

Subject: Input re: Islands Trust Policy Statement

I would like the following letter to be included in the upcoming IT agenda package re: discussion of revising the IT policy statement.

I write this as a full-time resident of Salt Spring Island. My daily professional work is in conservation, biodiversity, and climate change — especially at the recognized intersections of these issues with human equity, culture, and socioeconomic diversity.

Any proposal to omit or dilute the language or idea of “community” from Islands Trust’s mandate misses the forest for the trees. It would worsen the status quo, which promotes increasingly visible sprawl that chews up carbon-storing forests. But this status quo ignores social stresses in the Gulf Islands, which are reaching a breaking point, especially regarding housing — not just stereotyped “affordable” or “homeless” housing but the complex dynamics, costs, and benefits of all types of housing and associated land uses.

I work across rural North America and beyond for clients including philanthropic funders, community activists, scientific institutions, and environmental and Indigenous organizations seeking integrated solutions to integrated challenges. For decades, my personal and professional identities are as an environmentalist and a humanist. These values are deeply and inextricably intertwined, not just philosophically and theoretically but very practically and locally. I have learned that without a doubt, separating issues into “silos” has never worked; nowadays, such divisions are deeply understood as old-fashioned, ineffective, unethical, even foolishly extreme.

As an elected government, Islands Trust must protect the “rural character” of the Gulf Islands. This language appeared in legislation creating Islands Trust in 1974, and was bolstered in 1994 with “healthy communities and culture” language. I came here with my family, and volunteer actively in the community, because I believed in the balance inherent in these policy mandates.

The Local Trust Committees are small island governments. Islands Trust is a provincial special purpose government. Both can drive smarter solutions that work for people and nature. Either extreme undermines effectiveness. The environmentalist in me is concerned that Islands Trust is pushing too hard on the environmental part of its mandate, and that this will damage nature and human well-being. Every day, local governments like IT decide things that protect people and the environment, or not: they regulate zoning and land use. Getting this wrong risks all that visitors and residents love. Tipping excessively toward one or the other of these things - nature and people - would risk destroying the vitality of our human community, our natural ecosystem, or both. I want Islands Trust, as my local elected government, to be on the right side of history and to do right by my home island’s human and natural ecosystems.

Extreme voices from some well-meaning retirees who have ample time to engage loudly in public process are not representative of my hardworking friends and neighbours, food and service providers, vital children and elders, without whom this island would be worse off

culturally and economically. Such people are also defenders of our beloved watersheds and forests, often for generations. They are the heart of our community's functionality and vitality, and they need decent, stable, convenient, low-impact places to live.

There are alternatives to poorly regulated sprawl that prices out working people, which is what our status quo zoning gives us. But if you concentrate people near villages and services, it frees up space for nature. This simple fact has been borne out by research and governance examples around BC, Canada, and the world. Policy incentives for smaller, healthier, well-designed housing can reverse the trend of the wealthy buying, developing, clearcutting acreages, and making our islands more exclusive. Islands Trust must take integrated approaches that protect habitats and species, adapt us to climate change, and promote human diversity and fairness in a beautiful but changing archipelago.

As a former professor of population ecology and conservation, I know that "carrying capacity" of islands is never just an arbitrary number. It is mainly about per-capita impacts of individuals, where and how they live, at what densities, with what amenities and kind of sustainable built and transport infrastructure. This is a realm where IT can lead and shine as a government. This intersection and integration of policies - for nature and people - is where the IT mandate can meet multiple current crises and opportunities.

Rural character is not just nature: it is First Nations and settler families, artists, farmers, nurses, cashiers, deckhands, carpenters, elder aides, baristas, naturalists, scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs who create viable, vibrant community. Fearing population growth without addressing lifestyle impacts is folly. Let us design, import, or modify solutions as creative as the islands themselves! Environmentalism without humans backfires for both.

Setting the right future course depends on rooting us in right-minded policy.

Sincerely,
Dave Secord, PhD