

**The Assessment and Planning Project
BC Case Report No. 1**

**Limping Towards Sustainability
Growth Management, Ecological Governance, and
British Columbia's Islands Trust**

by

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The Assessment and Planning Project

Over the past decade or so, several Canadian jurisdictions have moved to integrate environmental considerations more effectively in land use planning. Many of the most promising initiatives have been in the southern parts of Ontario and British Columbia, which are enjoying and suffering significant population increases and associated urban pressures.

Government authorities and citizens in these two areas have used many different approaches to manage growth and improve environmental sensitivity. Relevant initiatives have involved use of strategic environmental assessments or explicit use of environmental assessment principles and obligations in special planning and growth management regimes or in consensus-based multi-stakeholder co-operation efforts. Some have been driven by provincial action; others have been led by community groups and local citizens. Some reflect a larger vision of progress to sustainability; others were begun in response to pressing immediate problems and with understandably limited attention to overall implications.

The Assessment and Planning research project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, seeks to compare and learn from experiences in the two provinces. Part of the work centres on a series of case studies covering a range of initiatives in the two provinces. *Limping Towards Sustainability: Growth Management, Ecological Governance, and British Columbia's Islands Trust* is the report on the first British Columbia study. For other case studies and publications of the project, contact the project coordinator and editor of the case study series, Dr. Robert Gibson, Department of Environment and Resource Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1.

The Islands Trust study, *Limping Towards Sustainability*

This case report examines the Islands Trust, a local government agency that has been responsible for land use planning in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia since 1974. These islands are under development pressures that are challenging the integrity of their rural character and fragile ecosystems. To address this, the Trust has been equipped with a number of characteristics that one might associate with the "ecological ideal". Its traits include an institutionalized sustainability orientation, a decentralized political structure, a precautionary approach, and ecologically based political boundaries. As a result, a case study of the Islands Trust offers an opportunity to examine the effects real life local ecological governance over the long term. In recent years, the Trust has seen fluctuating public support, driven immediately by clashing values and opposition to its cost and its approach. Rising discord is perhaps ultimately attributable to divergent understandings of the sustainability notion within Gulf Island communities. Nevertheless, preliminary indications are that the organization is continuing to have considerable success in achieving its mandate. In its practical lessons, this case is remarkable because, at a microcosmic level, it confirms so much of what we have learned about environmental issues and the sustainability notion more generally.

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Limping Towards Sustainability

Growth Management, Ecological Governance and British Columbia's Islands Trust

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Introduction

While few believe that institutional design is a panacea for achieving environmental and social sustainability, there is widespread consensus that it is a necessary ingredient and a fundamental starting point. Nevertheless, obvious gaps remain between theory and practice. Disagreement continues over exactly what a sustainable approach to governance would involve and there are few “real life” examples that approximate even a modest ideal. It is therefore important to give special attention to those few existing agencies that are engaged in apparently sustainable practices, in the hope that they can both enlighten the debate and provide models that might be emulated elsewhere.

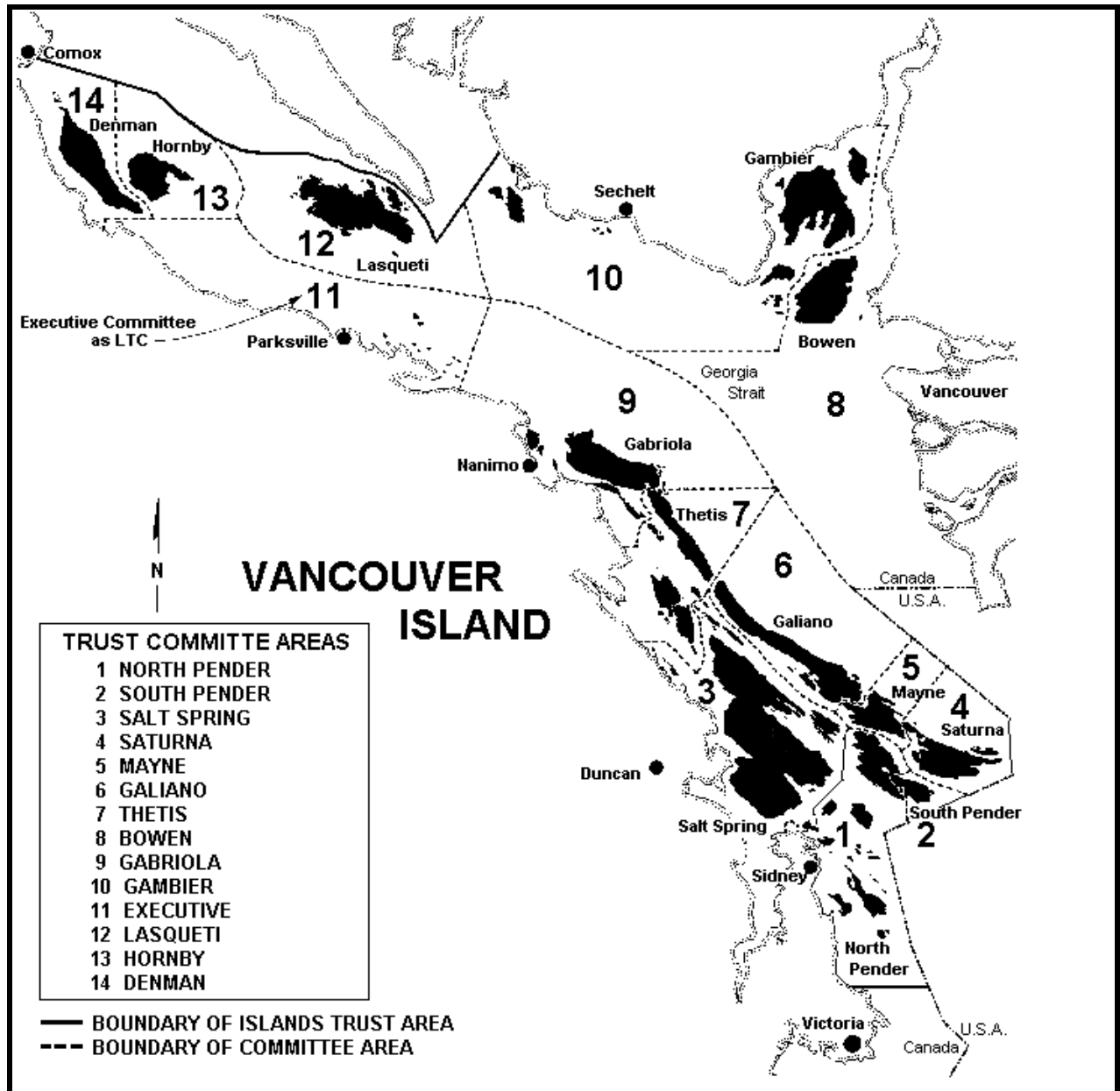
One possible model is the Islands Trust, a unique government structure with jurisdiction over land use planning in the Gulf Islands, located in the Georgia Strait between Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland. The Trust was formed in 1974 by the provincial legislature with a mandate to “preserve and protect” the special amenities and environment of the region. Since that time, it has evolved to become something closer to an autonomous local government, yet it continues to have characteristics of a special purpose agency, a land use planning body, and even an environmental non-government organization.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and assess this unique approach to sustainable institutional design and precautionary planning. I consider how the orientation, structure, and evolution of the Islands Trust demonstrate characteristics of an “ecological” government. I argue that despite evidently fluctuating community support, the Islands Trust and its constituents have had much success in pursuing sustainable development. Its lessons can be both serve as a reality check for those seeking easy solutions through institutional design and a source of inspiration for those in search of community and environmental sustainability.

The discussion is divided into five main sections. First, I briefly describe the physical, social, and economic character of the Gulf Islands. Second, I present an overview of the mandate, structure, and evolution of the Islands Trust. The third section provides an analysis of the recent experience of the institution, highlighting increased opposition to it from within the communities it governs. In the fourth section I begin to assess its progress towards sustainability goals. Finally, I consider the broader lessons that can be gleaned from this study.¹

¹ The methodology for this study involved two main components. First, a literature review of material from both academic and non-academic sources was completed, including an extensive examination of Islands Trust documents. Second, this literature review was augmented by fifteen interviews with key informants from both within and outside the Islands Trust organization and by a number of informal discussions with members of conservation, community, and ratepayers associations.

Figure 1: Islands Trust Area Map



Source: Islands Trust, www.islandstrust.bc.ca, 1998

Context: the character of the Gulf Islands

The physical, social and economic setting

Virtually everyone who visits the Gulf Islands is immediately struck by the spectacular scenery and tranquillity of the setting. The archipelago consists of thirteen main islands and some 470 smaller ones (see Figure 1). Location affords the area moderate rainfall and one of the warmest climates in Canada, as well as a varied and rich physical environment (Eis and Craigdallie, 1980). This is home to more than 200 species of migratory and resident birds and an abundance of other wildlife and vegetation, including resident pods of orca whales. Rugged landscapes, sheer cliffs, a mosaic of forest types, and sheltered bays contribute to the unique aesthetic qualities (Wood and Sadler, 1992).

At the same time, peculiarities of the region such as water shortages and drainage problems lead to a number of significant ecological challenges (Hornby Island Pilot Project Committee, 1994; Wood and Sadler, 1992). In addition, most of the area is situated directly between three major urban centres: Vancouver, Victoria and Seattle. The islands must therefore contend with such external threats as marine pollution, the possibility of oil spills, and noise from low flying aircraft.

Geographic location has also been a factor in the changing social character of these communities. The area, now home to some 22,000 permanent residents (Statistics Canada, 1997), has a long history of human settlement. However, it remains predominately rural in character, with cottages and small farms dominating the developed landscape. During the 1960s, the islands became a desirable place for artists, writers, “hippies” and others seeking an alternative to urban lifestyles (M’Gonigle, 1989). More recently, easier access from Victoria and the Lower Mainland has resulted in changing demographics. In particular, more frequent ferry service has become a powerful attractant for retirees and urban professionals, many of whom commute or live on the islands only part time (British Columbia Ferry Corporation, 1997).

Social makeup also varies quite widely from place to place. Salt Spring Island is home to nearly half the region’s population, with more than 9,000 residents. In contrast, South Pender Island is home to fewer than 200 people (Statistics Canada, 1997). Each island is also held to have its own distinct character and culture. Some are thought to be more urban, while others are thought to be more working class or to have a more artistic citizenry. In sum, the area is home to a dynamic community, holding an eclectic mix of traditional and progressive values (M’Gonigle, 1989). The economies of the islands are increasingly dependent on the growing tourist market. Tourist needs are generally served by a variety of cottage industries including bed and breakfast inns, craft shops, and recreation services such as small charter boat companies. Tourism comes with costs however. Peak season coincides with summer months when the water supply is at its lowest and visitors place additional strains on sewage disposal capacity, parks, marine areas, and other natural features.

Primary resource industries, such as farming and forestry, are also an important but declining sector. In addition, in accordance with their changing social character, the islands have become increasingly dependent on retirement incomes, most of which are derived

from off-island. Many other residents are self-employed and obtain their primary income from off-island, either by physically commuting or through consulting and telecommuting.

The growth context

Both increased tourism and changing demographics are symptomatic of the growth pressures that are being experienced across the Gulf Islands and throughout the Georgia Basin generally. This growth has four facets.

First are the *facts of growth*, which is largely an empirical matter. Between 1991 and 1996, the population of the Trust Area grew from 18,648 to 22,261 – a 22% increase (Statistics Canada, 1997). Similarly, the population expanded by 26% between 1986 and 1991, and by a striking 44% for the decade between 1981 and 1991 (Islands Trust, 1992A).²

These gross measurements are significant, but it is also important to note that the pattern of population growth varies widely from island to island and through time. For example, between 1991 and 1996 the population of Bowen Island (the second most populous island in the Trust Area and the one closest to Vancouver and the mainland) grew from 1933 people to 2738, a remarkable 49.4%. This contrasts with the experience of the more isolated Hornby Island, which grew a mere 7.0% from 924 people to 989 during the same period (Statistics Canada, 1997).

Growth is also evident in increased ferry traffic volume. Between 1984/85 and 1994/95 the number of ferry passengers traveling to the southern Gulf Islands expanded by 54% and is projected to grow by an additional 34% by 2004/05 (British Columbia Ferry Corporation, 1996).

The second facet is the *explanations for the growth*. In the first place, the tranquillity and natural amenities of the location, coupled with improved access and services, have undeniably made the islands a desirable place to live. There are also spill-over effects from adjacent areas. The population of the surrounding Georgia Basin, which includes Seattle and other parts of Washington State, is projected to grow to 7.7 million people by 2010 (British Columbia Ferry Corporation, 1996). This has resulted in a dramatic increase in those seeking to escape the pressures of urban life by going to the Gulf Islands to visit or take up residence. More general demographic and value trends in society also help explain the current scenario. A study on demand projection in the area completed by the BC Ferry Corporation notes,

Economically, the Islands can be characterized by retirement, recreation, tourism, a seasonal second home and vacation population, and a labour force with a large number of self employed persons...In short, it is an area characterized by the

² Demographic statistics for this study are derived from three sources: Statistics Canada (1997), B.C. Ferry Corporation (1996), and The Islands Trust's own data (1992A). Calculations are complicated by a number of factors. For example, each of these agencies used different geographic boundaries (e.g., Statistics Canada uses regional district boundaries, which are not based on the island borders used by the Trust). As a result, these figures cannot be considered statistically reliable. Nevertheless, they are quite accurate and adequately reflect growth trends.

activities and population that are going to grow most rapidly in the coming decades. (1996, p. 3-15).

The third facet is the *effects of growth*. On the socioeconomic side, the islands have seen a proliferation of subdivision applications and increased development generally. There have also been dramatic increases in land prices, particularly for ocean front property. This has contributed to acute shortages of affordable housing and a marked rise in property taxes.

On the ecological side, an expanding human population places greater pressures on water supplies and sewage waste sinks. Rapid development also puts fragile ecosystems at risk and adversely affects indigenous flora and fauna.

The final facet is the *perception of growth*. What it means and whether it should be controlled is a highly contentious matter and one that evokes a variety of responses from community residents. At one pole of the debate are those who are intensely opposed to further growth because of a perceived threat to community character and to ecosystems with limited carrying capacities. In its most extreme form this sentiment has been articulated in explicit calls for population caps and limitations on migration (Dovetail Consulting, 1992). At the opposite pole are those who wholeheartedly embrace more growth because they expect it to bring employment and greater prosperity to local economies. In between lies a myriad of equally heartfelt positions.

In sum, the Gulf Islands are home to a rich and varied physical environment and a diverse human constituency. The blend of these factors, when combined with ecological challenges and intense development pressures, has made necessary an innovative approach to governance and land use management.

The Islands Trust as an Ecologically Oriented Government

A mandate to preserve and protect

As early as the late 1960s, the emergence of rapid growth and development patterns threatened to overwhelm the region with a flood of large recreational subdivisions. In 1972, a special committee struck by the provincial government concluded that the special qualities of the islands were gradually deteriorating. The result was the passage of the *Islands Trust Act* in 1974. Although it has undergone a number of amendments since then, this act remains the primary source of the Trust's authority. Today, it vests the Trust with responsibility for land use planning, conservation, and control of development. The purpose of the agency is clearly set out in the opening passages:

The object of the Trust is to preserve and protect the Trust Area and its unique amenities and environment for the benefit of residents of the Trust Area and of the Province generally, in cooperation with municipalities, regional districts, improvement districts, other persons and organizations and the government of the province.

(Sec. 3(1), *Islands Trust Act*, 1989)

This preservationist purpose is most unusual for a planning agency or for a local government. It has distinguished the Trust from other institutions and has provided a guiding principle throughout its history. Interpretation of the mandate has gradually expanded to include socioeconomic aspects of island life and, consistent with evolving ideas in society, has developed to encompass notions of sustainability and sustainable development. Robinson et al. (1990, p. 39) define sustainability as “the persistence over an apparently indefinite future of certain necessary and desired characteristics of the socio-political system and its natural environment.” Pursuit of this has become the essence of the Trust’s work.

The effects of the mandate are pervasive and manifest themselves in two primary ways. First, there are a number of overt legal implications. Under the *Islands Trust Act*, the Trust Council, the main governing body of the organization (discussed in more detail below), is required to establish a Policy Statement that outlines the general policies and philosophies of the organization (Island Trust, 1994). The Statement furnishes a vision for land use planning and a guide to drafting more specific plans and policies at the local level.

The Policy Statement also informs the substance of Official Community Plans (OCPs), which are generated for each Local Trust Area. As in other municipal jurisdictions, these plans provide policy and designations to guide development and land use. They are prepared at the local level so that they can be sensitive to the particular needs and character of each island. Bylaws passed by Trust bodies must be consistent with the policies set out in the OCPs which in turn must be consistent with the mandate. Legally, no bylaw can be approved if it is inconsistent with the Policy Statement (*Islands Trust Act*, s. 13(3), 1989). This safety check assures that local bylaws conform with the broader policies of the Trust Area. The Policy Statement and the preservationist objective from which it flows therefore act as a sort of local ecological constitution that pervasively forces sustainability onto the agenda.

Second but equally important are the implicit effects of the mandate in shaping the organizational ideology of the institution. Throughout the years, the Trust has taken on a governing and administrative character that is inherently different from other regional and provincial agencies, which have tended to reflect a more pro-development inclination (M’Gonigle, 1989). The mandate has fostered a positive attitude within the organization, enabling those working for it to legitimately pursue a different ethos based on local environmental and community values. As one Trust planner noted, broad support for the mandate “creates a moral imperative that allows us to carry on” (project interviewee, 1997). The result is an uncommon government organization built on environmental sustainability from its foundations.

A participatory, decentralized, and ecologically bounded political structure

The Trust Council is the main governing unit of the Islands Trust. This twenty-six member body is composed of two individuals democratically elected for three year terms from each of thirteen major island groups (see Figure 1). The Council is responsible for establishing the general policies of the institution and its tasks include formulating the

Policy Statement, financial management, approval of annual budgets, and management appointments (Islands Trust, 1996). Four standing committees are also elected from Trust Council members to provide immediate operational and policy advice to the Council and its Executive Committee.

The Trust Council elects a chairperson and three vice chairpersons from among its members. These four individuals, elected for three year terms, become the Executive Committee, which oversees the administrative business of the organization. Its duties include reviewing all local bylaws to ensure compliance with the mandate and Policy Statement.

Local Trust Committees are also formed on each of the thirteen major islands.³ Each of these committees consists of three individuals — the two locally elected trustees and one member of the Executive Committee. A Local Trust Committee is responsible for land use planning within its jurisdiction, including preparation of OCPs and zoning and subdivision bylaws, (Islands Trust, 1996). The relationship of these various bodies is clarified in Figure 2.

The Trust's political organization has a number of advantages. First, each of the major islands has two trustees, regardless of population size. The result, particularly on less populated islands, is a system that is highly accountable and accessible in electoral terms. For example, on Mayne Island, which has a population of about 900 people, the ratio of elected officials to citizens is around 1:450 (smaller still if only eligible voters are considered). Saturna Island, with a mere 290 people, has a ratio of 1:145. Even Salt Spring, the most populous of the Gulf Islands, has a ratio of around 1:4600. The ratio for the islands as a whole is about 1:850.⁴

Residents can therefore enjoy relatively easy access to decision makers and are perhaps more likely to have their views taken into account. Public input to decision making may happen through official processes, as was the case in the formulation of the most recent Policy Statement (Martin, 1993), but is more typically through unstructured channels given that politicians are often on a first name basis with many of their constituents (project interviewee, 1997).

A second advantage is that political boundaries are ecologically defined. That is, they tend to be based upon geographical features and ecological zones rather than artificially superimposed surveyor's lines. This results in part from an accident of the fact that these are islands. However, it is also a reflection of the ecologically sensitive nature of the Trust; the more conventional regional districts that also hold jurisdiction in the area (discussed below) do not have ecologically appropriate borders.

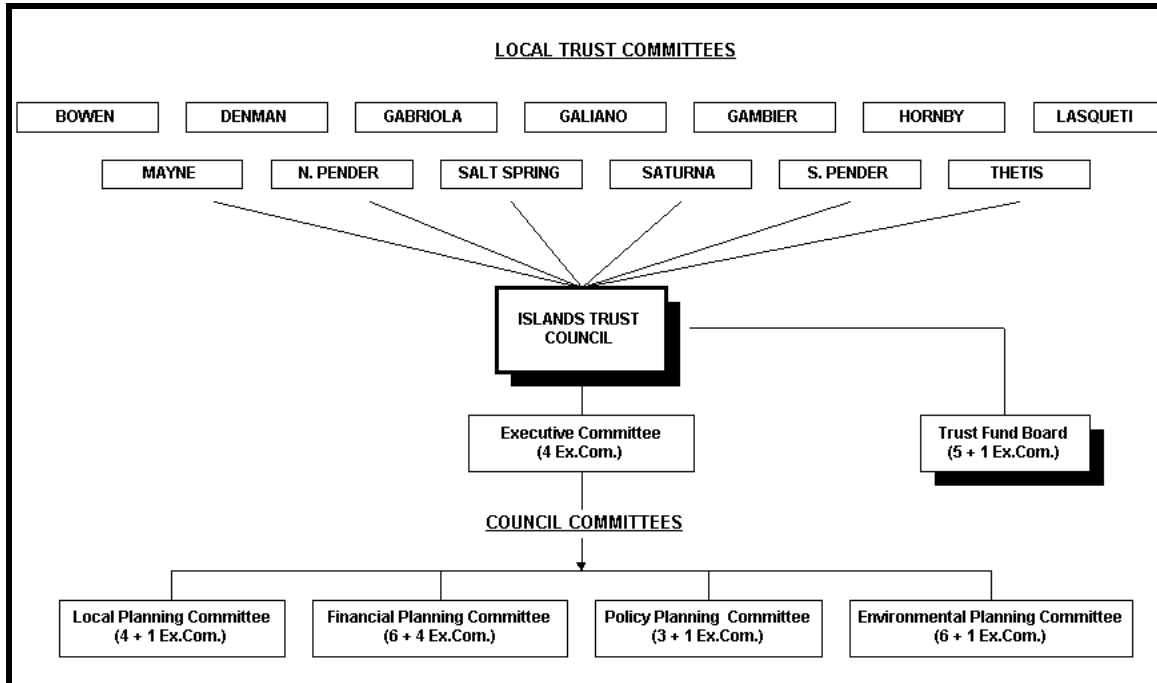
A third advantage is that, rather than being one unified entity, the territory is divided into a number of decentralized jurisdictions that come together as a federation. Each Local Trust Committee has considerable autonomy over land use planning and decision making on its island, allowing it to be responsive to local needs and character. However, each Committee is also ultimately accountable to the Trust Council and to the mandate. This prevents individual islands from being overwhelmed by aggressive development interests and affords a certain "strength in numbers". Without this federation approach, it is

³ The Executive also acts as a Local Trust Committee for a small part of the Trust Area not included within any other Local Trust Areas. It therefore also constitutes a 14th Local Trust Committee. See Figure 1.

⁴ Based on (Statistics Canada, 1997)

entirely conceivable that growth pressures could overwhelm some of the smaller islands that have fewer resources at their disposal (project interviewee, 1997).

Figure 2: The Islands Trust Political Structure



Source: Islands Trust, 1998

The Islands Trust administration and precautionary land use planning

Any ecologically oriented government structure must adhere to the precautionary principle at some level. This axiom, now quite familiar to those concerned with sustainability, holds that if an activity may cause significant environmental degradation it should be avoided or minimized, even if uncertainty remains about the likely impacts. Incomplete information should generally provide a rationale for *not* proceeding rather than a justification for going ahead. Implementation of the precautionary principle requires anticipatory planning and close scrutiny of development, with attention to predicting and avoiding deleterious environmental consequences.

Respect for this principle is an implicit goal of the Islands Trust bureaucracy, which consists of some 40 individuals working in nearby Victoria and on Salt Spring and Denman Islands.⁵ Support for the land use planning deliberations and decisions of the Trust is the principal objective of the agency and the focus of most of its activity. This involves various land control activities such as processing bylaw applications and permits, dealing with zoning issues, and formulation of community plans (see Figure 3).

Operating expenses are obtained from an administrative budget that is determined by the Trust Council annually (*Islands Trust Act*, 1989, s. 12). In 1998/99, the Trust's total

⁵ Staff have also recently been added in Nanaimo (on Vancouver Island) and on Bowen Island.

budget was just over \$3.5 million dollars. This amount is distributed amongst the various political and administrative bodies, with the largest amount (\$2.47 million) allocated to planning services for the 13 Local Trust Areas. These funds are used to “provide technical and support services to Local Trust Committees responsible for land use planning throughout the Trust Areas 470 islands” (Islands Trust, 1998B). In other words, more than 70% of the Trust’s financial resources are dedicated to local land use planning.

Slightly over 80% of revenue is derived from property tax levies. The remainder comes mostly from provincial grants and user fees (Islands Trust, 1998B). Tax collection is administered at the provincial level, based on a requisition submitted by the Trust Council (*Islands Trust Act*, 1989, s. 43).

Because its role is largely restricted to planning, the Trust administration does not play a major role in service delivery functions, most of which are left to various regional and provincial authorities. For example, such services as garbage removal, sewage management, parks maintenance, animal control, and building permits are dealt with by seven adjacent regional districts (project interviewee, 1998). These regional districts mainly provide service delivery and regional governance for municipalities and rural areas on Vancouver Island and the mainland. Their responsibilities are extended into the Gulf Islands for reasons of economy and efficiency (see Figure 4). For example, Bowen Island is part of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), which also serves 21 other municipalities and electoral areas in the Vancouver metropolitan area – a population of some 1.8 million people (GVRD, 1998).

Like the Islands Trust, the regional districts have the operating budgets that are paid for through requisitions derived from property taxes and service fees, as set out under the *Municipal Act* (CRD, 1998B). Islanders elect representatives to regional district boards for three year terms. These representatives serve along with other elected rural members and appointed members from neighbouring municipalities. The boards take on administrative and legislative responsibilities similar to a municipal council.

The Islands Trust and the relevant regional districts essentially act as separate local governments serving the same constituents (project interviewee, 1998). However, since so many of the service delivery functions of the regional districts have a direct impact on the mandate of the Islands Trust, it is vital that activities be coordinated.

This coordination happens on a variety of levels. First, a number of statutory and legislated requirements dictate how the governments relate to each other. For example, s. 32 of the *Islands Trust Act* (1989) prohibits a regional district from passing a bylaw respecting the Trust Area that is contrary to a bylaw of a Local Trust Committee. The regional districts must therefore adhere to the Trust’s mandate at some level. Second, relations are governed by a number of formal arrangements. In recent years, for example, protocol agreements have been negotiated with all seven regional districts. These agreements detail how consultation is to take place, what information is to be traded, and what timelines are to be respected. They address such issues as community planning, parks acquisition, servicing arrangements and administration (Islands Trust, 1998A). Finally, coordination takes place on an ad hoc, day-to-day level as staff and elected officials from both levels are called upon to deal with zoning matters, building permits, and development bids (project interviewee, 1998).

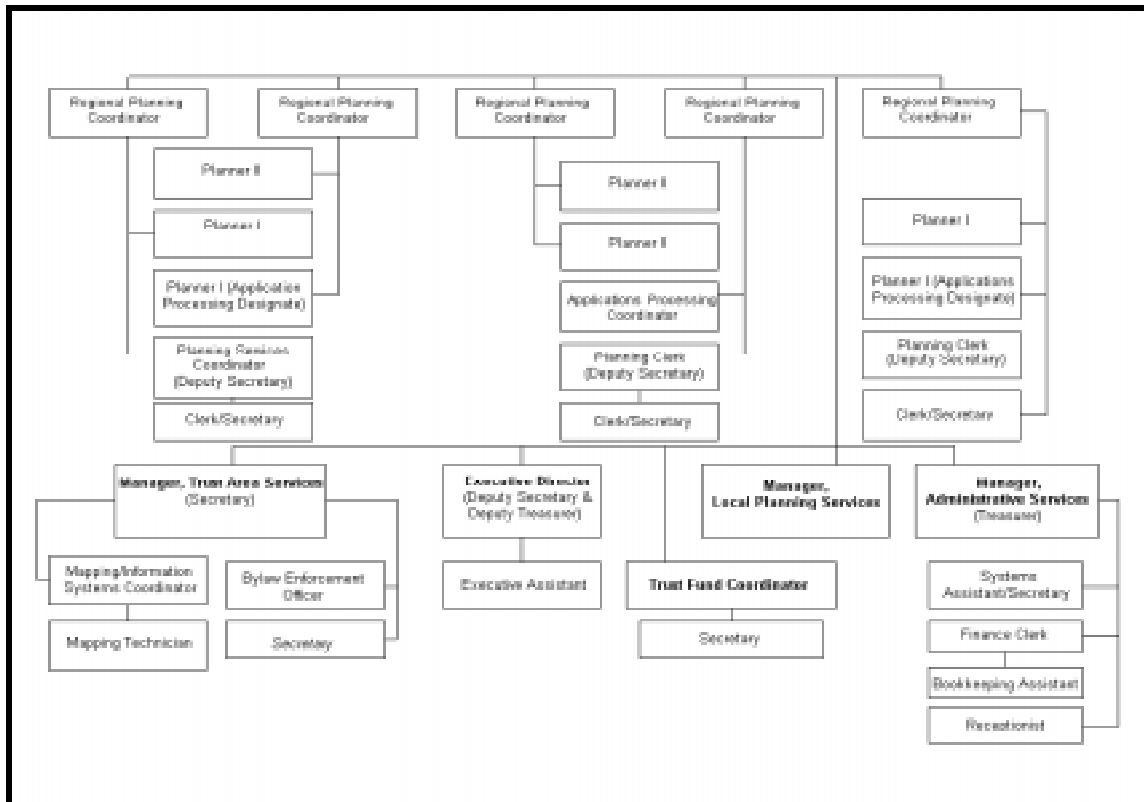
The separation of planning and service functions can lead to coordination problems and to a certain degree of inefficiency. Some residents also complain that the regional

districts tend to have an urban or pro-development bent which is inappropriate for the Gulf Islands. However, the separation of planning and service delivery does have one very significant benefit. As M’Gonigle (1989, p. 539) has noted, “restricted to [its] more limited role, the Trust has been freed of the concerns and compulsions which dominate most municipal and regional governments, allowing it to concentrate instead on more visionary planning tasks.” This has been instrumental in the creation of a bureaucracy that is instilled with a preservationist institutional ideology.

This ideology is encouraged by a close working relationship between political and administrative levels. The small size of the organization lends itself a certain level of congeniality and informality between planners and trustees, allowing them to work together on issues (project interviewee, 1997). Small scale also engenders an affinity between staff and their readily identifiable clientele – the Gulf Islanders.

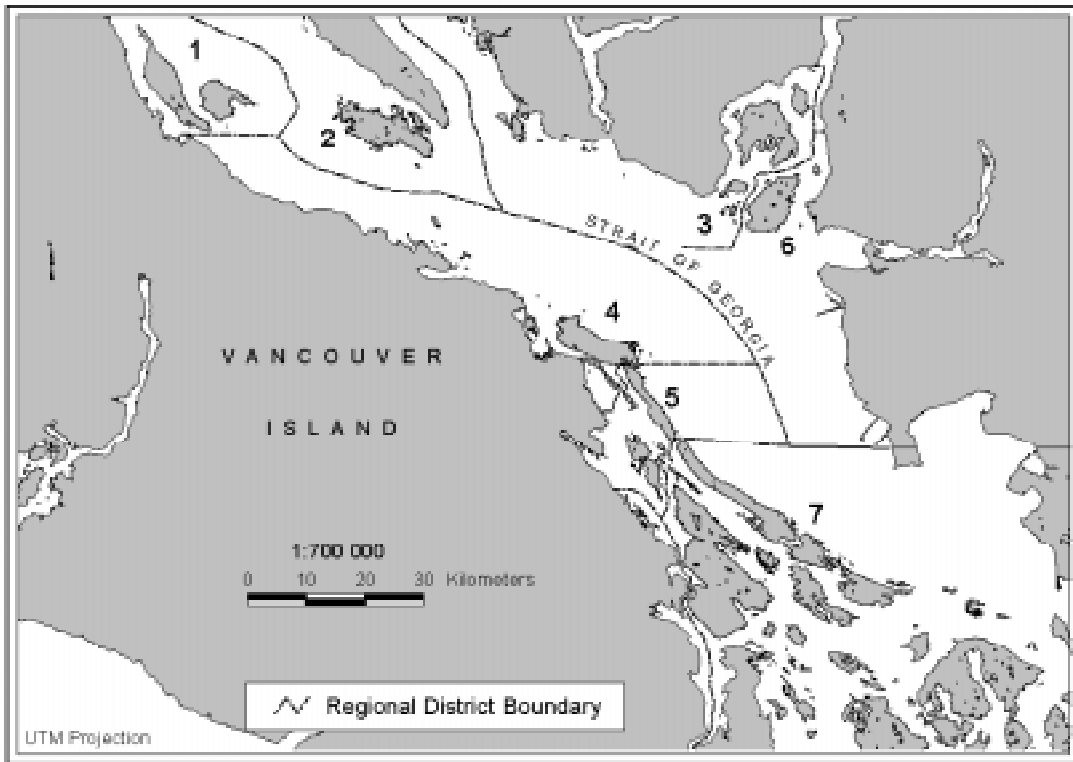
The environmental orientation of the mandate also seems to have a powerful effect on Trust personnel, creating what one outside observer called “a certain positive energy that speaks to the heart of an individual’s commitment” (project interviewee, 1997). That is, the Trust’s special purpose fosters a shared ethic and sense of common cause for staff members. All of this seems to lead to careful scrutiny of development on the part of planners and dedication to the ideals behind environmentally sensitive land use planning, including the precautionary principle.

Figure 3: The Islands Trust Administrative Structure



Source: Islands Trust, 1998

Figure 4: Regional Districts in the Islands Trust Area



Gulf Island Regional Districts	
1	Comox Strathcona Regional District
2	Powell River Regional District
3	Sunshine Coast Regional District
4	Nanaimo Regional District
5	Cowichan Valley Regional District
6	Greater Vancouver Regional District
7	Capital Regional District

Source: Islands Trust, 1998

History and power, flexibility and adaptation

Although it began with its “preserve and protect” mandate, the Islands Trust’s authority and autonomy were tempered in the beginning. Originally, it was conceptualized as a coordinating body that would oversee the planning works done by the provincial government and regional districts. This was to have been accomplished through recommendations and the ability to veto certain bylaws approved at the regional level. However, the Trust’s ability to fulfill the mandate was constrained by its lack of taxation authority and its autonomy was curbed by the fact that members of the Executive Committee were originally appointed at the provincial level.

This arrangement was modified by amendments to the *Islands Trust Act* passed by the provincial legislature in 1977. The three Executive Committee members began to be elected from the 26 local trustees, an arrangement that remains in place today.⁶ Planning and zoning powers were transferred from the various regional districts to the Trust. It also gained the ability to impose a property tax, thereby becoming more financially self sufficient (Jones, 1994).

The 1980s saw a number of “roll back” initiatives from a decidedly more pro-development provincial government in the 1980s. In 1982, then Minister of Municipal Affairs Bill Vander Zalm attempted to repeal the *Islands Trust Act* through a new land use bill. Although the bill died on the order paper, it was followed by a similar policy in 1983 that severely curtailed the ability of local agencies to establish regional plans throughout the province. In 1985, the provincial government introduced a “housekeeping bill”, the *Islands Trust Amendment Act*, which brought the small Trust staff directly under the control of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. In practice, this resulted in no interventions by the province into the Trust’s operations and Trust staff maintained direct lines of communication with Trustees (project interviewee, 1997). However, some viewed it as a significant incursion into the independence of the organization (Smith, 1986).

Several countervailing policies and initiatives were also taking place at this time. Most notable was the proclamation of the Islands Trust Fund in 1987, discussed in more detail below.

Major revisions to the *Islands Trust Act* in 1989 significantly expanded the Trust’s authority, autonomy, revenue raising capacity, and ability to coordinate with other agencies (Jones, 1994). These changes brought the Trust closer to the status of an autonomous local government from its former role as a special purpose agency under direct provincial control (project interviewee, 1997). The Islands Trust staff was again separated from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and a new Executive Director position was created to oversee the organization and to act as a liaison with the political level. The process of expanding authority also resulted in the creation of a new Policy Statement that oriented the Trust in a decidedly more “ecological” direction and the commencement of an ongoing process to revise the outdated OCPs for each Local Trust Area.

The Trust’s gradual expansion began from a narrow power base and its authority still remains largely restricted to land use planning and zoning matters. On a myriad of issues, many of which are directly relevant to the mandate, its abilities and autonomy are

⁶ A fourth elected member has recently been added to the Executive Committee to take up some of the administrative workload.

severely restricted. Most notably, it has little control over the regulation of forestry. However, the Trust is also virtually powerless on a host of other matters spanning from road building authority to subdivision approvals to dog catching. As a result, the Trust is dependent upon the approval and assistance of other government agencies in order to fulfill its designated role. Given that the Trust is invariably more limited in terms of resources and power, it often finds itself in an inferior bargaining position.

Efforts to compensate for power imbalances have been formalized in recent years through the development of an extensive array of protocol agreements with various other agencies. These have covered all manner of issues, from simple road standards arrangements with the Ministry of Transportation and Highways to wide-ranging formal coordination mechanisms with regional districts. Use of such creative solutions is a means to address sustainability across the policy agenda and again reflects the innovative character of the Trust (project interviewee, 1997).

Currently, the organization is engaging in greater efforts to promote conservation on private lands. This is being accomplished principally through the Islands Trust Fund, which can acquire and hold significant lands in the Trust Area either through donation or through purchase. In addition, the Fund facilitates the attachment of *conservation covenants* to private lands through changes to land titles. This is seen as a useful way for individuals to protect their own property voluntarily in perpetuity. The Trust Fund is administered by a six member board consisting of three trustees and three public-at-large members appointed by the province. Its vision is to “protect and conserve, in perpetuity, significant natural and cultural areas within the Trust Area by encouraging, undertaking, and assisting in voluntary conservation initiatives.” (Islands Trust, 1997, p.2).⁷

The Trust's structural and substantive evolution will almost certainly continue given the ongoing population growth. Demands for reform have already come from the two most populous islands, Salt Spring and Bowen, whose representatives have begun to petition for greater local autonomy and a more representative structure (project interviewee, 1997). One possible outcome may be establishment of local municipalities on these islands, although the idea of creating a separate Gulf Island regional district is also discussed. What relationship any new bodies would have to the Islands Trust is uncertain, although the 1989 amendments to the *Islands Trust Act* provide that new municipalities will remain subject to the established mandate.

Thus far, the institution's twenty-five year history has been characterized by expanding power and increasing maturity. One outside observer described it as having become a “more sophisticated and broadly based professional organization” (project interviewee, 1997). Without question, it has become an entity with defined priorities and strategic focus. Expanded legal authority has been achieved in part because of initiatives at the provincial level but is even more attributable to efforts on the part of individuals within the organization, who have continually stretched the legal envelope in order to improve effectiveness. This was demonstrated most evidently on Galiano Island in the early part of this decade.

⁷ The Islands Trust is currently petitioning the provincial government to allow tax advantages for land owners who use covenants through a “Natural Area Protection Tax Incentive” program (Project interviewee, 1998).

Conservation on private lands: the Macmillan Bloedel case

Using zoning and land use regulation for conservation purposes can lead to problems, especially when restrictions are applied to privately owned property. This became all too evident when Macmillan Bloedel (MB), British Columbia's largest forestry company, attempted to develop and sell large private holdings of 15,000 acres on Galiano Island in 1991. Until that point these lands had been used almost exclusively for logging and remained relatively intact. Residents rightly feared that MB's actions would lead to the land being carved up, logged off, and ultimately developed into residential lots.

Galiano's Local Trust Committee moved to pass what some have called "down-zoning" bylaws which removed the residential capacity on most of the lots through zoning restrictions. This would effectively force Macmillan Bloedel to either continue to use the land for forestry or to leave it undeveloped, creating *de facto* parks. The situation quickly turned acrimonious as the corporation responded with a civil lawsuit which alleged that the Local Trust Committee had acted in bad faith, having the ulterior motive of preventing land sales without providing financial compensation.⁸ The Islands Trust lost the case at the BC Supreme Court in 1993.

After a long appeal process, the Supreme Court decision was reversed in 1995 and the Trust's bylaws were allowed to stand. The appeal judges unanimously agreed that the Local Trust Committee did indeed have the ulterior motive of slowing development. However, the court decided to allow the bylaws, despite damage to the company's interests, because the committee was acting within the authority conferred on it by the *Islands Trust Act (Macmillan Bloedel Ltd. v. Galiano Island Trust Committee, 1995)*.

The case is a landmark in the evolution of the Islands Trust and has established an important precedent for environmental law generally. For the purposes of this paper it is significant for several reasons. First, it highlights the dangers of relying on regulation and zoning as a means of achieving conservation goals. It also underscores the limitations of the Trust's powers, particularly when faced with increasingly sophisticated development interests.

More importantly, the fact that the case was ultimately won based on the powers bestowed under the *Islands Trust Act* again draws attention to the special nature of the Trust. The case has given the mandate a "purposive" judicial interpretation and has clarified the outer limits of what can be done to achieve conservation ends (project interviewee, 1997). As long as its bodies are acting within the mandate, the Trust can use minimum lot sizes, density standards, and other bylaws to effectively manage private lands by making development financially unattractive.

It is unlikely that the Trust will change its approach significantly and begin regular use of what some would call draconian bylaws of this nature. There appears to be an understanding, at least within the Trust, that the Macmillan Bloedel case addressed a very specific situation (project interviewee, 1997). However, the ruling has certainly had a confidence boosting effect throughout the organization and has confirmed authority over

⁸ Many believe that the suit was intended as a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP), designed to stifle public debate. This claim is based on the fact that MB used conspiracy allegations to sue the local trustees as individuals and also included members of a local environmental group, the Galiano Conservancy Association, as part of the lawsuit. The conspiracy allegations were later dropped, but this action contributed to a highly charged and confrontational atmosphere in the prolonged legal process that followed. See *Macmillan Bloedel v. Galiano Conservancy Assn.*, (1994) 2 BCLR (3d) 99 (CA).

private lands. As one observer noted, the Trust now has the ability to “use land use planning in a way that they did not anticipate and in a way that other municipalities cannot” (project interviewee, 1997).

In summary, the Islands Trust has a number of characteristics that seem well suited for institutions designed to serve ecological and community sustainability:

- Because of a “preserve and protect” mandate, it is sustainability oriented both through explicit legal requirements and through an implicit organizational ideology.
- Its political approach is participatory, decentralized, and based on ecological rather than artificial boundaries.
- Its small scale, sensitivity to local concerns, and emphasis on planning have led to a precautionary approach to land use management.
- A twenty-five year history of policy innovation and incremental increases in power and autonomy have shown the institution to be quite adaptive and flexible.

As a result, the Islands Trust provides a rare opportunity to study ecological governance over the long term. In the following sections, I consider how this model has functioned in practice.

Recent Experience: internal opposition and external pressure

Any elected government agency, no matter how ecologically oriented it may be, depends on support from the community it represents if it is to pursue environmental protection effectively. In this part of the paper, I look at the challenges the Islands Trust has faced over the last decade. First, I provide an overview of how community support has recently wavered. Second, I analyze the sources of this rising discord. Finally, I argue that much of what has happened has resulted from different understandings of the sustainability notion within Gulf Island communities.

Rising opposition

In the decade following its formation, the Islands Trust apparently enjoyed extremely strong support. A 1987 study indicated that over 75% of residents not only supported the organization but also expressed an interest in seeing its role expanded (Natural Resource Management Program, 1987).

This support has subsequently eroded. Although the critical voice appears to have always remained in the minority, it has varied widely and some sharp criticism has come from those islands immersed in controversy. For example, considerable dissent arose on embattled Galiano during the Macmillan Bloedel conflict. On Bowen Island, many have sought a separate municipal status to reflect the island’s more urban character and proximity to the Lower Mainland.

Conflict is reflected principally in the formation of various ratepayers associations and groups with an explicit or implicit anti-Trust orientation (see Yaffe, 1993; Farrow, 1991). One example is the Galiano Ratepayers Association, which claims a membership

of over 300 people and was formed in 1991 in reaction to rising taxes and opposition to the Trust's methods (Galiano Ratepayers Association, 1992). Another example is the "Trust Watch Collective", a now defunct organization that formed on Bowen Island and used an Internet web site to demand changes from the Trust (Trust Watch Collaborative, 1996). These groups' efforts have ranged from seeking moderate reform, such as increased transparency and better access to information (Trust Watch Collaborative, 1996), to demanding the Trust's outright abolition. Most groups have been organized around the notions of protecting private property rights and minimizing taxes, as well as seeking more accountability and openness.

Naturally, some dissent and debate are necessary for the healthy functioning of any democratically elected organization. However, in this case opposition has often been extreme. In the early 1990s, bumper stickers began to appear on cars and trucks with the slogan "Save Me From the Islands Trust". One member of a ratepayers association described the Trust as "absolute enemies" and openly expressed a desire to see it eliminated (project interviewee, 1997). In time, if these groups coalesce into an effective movement which finds a sympathetic ear in the provincial government, the end of the organization could conceivably ensue. Meanwhile, because the Islands Trust needs close ties to the public it represents, such sentiment hampers the agency's capabilities and has a detrimental effect on community solidarity.

Opposition to the Trust itself

Opposition to the Trust itself comes from at least three principal sources. The first is from would-be land developers and is no surprise given the often explicit anti-development stance of the institution. Those within this group range from large, off-island corporate interests (such as Macmillan Bloedel on Galiano Island) to local residents wishing to build family homes on undeveloped lots.

The second source of opposition is based on a more generalized anti-government sentiment and manifests itself in private property rights advocacy. Here, the difficulty is that the Trust's mandate clashes sharply with other deeply entrenched social values, particularly the belief in the right to enjoy and alter one's property without government interference. This point of view has been the strongest motivation behind the formation of several new ratepayers associations in the past decade. Some espousing this view see the Trust as a body captured by "green ideologues" who regard conservation as a moral crusade. They consider the Trust to be fundamentally antagonistic to private property rights (project interviewees, 1997).

One reaction might be to judge this sentiment as short sighted and based on an unenlightened understanding of environmental imperatives. However, some of those holding this point of view are quick to identify themselves as environmentalists (project interviewees, 1997). The reality is that, in pursuing its mandate, the Trust can and does prevent land owners from building homes. Furthermore, as noted above, the agency's lack of formal power causes it to use zoning as a means of achieving its goals. This method can be extremely confusing to those affected and may appear deceitful and underhanded.⁹

⁹ The Trust has made efforts in recent years to address this value conflict through community consultation and by working for tax incentives for those who protect natural areas on privately held land (Islands Trust, 1997).

The third and final source of opposition is a direct result of escalating property taxes, most of which has happened since the 1989 amendments to the *Islands Trust Act*. Indisputably, taxes have risen dramatically. The 1998/99 budget shows an increase of nearly \$1.7 million dollars from 1991/92 (the first budget to follow the 1989 amendments). During the same period, the overall property tax levy grew from \$1,165,000 to \$2,851,435 (Islands Trust, 1998B). In other words, property taxes have more than doubled over a 7 year period, even when calculated on a per capita basis.¹⁰

This is at least partly attributable to bureaucratic expansion. Efforts to pass a new Policy Statement and put new OCPs in place in each Local Trust Area have resulted in significant costs, such as salaries for additional professional planners (project interviewee, 1997). Tax increases are also due to factors that are beyond the immediate control of the Trust. For example, cutbacks at the provincial level have resulted in declining external funding.

In any case, in the last decade taxes have risen significantly, leading to one of several peculiar ironies. Higher taxes are partially a result of conservation efforts on the part of the Trust. But, to make money to pay these taxes and to continue living on the islands, some residents have allegedly chosen to log intact natural areas on their lands (project interviewees, 1997). This counterproductive effect has raised considerable discontent among both supporters and critics.

On the issue of taxation, there is also another interesting irony at work: The Islands Trust is dependent on land taxes but is essentially anti-development. In order to alleviate taxation pressures on large lot owners, it could allow more subdivision to occur – an action that tends to raise property values and therefore revenue. However, the desire to maintain intact natural areas tends to lead the organization to favour large lots and to minimize land development.

Tax-related animosity is compounded by a peculiarity of the agency's mandatory focus on land use planning. Other levels of government do most of the visible work commonly associated with a municipal government. Taxpayers do not see the Trust completing vital day-to-day functions like maintaining roads and collecting garbage. Moreover, because of the contentious nature of the mandate, the Trust is often most visible during times of controversy (project interviewee, 1997). As a result, it is sometimes viewed as a costly bureaucracy that acts as an impediment rather than a provider of services.

Opposition to the Trust's approach

Some support the Trust and its mandate but oppose the positions it takes or the specific tactics used. There are at least four aspects to this.

First, there are disagreements about the *quantity* of development, with some arguing that there should be more and some claiming that there should be less. On one side are conservation groups and those with an ecological bias. As a whole, this group is generally supportive of the Trust and its work. Indeed, at least one group – the Island Watch Society on Salt Spring Island – was founded with the explicit goal of supporting and strengthening the “preserve and protect” mandate (project interviewee, 1997). However,

¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that the most recent budget was passed without any tax increases, possibly signaling a reversal of recent trends (Islands Trust, 1998B).

some within this constituency believe that the region can tolerate absolutely no more growth and see the Trust's efforts as insufficient. One environmentalist I spoke with put it this way: "The Trust is a paper tiger with no teeth. All it can do is gum developers to death" (project interviewee, 1997).

On the other side are those who believe that more growth is needed. These critics accuse trustees and staff of stonewalling development and attempting to "stop and block" expansion. They argue that a "slow and control" approach is both more realistic and economically preferable (project interviewee, 1997). Those who would welcome additional population and development point to various instances where the Trust has engaged in what can be seen as obstructionist tactics, such as withholding building permits on approved projects or passing bylaws *in camera* to prevent undertakings (Skelly, 1994).

Second, some oppose the *quality* of the development that is allowed. Primacy has been given to maintaining rural character and water resources. This generally leads to a standard approach of allowing only large lots and construction of independently serviced single family dwellings. The downside of this is that it can lead to fragmentation of intact natural areas and contribute to sprawl (Scott, 1991).

In some recent cases, this approach has given way to the use of "amenity zoning" and approval of residential enclaves (project interviewee, 1997). Developers are being allowed to build with higher densities in some areas, often in return for the gifting of other lands for parks and preserves. The result is a form of horse trading where developers are able to get projects through while the Trust is able to serve its mandate through other means (project interviewee, 1997). This approach also reflects a broader shift in land use planning. However, critics argue that it only results in more people on the islands, accelerated urbanization, and overburdening the limited water supply (Attorp, 1995).

