street, which follows the lowness of land and suggests this is where water once flowed. The wetland lived at a time before the bays were adorned with colonial names and the land settled by European ideas of what it means to live in and tend a place.

The thought of living in the ghost of a wetland haunts me, in the best possible way. I try to imagine what this land looked like before the trees were cut down and the marshes filled. Before the creeks were banished underground and replaced with farm fields, and then eventually transformed into the suburb of Fairfield in which I now dwell.

This map represents a personal journey into reanimating the buried and plundered natural history of the place I call home. Its purpose is to deepen my connection to place and further ignite a sense of kinship with the more-than-human world. This is not an act of nostalgia, but rather a calling forth of a communal inheritance in order to imagine how to move forward into a good future.

It is not possible, of course, to put a pin in time and claim that the state of nature in one particular moment is the original, the true, the 'natural'. And yet, in the face of rapid and extreme ecological change that threatens the ongoing survival of major lifetimes, including humans, there may be wisdom in summoning the ghosts of nature that once flourished here. What secrets to resilience and diversity are buried under the development scars of our time? What ways of being and knowing between humans and the more-than-human world can be reclaimed in service of creating a world that values life, relationship, and mutual flourishing?

The changes to the ecological landscape of lək'wəṇ territory / Greater Victoria over time, and the forces that shaped those changes, are written into the visible and invisible contours of this place today. The burial mounds on the south-facing slope of miqan / Beacon Hill are now contextualized with an interpretive sign and ringed by a split rail fence to ensure park visitors approach the site with respect. Remnant Garry oak woodlands and reconstructed wetlands across this land are tended by committed groups of volunteers who remove invasive plants, daylight buried creeks, and share the story of place with all who will listen.

Like the ghost ecology that it represents, this map is a living document. The notespace on the right invites the addition of learnings and insights. This map welcomes new drawings, stories, questions, sketches. They need not stay in the lines — whatever wisdom is animated in this map will be known by its creases, smudges, corrections, evolutions.

ABOUT THE MAP

The hand-drawn base map was created in 1861 to show the plots of lands that the Hudson's Bay Company had for sale. What is more interesting, to my eye and for my purpose, is the general ecology that is sketched into what surely would have been thought of as 'unused space' by the men making and using this map. Overlaid on this historical map is the contemporary street grid of Greater Victoria, generated by OpenStreetMap, a GIS-based mapping software. I have included only the major roads so that the detail in the hand-drawn map are legible.

Astute readers of this map will notice many areas where the old and new cartography do not align. This misalignment represents the gap in cartographic accuracy between hand-drawn maps and the geographic precision that we can now attain through modern digital spatial information systems.

lək'wəṇ (Lekwungen) placenames have been added where possible. I wish there were more of them on this map. The names included here were sourced from the Songhees Nation website and a pamphlet about Lekwungen Traditional Territory (© Cheryl Bryce).

- 1861

Douglas-fir forest

Garry oak woodlands

wetlands

hills, rocky outcrops
- 2022

major roads

parks

lakes and streams

Swan Lake

I circumnavigate the lake trying to resist the chimeric notion of a pure state of nature. My vision is clouded by unwelcome thickets of blackberry and carpets of reed canary grass. I am well trained in seeing these invaders and feeling the requisite revulsion and umbrage at their smothering dominance. At this site and so many others across the region, conservation efforts focus on removing and controlling invasive species so that native plants and animals can thrive. And yet this violent and endless expulsion breeds despair, for the work is never done. The pure state is never achieved.

There can be another way. The ghost ecology of this sanctuary asks us to move forward towards resilience, function, integrity, and abundance. It asks us to consider what persists alongside what is lost. It inspires us to see and hear the convergence of bird life in the marshy edges of the lake. It demands that we celebrate the release of salmon fry here each year despite knowing the adults cannot return to spawn because of the ongoing polluting runoff from roads and yards. Today the cost of full remediation is too high. But one day it may not be, if we can change our mind / set.

xwszyq'əm | James Bay

Look down in the oily water here, past the slick rainbows of engine slime, and you can still pick out clam shells on the mucky bottom. Once a place of great abundance, this 'place of mud', as its lək'wəṇ name suggests, was a broad tidal mudflat that sustained some of the best clam beds on the coast. Now the city squats atop this abundance, suffocating the life with an obscene amount of imported fill, concrete, asphalt, arrogance, and ignorance. I am filled with equal parts rage and sadness when I stand here trying to wipe the oil from my vision.

This is also one end of the canoe route that led through the spot where I now live and on to Ross Bay. (I still have not learned an Indigenous name for that bay. My inquiries have lead nowhere and in circles. This is one ghost that is not giving itself up easily.)



Photograph of xwszyq'əm / James Bay circa 1859, by Arthur Vipond.

Natural shoreline

There is a singular spot along the Inner Harbour where the natural shoreline still breathes the air. It's a small stretch of perhaps 50 metres, tucked away on the edge of a parking lot, shaded by a large heritage building, lapped by greasy seawater. This patch of rock likely seems unremarkable to most. Yet to me it is valiant. A vestige of the land that once was. A reminder that it is never nothing to smother a shoreline with concrete and effluent.

