

Cultural Values Report – CVRD’s Maris Nature Park



Jesse Morin, PhD, February 26, 2024

Submitted to Mark Hart, Parks Planner, Comox Valley Regional District

Executive Summary

Based on my review of relevant ethnohistoric documents and two site visits to Marris Nature Park, some of the preliminary cultural values of the park include:

- Preservation of the old-growth Douglas Fir trees there, including planning all developments to avoid impacts to their root systems;
- Preservation of mature trees;
- Preservation of existing stands of berry bushes, especially huckleberry and salmonberry;
- Preservation of existing/likely mushroom harvesting areas;
- Preservation of existing game trails or possible dens through the area;
- Preservation/no impacts of areas around glacial erratics (high archaeological potential);
- Preservation of any archaeological sites that may exist in the park area;
- Enhancement of stream habitat for diverted waterways within the park;
- Preservation of the existing minimally disturbed natural environment of the area.

Cultural Values to Enhance

- Use of KFN place names or ayajuthum language in signage, trails etc.;
- Removal of invasive species (holly, ivy etc.);

Overview

Between 2022-2024, the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) was gifted two parcels of land at the eastern end of Tasman Road, and one parcel at the northern end of Eagles Drive in Merville from private donors with the intent of having the lands protected as a nature park – Maris Nature Park (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The first two properties consist of a 40-acre tract of land extends approximately 1 km along the waterfront, and extends approximately 200 m inland. The third property is located immediately southeast of the former, and is about 20-acres in extent, extends approximately 120 m along the waterfront and approximately 200 m inland. This report also includes an archaeological preliminary field reconnaissance (PFR) under KFN CHIP 2025-20. The CVRD is in the information gathering phase for planning development of and increased public access to this park. The development of a park at this location is of interest to KFN because it is a relatively unimpacted portion of waterfront within KFN territory, and it is within a few hundred meters of a large area of KFN Treaty Settlement Land.

As part of CVRD's information gathering process, and alongside and Archaeological Overview Assessment (AOA) (Ross 2023) and a Biophysical Assessment (Poupard 2023), Mark Hart of CVRD has requested that I work with the KFN Guardians to compile a cultural values report for Maris Nature Park. The purpose of this cultural values report is to ensure that KFN's values, concerns, and objectives are considered in CVRD's development planning for this park. This

report is clearly not intended to be the voice of KFN or the last stage of consultation with KFN regarding this park, but rather is intended to be an initial venue for identifying KFN’s cultural and ecological values in relation to the park development, and for outlining some of KFN’s visions for park development here.

The research for this report included: site visits on January 23, 2024 with KFN Guardian Krissy Brown, KFN archaeologist Raini Bevilacqua and Mark Hart, and on February 21, 2025 with KFN Guardian Caelan McLean and Mark Hart, a review existing ethnohistoric information regarding Indigenous use of the area, the historical ecology of the area, and a review of local archaeological sites. KFN holds confidential TUS information relevant to this area, and may chose to disclose this information at their discretion. KFN TUS information is not included in this report. Additionally, communication with KFN staff identified possible developments there that would increase recreational access to the area while preserving KFN cultural and ecological values there.

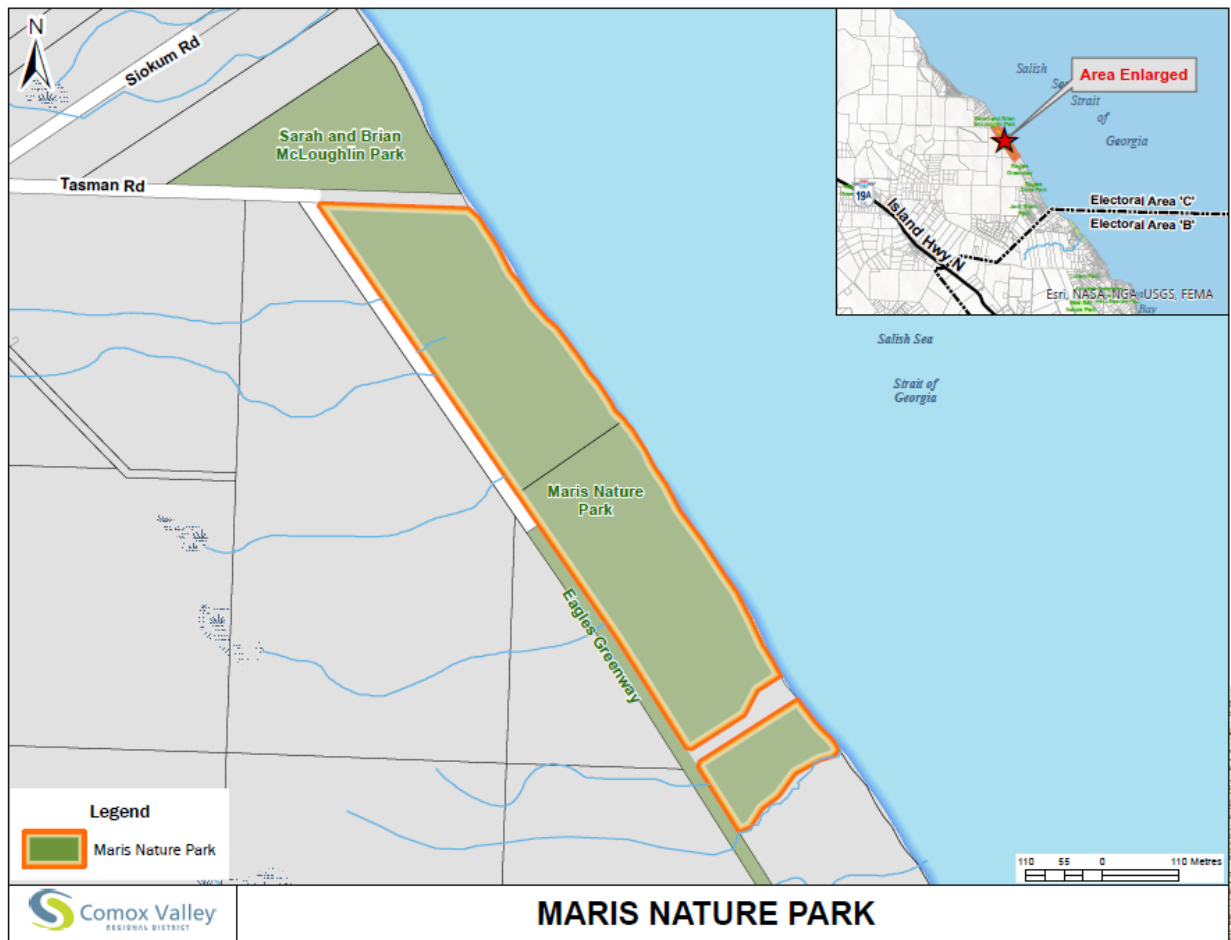


Figure 1. The location of Maris Nature Park in Merville.

Background

The Maris Nature Park area has seen little past development aside from logging (early 20th century and probably 1970s'), and consists of mature second (or third growth) forest well-described in Poupard (2022). Historical impacts to this area are limited to earlier logging related activities (including road construction), and the percolation tests described in Wilson and Macnab (1995).

The lower bench area adjacent to the shoreline is only a few meters above sea level, and is sharply separated from an upper bench area by a very steep slope rising about 40 m. While no permanent streams exist here, upstream culverts direct water through this area, and on the site visit of January 23, 2024, notable volumes of water were flowing through at least two locations here. The entire lower bench of this area should be considered to have high archaeological potential, but no archaeological deposits were observed during the AOA (Ross 2023), the previous archaeological investigation (Wilson and Macnab 1995), or our walkthrough on January 23.

Cultural Background

Ethnographic descriptions of Indigenous group territories at the time of First Contact (1792) indicate that the Maris Nature Park area was within the territory of the K'ómoks, formerly known as the sálhulhtxw ('sathloot') (Kennedy and Bouchard 1983:15, 1990:442). More specifically, the park is located at the approximate boundary between the territories of the two southernmost K'ómoks/sálhulhtxw groups or tribes known as the Eiksen/Eeqsen and the Qāq'ēcht/Kakekt¹ (Boas 1887; Kennedy and Bouchard 1990). No historical, archaeological or otherwise documented traditional settlements or village sites are documented in the vicinity of Maris Nature Park, but such pre-contact K'ómoks settlements were likely located about 4-9 km northwest around the Oyster River and Black Creek, and about 7 km southeast around Little River. It is very likely that the inhabitants of these settlements to both the north and south of here would have regularly travelled to and through the Maris Nature Park area in the course of their seasonal and even daily harvesting and other cultural activities.

Historical Background

¹ This group name Qāq'ēcht/Kakekt may be related to the named person – Kuta'qcut - in an Eiksen oral history originally recorded by Franz Boas (Bouchard and Kennedy 2006:233)

Early explorer and settler accounts within KFN territory were reviewed for information relevant to Indigenous use of the area around Maris Nature Park (e.g., Brown 1864; Cole and Lockner 1993; Meade 1980; Pidcock 1862; Walkem 1914). None of these accounts were found to describe Indigenous use of the Maris Nature Park area. An aspect of the regional ecology that did capture the interest of these explorers were the large anthropogenic prairies extending along the Tsolum River to around Grantham that were rich in berries, edible ferns, camas, deer and elk (e.g., Mayne 1862:173-175; Pidcock 1862:69-71, 75). The northern extent of this prairie is located about 4 km south of Maris Nature Park.

While the initial EuroCanadian colonization of the region in the 1860s was largely focussed on the open anthropogenic prairies around Tsolum River extending north to Grantham (Mackie 1995:39-41, 2000:9-10), the colonization of Merville and Black Creek didn't really begin until the 1920s with land grants awarded to World War I veterans (Isenor 1987:106-107; Dickinson et al. 2015:68). These latter areas were heavily forested and swampy, and required significant effort to clear trees and drain swamps before they were converted into farmland (Isenor 1987:106-107; Mackie 2000). A significant forest fire swept the area in 1922 (the Merville fire) (Mackie 2000:83). The early logging of this area (~1910-1930), and the 1922 fire would have likely dissuaded contemporaneous harvesting activities by Indigenous peoples.

This early landscape history is relevant to earlier Indigenous use because it provides insight as to what resources would have been there. The dense forest inland (west) of Maris Nature Park was likely used for hunting game such as deer and elk and gathering forest products, and the swamps reported there would have been used to hunt/trap beaver and waterfowl. Further, both the forest here and one or more of these swampy areas may refer to a pond described in several versions of an oral history set in the Comox Valley (see *Relevant Oral Histories* below).

Indigenous Place Names

There are no publicly-available recorded Indigenous place names for the Maris Nature Park location. KFN does hold traditional place names for both Williams Beach and the Kitty Colman area in the vicinity of the park. Currently, KFN is not releasing place names to the public that are not already in the public domain. It is recommended that KFN is engaged regarding the potential use of ayajuthum language in signage, for trails etc. associated with park development here.

There are several Indigenous names recorded on one of the earliest maps of the Comox Valley (**Figure 2, Figure 3**)(Comox District 1865). One of these – “Chaw-wil-ocq Plains” is indicated for the anthropogenic prairie area now known as Grantham, located about 4 km south of the study area. This and adjacent prairies were very important food harvesting and hunting areas for KFN’s Pentlatch ancestors who occupied that area (Mackie 1995:70; Mayne 1862:173-174; Pidcock 1862:69).

Inferred Traditionally Harvested Resources in the Park and Vicinity

With knowledge of the plant and animal communities in and around Maris Nature Park, and knowledge of the range of taxa traditionally harvested by KFN ancestors, one can infer the species that likely would have been harvested by Indigenous people here in the past.

- Seals – there are several glacial erratics in the intertidal areas at and around Maris Nature Park that seals haul out on, and several seals were observed offshore on our field visit of January 23. Seals were commonly hunted by KFN ancestors (Barnett 1955:92; Capes 1977; Mitchell 1988).
- Deer – no deer signs were observed during the field visit, but many deer signs were observed of a survey of a nearby property in 2023, and deer signs were observed in the biophysical assessment of the park (Poupard 2022). Deer were commonly hunted by KFN ancestors (Barnett 1955:92; Capes 1977; Mitchell 1988).
- Elk – no elk signs were observed during the field visit, but in the past they would have been much more abundant and widespread in the region. Elk were commonly hunted by KFN ancestors (Barnett 1955:92; Engisch et al. 2003; IR Wilson 2003).
- Bear – bear signs were observed in the biophysical assessment of the park (Poupard 2022). Bear were commonly hunted by KFN ancestors (Barnett 1955:92, 104; Mitchell 1988; Simonsen 1989).
- Berries, including huckleberries, salmon berries, salal, and elderberry were all observed in the park (see also Poupard 2022). These berries were all commonly harvested by KFN ancestors (Barnett 1955:63; Simonsen 1989).

- Mink – a possible mink den was observed in the biophysical assessment of the park (Poupard 2022). Mink were highly valued for their furs and were actively trapped by KFN ancestors (Barnett 1955:92, 98; Mitchell 1974, 1988).
- While cedar trees were rare within Maris Nature Park, they would have been more common around swampy inland areas before they were drained, and cedar bark and cedar planks were commonly harvested by KFN ancestors (Barnett 1955:107, 121).
- Bark and pitch from Douglas firs – three old growth Douglas fir trees are located within the park and the adjacent inland area was formerly forested with hundreds of hectares of such trees. Bark (for fuel) and pitch (for medicine, glue or fire starter) by KFN ancestors from Douglas fir trees (Mackie 2000:27, 111, 142).
- Willow bark, was and is used by KFN members as a traditional medicine, and a large willow tree was observed on the lower bench area of the park.

Relevant Oral Histories

The corpus of publicly available Indigenous oral histories relevant to KFN territory were reviewed for references to the region around Maris Nature Park (e.g., Barnett 1936a, 1936b, 1936c; 1955; Boas 1888, 1906, 1910; Bouchard and Kennedy 2006; Comox Valley Echo 1999a, 1999b; Curtis 1907-1930, 1913, 1915; Duff 1960a, 1960b, 1960c; Kennedy and Bouchard 1983; Kinkade 2008).

The events of one Indigenous, almost certainly originally Pentlatch, oral history (several variants of it have been recorded) involving brothers taking revenge for the murder of their sister is set at a place called “Tsa’wiloq²”, a place that has been inferred to correspond to the name “Chaw-wil-ocq” for the Grantham area, located about 4 km south of Maris Nature Park (Boas 1910: 107-114; Bouchard and Kennedy 2006:291-293; Comox District 1865) (**Figure 3**). The major theme in all versions of the oral history is that the jealous husband lures his wife there and kills her by tying ties her to a tree at, or past Chaw-wil-ocq, and her brothers then come to seek revenge for her death by killing the husband.

In one version of this oral history, the husband and wife live at “Tsa’wiloq” and go for a long walk into the forest to collect pitch (Bouchard and Kennedy 2006:238, 291-293). It is worth noting that Douglas fir trees are well-known for producing copious pitch (Charlie and Turner 2021:64-66), and the wooded area between Grantham and Maris Nature Park was dominated by very large old-growth Douglas fir, making it an excellent place to collect pitch (Mackie 2000).

In another version of this oral history, a man and wife lived at “Pentlatch” (i.e., the Comox Valley) and they walk a long way to a pond or lake behind their village at a place called “Tsâ’wilax^w” (Boas 1910:107-114). Again, this name Tsâ’wilax^w likely corresponds to the name “Chaw-wil-ocq” for the Grantham area (Comox District 1865). The purpose of their trip is to bathe in the pond and scrub themselves with hemlock boughs (Boas 1910:107-114).

² The sound “ch” does not exist in Kwakwala, and for ayajuthum or Pentlatch (Coast Salish languages) borrowed into Kwakwala, the “ch” is replaced with a “ts” sound (Powell 1994).

Aside from the variants of the oral history described above, I am not aware of any recorded oral histories set in the vicinity of Maris Nature Park. Generally speaking, in many oral histories this area is transited by people travelling north or south through the area, between K'ómoks and Pentlatch settlements (Boas 1888:266; Bouchard and Kennedy 2006:189-191; Curtis 1915:110). As most travel was done by canoe, likely near the shore of Maris Nature Park, or on an inland trail that linked the Tsolum prairies to Campbell River. The two variants of the oral history regarding the brothers seeking revenge indicate that pitch was harvested in the area, and that a pond there was used for ritual bathing.

Local Archaeological Sites

There are no known archaeological sites within Maris Nature Park, and relatively few recorded sites within the vicinity. A recent AOA (Ross 2023) and previous Heritage Inventory Study (Wilson and Macnab 1995) that included subsurface testing did not identify any archaeological materials within the park. However, given the shoreline context of the park, the lower bench here should be considered to have high archaeological potential (i.e., high probability of existence of currently unknown archaeological sites in that locality) (Ross 2023; Wilson and Macnab 1995). More precisely, it is reasonable to expect buried shell midden deposits, representing the past cooking and occupation of this area, in this lower bench area. Recorded archaeological sites in the vicinity of Maris Nature Park include:

- DkSg-4, a cultural depression site³ (unknown function) located approximately 3.6 km southwest. It is notable that this site is located well inland (~3.8 km from the shore) (Ball 2024).
- DLSg-2, a large shell midden, likely the remains of a past village or campsite located approximate 3.6 km northwest at Alders Beach (Simonsen and Somogyi 1998).
- DLSg-7, a small lithic (stone tool) site, located approximately 7.2 km northwest at Miracle Beach.
- DLSg-5, wooden fish trap site consisting of at least 15 traps dating to between AD 400-850, located approximately 7.4 km northwest at Black Creek/Saratoga Beach (Cullon and Pratt 2019);
- DLSg-14, k'áxem iay ('Black Creek houses') a village site consisting of shell midden site with two clear house depressions, located approximately 8.4 km northwest, just north of Black Creek ;

³ A recent Archaeological Impact Assessment at this site failed to identify any archaeological remains, and its recorded site boundaries have been reduced accordingly (Ball 2024). The mound and pit features formerly reported there may be derived from dynamiting large stumps (Mackie 2000).

- DkSf-68, DkSf-69, DkSf-70, DkSf-71, small shell middens representative of past camp sites, located approximately 6.6 km southeast at Seal Bay. It is worth noting that one of these sites (DkSf-71) is located on the upper terrace, and is not adjacent to the shoreline.

Areas of High Archaeological Potential

Although previous studies have not identified archaeological materials with Maris Nature Park (Ross 2023; Wilson and Macnab 1995), the lower bench here should be considered to have high archaeological potential (i.e., high probability of existence of currently unknown archaeological sites in that locality) (**Figure 4**).

