

A Brief History of the Vancouver Natural History Society

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The Vancouver Natural History Society (VNHS) came into being on 10th May 1918. It was formed by the amalgamation of the Arbour Day Society and the Natural History Section of the BC mountaineering Club. Both of these groups owed their success, before amalgamation, to John Davidson who was the founder and first President of the VNHS. The aims and objectives of the new Society were stated in the new constitution as follows:

- a) To cultivate and disseminate knowledge of every branch of natural science;
- b) To encourage nature study and Arbor Day exercises in schools;
- c) To arouse interest in the value of our native trees;
- d) To encourage the protection of useful plants and animals liable to extinction;
- e) To endeavour to secure for Vancouver an adequate natural history museum to illustrate the flora, fauna, geology and anthropology of British Columbia.

The current Constitution of the Society shows that these objectives remain essentially the same to this day.

From the outset the VNHS became very active in organizing lectures, field trips and summer camps. The first summer camp was held on Savary Island for ten days in July 1918, just two months after the Society was formed.

During the 1920's the membership continued to grow and the Society became actively involved in conservation issues with considerable success. Amongst its many campaigns, the Society played a significant role in the phasing out of wholesale logging in the Capilano watershed, and the reduction of the bounty hunting of predators. In 1926 the membership had grown to the point where it was decided to establish "separate sections dealing with the various branches of Natural History". In those days the membership of the botany section was greater than the combined total of all the other sections.

The Depression of the 1930's caused a slowing down of membership growth and some summer camps were cancelled. In spite of this the photography section thrived. In 1930 Bert Brink, the Society's Honorary President and an active member to this day, joined the VNHS. Bert was best known to members as a leader and organizer of the summer camps for nearly fifty years.

The Second World War further eroded the society's membership but the Society's conservation efforts continued, spear-headed by Dr Ian McTaggart-Cowen. In 1941 a junior section was formed in an effort to increase membership. The first VNHS newsletter, *VNHS News* was issued in 1943. This would eventually evolve into *Discovery*. Several summer camps were cancelled but field trips continued.

Conservation has always been a major part of VNHS activities and "the Battle for Buttle Lake" became a highlight of the 1950's. The BC Power Commission was planning to

construct a major (for those days) hydro dam on Buttle Lake in Strathcona Park. A number of groups including the VNHS banded together in an effort to preserve the ecology of area. The outcome was not entirely successful as the level of the lake was raised by 15ft. It did however lead to much greater attention being paid to the environmental aspects of major hydro developments.

During the 50's the Society was also involved in the initiation of the Vancouver Aquarium, The Vancouver Museum and VanDusen Botanical Gardens. Summer camps continued to be successful and for the first time a camp was held on Denman Island where participants were able to drive right to the campsite.

In the early years of the VNHS the Botany Section had been the largest and strongest group largely due to the influence of John Davidson, but in the 1960's the Birding Section grew in size and influence. In addition, to deal with the Society's ongoing involvement with conservation matters a Conservation Committee was formed under the direction of Bert Brink. One of the main objectives of this Committee was to form links with other like-minded groups and in 1963 joined with the BC Waterfowl Society in establishing the Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary.

The VNHS was also actively involved in the formation of the BC Nature Council (later to become the Federation of BC Naturalists) with one of its prime objectives to provide "a potent united voice in conservation matters".

In the late sixties a detailed study of the natural history of Lighthouse Park, in West Vancouver, was commenced. The results of this study were published the VNHS in 1973 with the title "Nature West Coast".

Also in the 70's VNHS News evolved into "Discovery" and another publication "Vancouver Birds 1971" was produced. The Society's conservation efforts continued with protest against French nuclear testing in the Pacific and, closer to home, condemnation of BC Hydro's proposed Hat Creek thermal power project. In 1977 the VNHS, together with the Alpine Garden Club of Canada and the FCBN, began an endangered species poster campaign.

Summer camps were so successful that for a few years in the mid seventies several camps were held each year. However this was an organizational nightmare for the Camp Committee and in 1977 the Society returned to one camp per year.

In 1983 the VNHS, with the aid of a government grant, published self-guiding interpretive trail brochures for ten provincial parks. In 1988 the Society published "The Natural History of Stanley Park" and in 1993 "A Bird Watching Guide to the Vancouver Area". From 1981 to 1992 the conservation section was involved with an environmental show on Vancouver Co-op Radio, and in the summer of '92 the Society unveiled the Stanley Park Nature House at Lost Lagoon.

In 1991 the Society embarked on a new venture - Nature Tours. These were planned and executed by a dedicated group of members under the leadership of Bill Merilees. Tours went to a number of places in BC, including many to the Queen Charlotte Islands, as far as the Grand Canyon in the US and more recently under the umbrella of a travel agent to Australia and Borneo.

In 1999 the Young Naturalist Club was formed under the guidance of Daphne Solecki. The objective of the YNC is to encourage children to take an interest in nature from an early age. Children from 5 to 14 are eligible for membership. By early 2002 the membership of the YNC had grown to about 360 and is widely spread across the province.

In 2002 a Marine Biology Section was formed. Conservation of the environment continues to be a major concern of the Society. Summer Camps and week-end field trips are as popular as ever and with a membership of around 850 the Society is alive and well.

In 2007, the VNHS changed its marketing name to Nature Vancouver and will celebrate its 90th anniversary in 2008.

Acknowledgement:

The majority of the information in this summary was derived from the VNHS publication "The Vancouver Natural History Society 1918 -1993" by Jim Peacock. This is recommended reading for anyone wishing to learn more about the Society's first 75 years.