A once & future wetland

I live on the edge of a missing wetland. You can see it drawn onto old maps, a network of marsh and stream that was once navigable by canoe. Whatever trails once wended through the mosaic of swamp, fen, marsh, thickets, and wet meadows that likely defined this area have been transformed into asphalt roads and knitted together into an orderly grid of private property and modern suburban place-making.

Still, I find the footprint of the wetland in the dense clay soil in my garden that refuses to lighten up no matter how much compost I turn in each year. Its ghost rises each winter when my garden paths turn swampy with the rains. My tidy beds of greens, peas, and tomatoes replaced the land-based bounty that once likely flourished here. Salmonberry, elderberry, crab apple, hazelnut, salmon, cutthroat trout, and waterfowl for feasts. Reeds for baskets. Willow for medicine.

What would it mean to honour these ghosts? I try to hold the wetland in my mind's eye as I stand where I live. This is not meant as an exercise in turning back the clock, in turning my back on the future. I don't ask what would it look like, but rather what *could* this land look like if we honoured the ghost ecology of place?

miqan | Beacon Hill

In springtime I walk the meadows as they bloom in waves of yellow, purple, blue, and pink. This annual impressionistic display of wildflowers inspires me to be nowhere other than here.

The profusion of camas in particular — that perfect symbol of a carefully honoured relationship between humans and the land — reminds me that the Western concept of wilderness as a place untouched by people has little value in teaching us how to live in ethical relation with the natural world.

Clover Point

This point has long been a perfect spot for any number of human activities. A perfect spot for harvesting from ocean and meadow. A perfect spot for encampment. A perfect spot for territorial defense. A perfect spot for cremation. A perfect spot for treating sewage. A perfect spot for sitting in cars and considering the horizon. A perfect spot for dog walking and kite flying.

The fields of springbank clover that inspired the point's colonial name are all but vanished. The contours of the rocky promontory are subsumed by asphalt and fill, smoothed to a flatness that is easily walkable, drivable. I try to imagine how the land would have rolled and jutted, the ghost topography rising in my mind's eye. Do the waterbirds and otters feeding in the shallows sense what is missing?

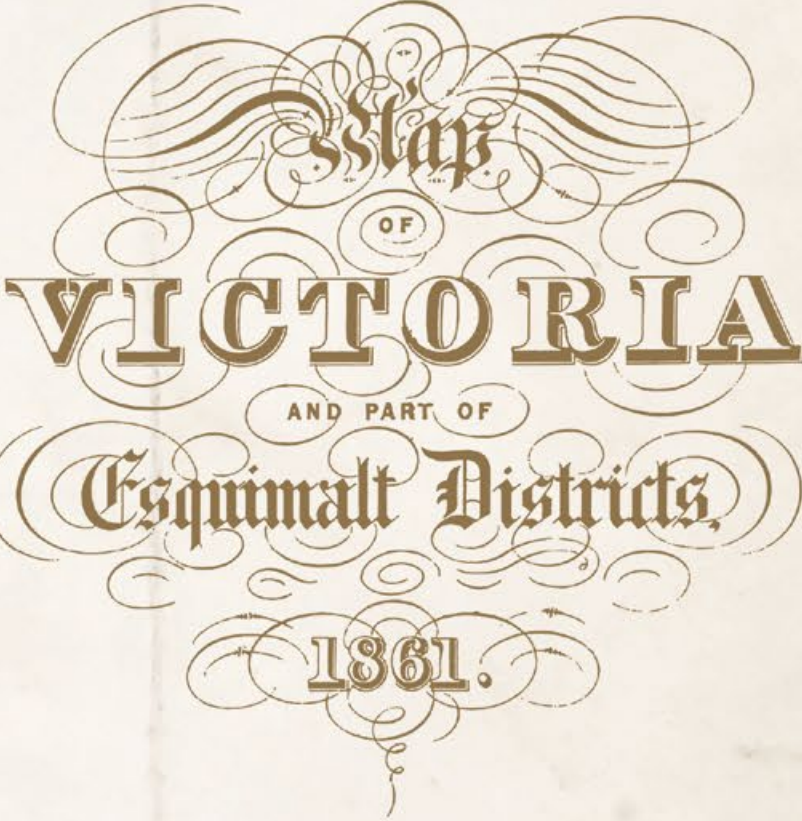
Moss Rock

This rocky outcrop perches as a benign guardian over the former wetland, now residential subdivision. I can see its peak from my front porch, an easily scalable mound of rock and moss that is where we tell ourselves we will scramble to escape a tsunami.

From the top I can survey the entire neighbourhood and all the way to downtown. In spring the melee

of birdsong competes valiantly with the persistent drone of machines. I have no skill at identifying bird calls, and the Merlin bird app only takes me so far. Perhaps I am hearing some wrens, like the lovely wee ones that visit my yard. Perhaps a house finch. How loud would this spot atop the rock have been centuries ago? How better might I have been / could I be at knowing their names?

Notes



DAY & SON LITHO TO THE QUEEN  
GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS