

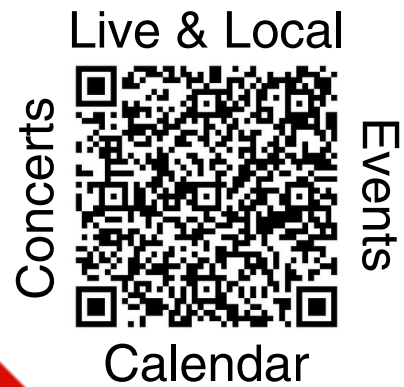
Cortes Island **Resonance**

Written by Roy Hales

Vanishing Voices:
Cortes Island & The Global
At Risk Species Crisis



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Vanishing Voices: Cortes Island & The Global At Risk Species Crisis



Across the globe, the accelerating loss of biodiversity is sounding alarms among scientists, conservationists, and communities that recognize nature as more than scenery—it is the living fabric of our survival. The United Nations warns we are in the midst of an extinction crisis “at least tens to hundreds of times faster than the natural process of extinctions.”

In Canada, where biodiversity is heralded as a national treasure, action is falling gravely short—and British Columbia is a prime example. Despite being the most biologically diverse province in the country, B.C. still lacks legislation specifically designed to protect species at risk.

“We’re the only province in the entire country that doesn’t have species at risk legislation,” says Cortes Island biologist Sabina Leader Mense. “It’s a travesty.”



The Friends of Cortes Island’s (FOCI) Species At Risk program has identified at least 33 species that live year-round or seasonally on Cortes Island, including the endangered Northern Goshawk, the elusive Townsend’s Big-Eared Bat, and the recently rediscovered Silver-Spotted Skipper butterfly. These species are not just data points—they’re vital participants in an ecosystem still rich with relatively undisturbed forests, coastal shorelines, and marine life.

We are fortunate to have so many amazing species here,” says Helen Hall, Executive Director of FOCI. “Cortes has not been as developed as much as some of the other islands. We still have large intact areas of forest and a really good marine ecosystem.” But this haven is fragile. “Some species still evidenced here are disappearing from other areas because of habitat loss and degradation.”

A Broken System

The federal government's Species at Risk Act (SARA) was created in 2002 to address this decline, but it largely applies only to federal lands and does not include species of "special concern." Even worse, the advisory body behind SARA—the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC)—is under-resourced. Despite an estimated 5,000 species potentially at risk across Canada, COSEWIC processes only 60 assessments or reassessments per year. At this rate, it would take over a century to evaluate all species.



In 2023, COSEWIC listed 875 species as Extinct, Extirpated, Endangered, Threatened, or of Special Concern. Among these, 46 were formally declared Extinct or Extirpated, and another 95 may be gone from Canada without confirmation. "Without historical data, we have no perspective of what's being lost," says FOCI President Mike Moore. "If that's not also coupled with money that goes to changing policy to protect habitat ... then counting species is really just gathering data to write a really nice epitaph for the gravestones of species that go extinct."

The Auditor General's report from 2023 echoed this, calling on Environment and Climate Change Canada to increase support for COSEWIC and set targets aligned with the urgency of the biodiversity crisis.

Cortes Island: A Living Laboratory

Cortes Island serves as both a refuge and a bellwether. Local species like the Western Toad have vanished in recent years—likely due to habitat loss, pesticides, road mortality, and fungal disease. “We think they have pretty much disappeared,” says Hall. “.”The last sighting was a decade ago in 2015”



The community has also rediscovered species long thought missing, such as the Silver-Spotted Skipper butterfly, last seen in B.C. over 50 years ago until it was found near giant vetch plants on the island. Others, like the Northern Pygmy Owl and Coastal Cutthroat Trout, face habitat pressure from logging and development.

“These trout are really indicative of a healthy ecosystem,” says Sabina Leader Mense. “They need clean water, clean gravel, and a strong shoreline. A decline in their population is indicative of a change in their habitat.” FOCI’s species at risk program feeds local observations into the provincial Conservation Data Centre.

“We are running our program to find out more about these species, their status here and how that fits into the bigger picture,” says Hall. This citizen science approach empowers residents to contribute to conservation, even if it’s just noticing an owl, a bat, or a toad.



