

COULD VIU'S CENTRE FOR SHELLFISH RESEARCH BE A PASSPORT TO PROSPERITY IN LIGHTHOUSE COUNTRY?



BY LISA VERBICKY

The first time I took my children to Vancouver Island University's (VIU) Milner Gardens was as a mere distraction from restless in-laws that had the week before declared that they were "coming to visit...for a week". So, I begrudgingly squeezed into the backseat of the hatchback, my sun hat pushed forward over the bridge of my nose, and let my husband drive us twenty minutes south.

Whether it was car-sickness or the relief of no longer being stuck to my children in a slick of sweat, my enthusiasm climbed a notch when I stepped out into the gardens' fir-shaded and flora-scented parking lot. Beyond the log pavilion beckoned a soft trail padding off into a forest as charming as a setting out of the *Princess Bride*. We spent the next four hours wandering amongst rhododendrons, hiding under kiwi vines, drinking tea, reading interpretive signs, visiting the gift shop, romping on a heaven of fresh cut lawn, learning about gardening, and well, having a jolly good time of it.

We have since been back for music and art events, the Christmas light celebration, and am now looking at summer gardening camps for the kids.

According to Geoff Ball, Milner Garden's Executive Director employed by VIU, I have now become one of 250,000 annual visitors to the University's public gardens. Largely operated by a close community of 225 volunteers clocking some 1,400 hours per season, Milner Gardens has contributed to the local community in ways far beyond one family's fun.

Beyond being a lovely place to visit, Milner Gardens has fostered environmental stewardship with the restoration and preservation of the 70-acre site and its children's early gardening programs. It has promoted community through its volunteer programs and cultural events. It has trained our young horticulture, biology, geology, forestry, and arts students and set them free to work close to home. It has attracted visitors and wedding parties from around the globe, bringing business to local B&B's, florists, restaurants, photographers, party supply companies, shops and services throughout Oceanside.

So, how does that add up in Lighthouse Country? It's a good question to ask right now, as VIU's latest satellite facility, the Deep Bay Field Station operated by the Centre for Shellfish Research (CSR) is moving from its construction phase and into its operational phase. With a soft opening scheduled for September of this year, VIU wants to hear from local residents and businesses about how this, now real, opportunity can best fit into the surrounding communities. What will a university presence look like here? How do we *own* this opportunity?

"At this point there is a lot of potential for providing local and relevant multi-disciplinary educational programming, cultural events, and local business opportunities," says CSR Manager, Brian Kingzett.

Some of the ideas that have come to the table so far include credit courses/programs in disciplines including aquaculture, biology, business/marketing, aboriginal studies, and the culinary and fine arts.



Whatever the angle, and even in its infancy, Vancouver Island University's Centre for Shellfish Research in Deep Bay is an impressive sight and an important new addition to Lighthouse Country.

“The best way to support our community is to bring revenue to the community,” says Betsy Poel, Director, Lighthouse Country Business Association.

The centre also has the facility potential to hold an array of Continuing Education classes, making it much more convenient for local learners who normally commute to Nanaimo or Parksville.

Similar to Milner Gardens, K-12 coastal science programs are also being looked at, along with science-based summer camps designed to give kids a deeper connection to where they live.

Also like Milner, says Kingzett, the facility has the potential to operate largely on volunteer hours, fostering a local knowledge base, an opportunity for work experience and learning, and a sense of pride, culture and community.

From an environmental perspective, as was done with Milner, VIU students themselves along with local horticulturists and salmon enhancement groups have been restoring the site’s riparian areas into an attractive public educational model of coastal hydrology.

The aquaculture industry itself is, by necessity, a ‘green’ coastal economic driver, says Kingzett. Pristine water quality is crucial to the sustainability of the industry, and research taking place on the bottom floors of the facility will be watching it very closely.

“We want to walk the talk,” says Kingzett.

The clam-shaped building, designed by McFarland Marceau Architects Ltd. to be LEED Platinum and structurally engineered by Fast + Epp (who also worked on the Richmond Olympic Oval) is expected to serve as a model of green building technology and theory, and an attraction for science-based tourism. Lighthouse Country will be home to one of the greenest and most unique buildings in North America.

The facility’s teaching kitchen and a potential ‘chef in residence’ will also serve to accommodate special events like weddings, conferences, and tours which are expected to provide several business opportunities in accommodation, recreation, and retail sectors.

“The Deep Bay Shellfish Centre is a fantastic project that will be of great benefit to the area as a whole,” says Milner’s Geoff Ball. “There’s definitely potential for us at Milner Gardens to work as partners along the way.”

Community involvement is one of the items on Brian Kingzett’s ‘to-do’ list as the CSR project manager, now operating under a growing VIU regional strategic plan to promote the economic, environmental and social health of coastal communities.

According to Kingzett, the regional plan is taking stock of how best to promote coastal prosperity through teaching, research, service, and partnerships at each of its campuses in Cowichan, Nanaimo, Parksville, Powell River, Qualicum Beach (Milner Gardens), and now in Deep Bay with the CSR.

The long-term viability of the industry-based research centre, says Kingzett, depends in large part on its inclusion of the area’s businesses, residents, community groups, aboriginal communities and schools into its business plan.

The benefits to the community, says David Kerr, a Director of the Lighthouse Country Business Association (LCBA), depend primarily on how well the University’s programming links to overall local community economic development.

“We need to look at what relevant skills are coming out of the centre’s programming and what the potential is to keep young workers from taking those skills elsewhere. Some universities don’t consider this,” he says.

According to VIU, the Deep Bay facility is being built primarily as a science-based research centre supporting the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of a \$38 million annual provincial (\$20 million/year locally) aquaculture industry that supports coastal communities with over 1,000 direct and 600 indirect jobs province-wide.

Like graduates from Milner’s programs, it is expected that students of the new centre’s programs will likely continue to work in our area, in other areas around Vancouver Island, in coastal areas in British Columbia and worldwide.

The LCBA will be meeting to discuss with Kingzett business opportunities and challenges that might come with the centre’s revenue generating plans.

When asked, for example, about competing as a venue for events with the Lighthouse Community Hall, Kingzett replied that the venues would be appealing to different markets.

“The two venues may even complement each other,” says LCBA Director, Betsy Poel.

Other opportunities for business in the area will also be discussed, says Poel, including signage that directs students, researchers, and tourists through the commercial area enroute to the facility, an alternate highway access into the centre, and online marketing opportunities.

“The best way to support our community is to bring revenue to the community,” she says.

“I think the centre will draw people locally, from up and down the Island and internationally,” says Patti Stubbs, a LCBA Director.

VIU is keenly interested in gathering information to help shape its future role within the community and is seeking input from students, community organizations, First Nations leaders, partners in education, and the public.

Let VIU know what programs and services you would like to see by commenting at wearelistening@viu.ca or by calling 250-753-3245 local 2389 and visiting <http://viudeepbay.com> ~