Third, there is discontent about the Trust's head office being located outside the Gulf Islands in Victoria, the provincial capital. This location is in part a historical leftover, but it is also a matter of expedience in that it allows greater access to professional planners and to communication with provincial and regional counterparts. Nevertheless, many argue that it results in planners being out of touch with the islands' character (project interviewee, 1997; Dovetail, 1992). Still others see the Victoria location as symbolic of an over-centralization of power and advocate a model that would establish even more control at the level of individual islands (Attorp, 1995).

The current approach to remedying the situation is to decentralize incrementally. A branch office has already been set up on Salt Spring, a home office on Denman, and an office staffed part time on Bowen (project interviewee, 1997). This decentralization, driven by the demands of islanders, is facilitated by improvements in communication technologies.

Finally, many complain that insufficient work is being done to anticipate growth pressures instead of simply reacting to zoning applications and development bids. This is a complaint made by individuals both inside and outside the organization. Reform of forestry practices is most frequently mentioned as an issue receiving too little attention. Other issues include private property management, affordable housing, and parks creation. The Trust is also criticized for devoting too little attention to studying ecological capacity, such as the availability and quality of fresh water resources. Of course, to undertake this kind of proactive work would require new tools, such as

improved land stewardship legislation, as well as more financial resources (project interviewees, 1997; Cliff, 1991)

Different versions of sustainability

In one sense, conflicts over the work of the Islands Trust are no different from land use conflicts elsewhere in North America. In part, they are attributable to clashing value systems and a very basic divergence between long term environmental priorities and short term economic goals. This is perhaps symptomatic of a more widespread perception that there is a fundamental rift between the two spheres and it may be impossible to resolve these localized disputes without reconciling the larger societal issues that encompass them.

At the same time, deeper examination suggests that many land use and environmental debates are not as polarized as they may first appear. Within Gulf Island communities, at least, residents share a strong sense of place and both supporters and critics of the Islands Trust almost universally express a deep appreciation for the natural environment. Very few want strip malls, tract housing, and golf resorts to dominate the developed landscape. Indeed, many people move there to escape exactly that lifestyle. Thus, a generalized commitment to preserving the character of the area informs almost all political debate.

Indications are that there is still widespread support for the Islands Trust and its mandate at a general level. The controversies arise over what the mandate should mean in practice. Some critics argue that the object of preserving and protecting the Gulf Islands is interpreted too narrowly and that the environment is considered in isolation from the need for economic and community sustainability. This concern is based on a desire to maintain a local economy that is relatively equitable and self-sufficient with opportunities for such things as jobs and basic services. Detractors argue that the current approach is flawed because it ignores this basic requirement and the interdependence of the socioeconomic and ecological spheres (project interviewees, 1997).

This concern is evident in accusations that the Trust is an elitist institution too far removed from practical matters and too little concerned about equity considerations. Some maintain that the islands are home to an already privileged elite that is too heavily influenced by the affluent retired and urban professionals. They regard this group as having a “drawbridge mentality” that uses conservation arguments as a means to prevent change and to keep newcomers out, particularly those with fewer resources. Critics point especially to the lack of affordable housing and limited employment opportunities and argue that imposing such constraints on the less privileged is both unfair and unsustainable. As one commentator put it, “public concern for environmental values [is used] as a smoke screen for beggar-thy-neighbour obstructionism” (Scott, 1991).

Another equity consideration arises from the externalities residents impose on the surrounding region. Islanders enjoy a number of economic subsidies from nearby urban areas and from the province generally. For example, the Trust currently receives \$423,000, or just under 12% of its total revenue, from direct provincial transfer grants.¹¹ Islanders also have disproportionate access to other provincial services, particularly

¹¹ Of course, other local governments may also receive similar grants, including special planning grants targeted at creating regional or local growth strategies.

subsidized ferry service. In 1994/95 for example, ferry service in the Southern Gulf Islands suffered a loss of over \$24 million dollars, an amount that was ultimately taken up by federal and provincial subsidies and ferry passengers on more profitable routes (BC Ferry Corporation, 1996).¹² Islanders also have access to off-island amenities, such as shopping and entertainment facilities, but do not have to accept the consequences of traffic, road infrastructure, urban sprawl, and congestion. Because of the proximity to urban centres, they are able to enjoy the fruits of city life without enduring the problems. When such development is attempted on the archipelago itself, the response tends to be “Not In My Back Yard”.

Economic and environmental carrying capacity are also appropriated from other places. Most island income is ultimately derived from distant sources through retirees' pensions, tourist dollars, or off-island jobs. Also, limited local production of goods and services means that much of what is consumed on the islands is produced elsewhere in the province or the world. This in turn has the effect of shifting the consequent environmental impacts to other places.

In sum, the controversies on the Gulf Islands mirror a larger debate about a perceived environment/economy dichotomy. The Islands Trust emerges as a focal point for a more fundamental debate on how sustainability ought to be sought. This points to the another important issue: whether the Islands Trust is contributing as well as it might to the sustainability of the Gulf Islands' environments and economies.

Assessing the Islands Trust

Assessing whether an institution is advancing sustainability goals successfully is a difficult task in any setting. In this case, it is complicated by at least three factors. First, it is difficult to predict what level and quality of development would have occurred on the islands had the Islands Trust not been created and more traditional land use planning strategies been used instead. Second, the notion of sustainability is a still evolving and there is only general agreement on its main implications. Consequently, assessing how well the Trust is serving environmental objectives remains highly subjective.

Finally, one cannot assess the institution's effectiveness without consideration of its context, the challenges it faces, and the advantages it has on hand. By an accident of geography, the islands are located right in the middle of the most rapidly growing urban regions in North America. Due to this and to the islands' inherent attractiveness, the Trust confronts intense external development pressures.

Indeed, any successes that are achieved can have the opposite effect of increasing the Trust's problems. As urban sprawl increasingly blights adjacent urban regions centred

¹² Current provincial and federal subsidies to the B.C Ferry Corporation amount to \$24 million and \$22.5 million respectively. However, this money is not targeted directly at any one particular ferry route or service. As a result, operating losses from the Gulf Islands are absorbed by the general operating budget of the corporation, which in turn is subsidized by the governments (Project interviewee, 1998). It should also be noted that a significant percentage of Gulf Island ferry passengers are tourists and other non-residents and that the ferry system is a key part of the province's highway system.

around Vancouver, Victoria, and Seattle, the Trust's ability to maintain the attractiveness of the islands draws more outsiders as potential residents and would-be developers. In other words, the Trust's conservation work may sometimes have the reverse effect of reinforcing growth pressures.

The Trust's salvation is another accident of geography. Because these are islands, they are naturally more difficult to access and to develop. The fact that the Gulf Islands are on the periphery is among the agency's greatest advantages for staving off development pressures.

Thus, how well the Trust does is heavily influenced by factors over which it has no sway and one must ask what tests can reasonably be applied given the external pressures. It would also seem that the endeavours of the Trust are intricately tied to efforts elsewhere. Unless sound environmental policies are developed in other parts of the world, particularly in adjacent regions, the Gulf Islands will always be a draw for those seeking its aesthetic and lifestyle attractions

Indications of success

In these complicated circumstances, then, what is a fair test of effectiveness in serving the mandate and pursuing sustainability? On the one hand, there are some clear indications that the Islands Trust has made progress. On the other hand, growth has obviously not stopped. Much development has occurred in the past decade, particularly on the more populous islands. It is also apparent that some of the expansion that has been permitted is probably not in keeping with the aims of the mandate. For example, many Salt Spring residents were surprised when a 123 unit ocean front resort complex – Salt Spring Island Village Resort (SSIVR, n.d.) – recently went ahead because its developers were able to exploit several loop holes and oversights in the island's zoning bylaws (project interviewee, 1997).

Preliminary and anecdotal evidence suggests that growth is at least being regulated. This success is perhaps evident not so much in what you do see on the Gulf Islands, as in what you do not see. As one planner noted, many applications for major developments have been submitted over the years, including proposals for destination golf courses and amusement parks, yet there are relatively few in place compared to other parts of Canada. Local Official Community Plans, the *Islands Trust Act*, and the mandate have given staff and trustees a degree of freedom to be precautionary in their planning that is not generally available elsewhere. This has prevented much unfettered development from occurring (project interviewee, 1997). This idea was reaffirmed by one trustee who stated: "My greatest power as a trustee is my ability to say 'no'" (project interviewee, 1997).

What the Islands Trust has accomplished is also evident in comparison with the experiences and landscapes of adjacent municipalities. Rapid and only loosely managed urban growth throughout much of the Georgia Basin now threatens environmental, social and aesthetic well being in the region.

In contrast, landscapes on the Gulf Islands are still relatively free of the over-development that one might otherwise expect to see in such an attractive tourist setting. Community options that have been foreclosed by unregulated development in other places remain relatively intact in the Trust Area. As a result, the ability of future

generations to use and enjoy land and environmental resources is still significantly undiminished.