A Call for Legislative Action

Back in 2015, Cortes youth championed Bill M 211, a proposed B.C. endangered species act. “When the Liberals were in power, the NDP were really promoting the bill,” recalls Leader Mense. “The disappointment is that it’s 2023 now and the NDP are in power and haven’t gone anywhere near doing that.”

While the province has since committed to recommendations from the Old Growth Strategic Review, including biodiversity protection, the long-promised species at risk legislation remains absent. As Leader Mense puts it, “We need to all step up, talk to our MLAs and support a biodiversity law for British Columbia.”

From Local Action to Global Responsibility

According to the 2020 Wild Species Report, Canada lacks sufficient data on 590 of its native bee species, and for more than 30,000 species nationwide, no distribution maps exist. “If not documented, species might disappear without us noticing,” the report warns.

Cortes Island reminds us what’s at stake. “FOCI is working with Species at Risk on Cortes Island,” says Moore. “It’s not just about finding out if we have Screech Owls—it’s also trying to find their nesting trees. We do have logging on the island ... and we need to protect them.”

From amphibians and owls to trout and snails, the island’s diverse life forms are indicators of both what we still have—and what we risk losing. Whether through observation, education, or advocacy, residents of Cortes Island are showing how a small community can rise to meet a global emergency.

As Bruce Cockburn once sang, “The trouble with normal is it always gets worse.” Without action—on Cortes, in British Columbia, and across the country—“normal” may soon mean silence where once there was song, flight, and frog song.



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Northern Goshawk - by James Wang via Flickr (CC BY 2.0);

Townsend's Big Eared Bat - Photo by Deser LCC via FLickr (CC By 2.0);

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Pygmy Owl – Photo by Donna Collins/ Wild Cortes



FRIENDS *of* CORTES ISLAND

For nature, for people, for life

Friends of Cortes Island is the leading local conservation organization on Cortes Island with a remit to promote awareness and support for the natural environment by providing stewardship programs and educational activities.

We work tirelessly to preserve the natural wonders of Cortes that make the island so special. This includes our annual island wide beach clean-up; maintaining Regional Parks and Trails; developing creative conservation projects with the Cortes Island School; managing the Dillon Creek Wetland in order to prevent harmful nutrients from entering the Hague and Gunflint lakes; and working to prevent the highly invasive European Green Crab from devastating Mansons Lagoon.

We also run a host of community engagement events, from low tide and nature walks to nest box building workshops, wildlife coexistence education, and much more.

How you can get involved

You can get involved in keeping Cortes wild, beautiful and sustainable by becoming a FOCI member, volunteering on one of our many projects, or donating to support our important work.

Visit our website www.friendsofcortes.org to find out more or contact us at friendsofcortes@gmail.com

Making a Donation

Our work takes time, care, and resources. Your support helps us protect and nurture the natural beauty of Cortes Island for generations to come. If you're able, please consider donating:

Online at friendsofcortes.org/donations

By cheque, payable to Friends of Cortes, mailed to: PO Box 254,
Mansons Landing, BC V0P 1K0

Your generosity means so much—to us, and to the future of Cortes Island. Thank you.

Cortes Island **Resonance**

Written by Roy Hales

Roy Hales has been a published author since 1982 and has been the editor and owner of the local news website and daily radio program *Cortes Currents* since 2014.

Roy is also a former President of the Cortes Community Radio Society (2017-2021)

Visit Cortes Currents: www.cortescurrents.ca

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Cortes Island Resonance

Written by Roy Hales

Amplifying local voices and environmental themes through eight original reports promoted and distributed at Cortes Island's Village Commons Summer Concert Series 2025.

Environmental Reports

1. Restoring Life to Dillon Creek
2. Friends of Cortes Island at Mansons Landing Provincial Park
3. 30 Years of Foreshore Monitoring on Cortes Island
4. European Green Crabs Reach Cortes Island
5. Sabina Leader Mense and the Wolves of Cortes
6. Species at Risk
7. The Call That Changed Everything – Western Screech Owl
8. The Story of the Island's Streamkeepers

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