While it is difficult to assert definitively whether or not the Islands Trust is fulfilling its mandate, evidence suggests that it is limping towards it. Without question, this is a unique and at least partially successful experiment in local governance of a fragile environment. This achievement is attributable to a powerful nexus of several elements, including

- a preservation mandate,
- concerned and activist politicians,
- an inspiring and relatively isolated setting,
- an aware and morally driven constituency with a strong sense of place,
- a committed bureaucracy with a clear mission and a readily identifiable clientele, and
- an institutional structure based on participatory decision making.

Equally important is the federation approach that this model has created, which allows individual islands to continue to create their own vision of community with relative immunity. At the same time, the existence of larger bodies, including the Trust Council and the bureaucracy in Victoria, has provided the resources and safety checks needed to ensure that no individual island is overwhelmed.

In sum, anecdotal evidence, comparison to adjacent regions, and personal testimony from those closely associated with the Trust all suggest that the mandate is being reasonably well served, given the circumstances.

Greater certainty on these claims could be achieved through the use of environmental indicators or evaluation which measures progress towards specific sustainability targets. Such targets have not been established, despite the fact that goals are reasonably well laid out at a general level in the Policy Statement. Moreover, the Islands Trust itself appears to be doing little to determine and report on how well it is achieving its objectives. Relevant data on such matters as water quality and biodiversity are not being collected and may not be available from other sources. As a result, there is inadequate information to arrive at more definitive conclusions. Specific and quantitative benchmark mechanisms are needed in order to arrive at a more objective assessment. This can be identified as an important area for future research. With that in mind, I turn attention to the lessons this case can offer.

Lessons from the Islands Trust

It seems apparent that it would not be feasible or appropriate to directly impose the Islands Trust model in other places. This case should demonstrate that ecological governance must give attention to specific local environmental and social characteristics. However, we can clearly learn a great deal from what has happened in the Gulf Islands. These lessons can help create workable solutions elsewhere. Accordingly, this study offers both a reality check and a source of inspiration to those interested in sustainable institutional design.

The Islands Trust as a reality check

There are at least four cautionary lessons to be gleaned from this study. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that institutional design is clearly not a panacea. The Islands Trust experience demonstrates that institutional reform needs to be accompanied by changes in the broader societal framework and in the social and economic values of the community. While the Islands Trust organization is quite possibly the closest real life example to ecological governance in Canada, it has had only mixed success in achieving sustainability goals, despite twenty-five years of efforts and incremental increases in power and authority. To the extent that the Trust has been successful, it is largely because the values of its constituency have generally been compatible with its preservationist mandate. Where the Trust has encountered difficulties, it is because of antagonisms over these values. The legal mandate and the powers that accompany it have been a necessary part of success but cannot be sufficient without a foundation of community support.

Second, the Trust's experience provides a striking reaffirmation of the idea that social and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked while simultaneously demonstrating how difficult it is to address them together without conflicts. Efforts to protect the physical environments of the Gulf Islands have at times clashed sharply with other deeply held social values. Some of these values are also contained within the notion of sustainability, such as the desire to maintain a viable and relatively equitable local economy.

Third, the case demonstrates that if a local government organization is to be charged with protecting an environment, it must be vested with sufficient resources. Despite significant increases to its power base through time, the Islands Trust remains essentially restricted to a land use planning role. Increases in institutional capacity, legal tools, and human and financial resources would almost certainly result in more advances towards the object. This is particularly the case in sectors where proactive work needs to be done, such as forestry. In short, adequate authority and autonomy is needed to take local environmental agencies beyond the regulatory "stop and block" methods upon which land use planning for preservation tends to rely.

Fourth, this study offers the same lesson that those involved in parks and wilderness issues have learned in recent decades. It is that we cannot protect special places by designating such areas as unique and setting them aside as "islands of preservation" without attention to external factors. Most of the growth and development pressures experienced on the islands originate from the outside – from tourists, immigrants and developers. The Islands Trust acts to filter these pressures, but it remains vulnerable to external forces. It would therefore seem impossible to protect the Gulf Islands' environments without attention to the implications of growth throughout the Georgia Basin and, ultimately, the world.

The Islands Trust as a source of inspiration

The Islands Trust case can also serve as a source of inspiration in several respects. The first concerns the scale of politics. The Trust is a participatory, territorially based government that operates largely at the community level. In general, its trustees seem to be motivated not by ambition, so much as a sense of taking one's turn. Although this sentiment is certainly evident in many types of local community organizations, what is remarkable with this case is that the institution they represent is a governing authority dedicated to the broader social project of sustainability.

Anecdotal evidence and personal testimony also suggest that the Islands Trust continues to enjoy remarkably strong support, despite the controversial nature of its mandate and the community conflicts that have emerged in recent years. Earlier in this paper, I identified a nexus of politicians, constituents, environment, bureaucrats and institutional character as crucial to the progress that the agency has made. At the same time, the small scale, relative isolation, and close-knit nature of the communities also make them breeding grounds for dissent. Islanders tend to be politically aware people with strong commitments to whatever values they may hold. This "two sides of the people", as one observer called it, gives the organization great strength and also weakness, since so much opposition has come from within the community (project interviewee, 1997). The Islands Trust is, in short, a forum for democracy in a very raw form.

This model may not be directly transferable to other places. The ingredients that the Islands Trust has at its disposal make for a unique mix that simply may not be available elsewhere. And, as noted above, one must also take into consideration just how important the relative inaccessibility of the islands setting has been, an advantage that does not exist everywhere.

However, the idea of "community ecological governance" certainly merits further attention. With sufficient community support, such a forum could ultimately be applied to any place where there are people and environments to protect - conceivably even in downtown urban neighbourhoods. Decentralized small scale initiatives similar to the Islands Trust model can allow local communities to incorporate environmental considerations into planning and decision making at the grassroots level. This bottom-up approach can be a crucial component of a broader program of sustainability-oriented reforms and initiatives.

Second, the "preserve and protect" mandate has broad relevance and transferability. As noted above, it acts as a sort of local ecological constitution through a combination of its legal requirements and its effect in fostering an organizational ideology. Given sufficient power and support, there is no reason why similarly mandated institutions could not be enacted in other places. Many other parts of Canada and the world have environmental and social features to preserve and protect. This is true in the far North as well as in inner city neighbourhoods. However, most places lack mechanisms specifically dedicated to ensuring ongoing conservation efforts at the community level. At the very least, this case highlights what is possible when a local government agency is vested with an institutionalized orientation towards sustainability.¹³

¹³ Of course, many places would require a major rehabilitative component as well. In such cases, the Islands Trust mandate and model might prove useful but insufficient.

Finally, as M'Gonigle (1989) noted nearly a decade ago, the Islands Trust is a source of inspiration simply because it exists at all in the present context. Throughout its history a unique character, extraordinary mandate and participatory nature have set it apart from other institutions. One planner within the organization compared the Islands Trust to a dike that stands against the flow of over-development and environmental degradation (project interviewee, 1997). Because of ongoing controversy and an inability to advance conservation efforts in various spheres, it seems clear that it is more analogous to a leaky dike. However, through a remarkable synergy of social and institutional factors, it continues to hold back the most damaging floods.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have described a unique local agency that has an orientation, structure, and history characteristic of an "ecological government". The Islands Trust has made great strides towards fulfilling its mandate, as demonstrated by comparison to adjacent jurisdictions and by the fact that environmental options remain relatively intact. This case is remarkable because of the lessons it offers and because it highlights so many aspects of environmental issues and the sustainability notion at a microcosmic level.

More change and controversy are virtually inevitable in the future as growth continues in the Georgia Basin area and as Gulf Island populations expand. The more populous islands are already beginning to outgrow the current structure of the institution and their representatives have begun to seek new governance models. However, so long as new governments adhere to the mandate and aspirations of the Islands Trust there is, for once, reason for cautious optimism.

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Interviews

This work was informed by a series of informal interviews with various individuals associated with the Islands Trust. Fifteen open ended interviews were conducted in September 1997 and November 1998, each lasting between one and two hours. Thirteen of the interviews were conducted in person; two were conducted over the phone. Informants included four Islands Trust employees, two trustees, four ratepayers association representatives, two conservation group representatives, one Ministry of Municipal Affairs employee, one employee of the Capital Regional District, and one volunteer advisor from a community planning committee. Most representatives were selected from two different islands with contrasting demographic and economic characteristics. This work was also informed by a number of less formal telephone and e-mail conversations with members of conservation, community, and ratepayers groups. The identities of all informants are withheld to protect anonymity. Their analyses greatly enhanced my understanding of the Trust's recent experiences.