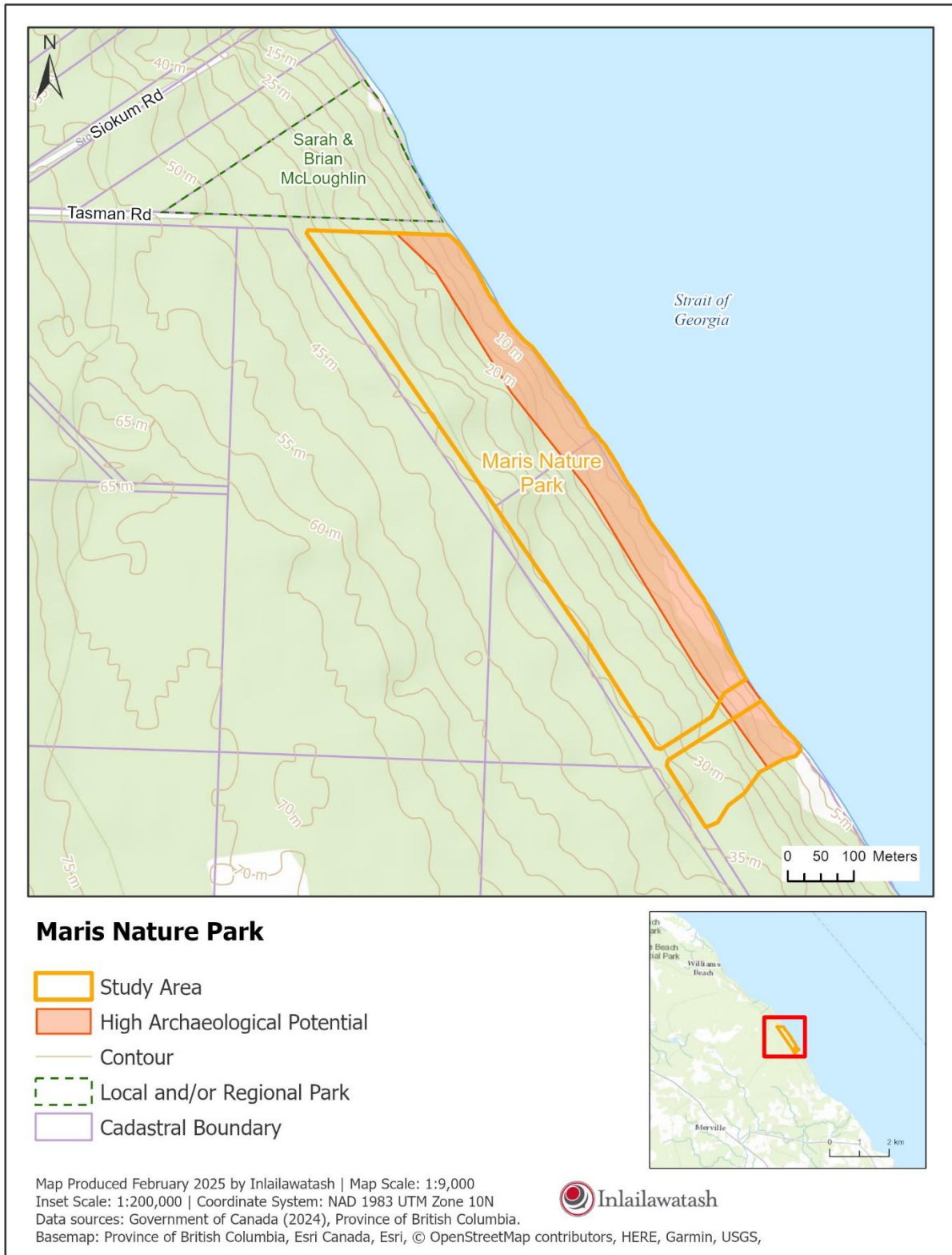


Figure 4. Area of high archaeological potential within Maris Nature Park.

Attributes to Preserve

Our walkthroughs of January 23, 2024 and February 21, 2025, and subsequent discussion identified several existing attributes or features of the area that KFN wishes to preserve. These include:

- Preservation of the old-growth Douglas Fir trees there, including planning all developments to avoid impacts to their root systems;
- Preservation of mature trees;
- Preservation of existing stands of berry bushes, especially huckleberry and salmonberry;
- Preservation of existing/likely mushroom harvesting areas (needs to be verified in the fall);
- Preservation of existing game trails or possible dens through the area;
- Preservation/no impacts of areas around glacial erratics (high archaeological potential);
- Preservation of any archaeological sites that may exist in the park area;
- Enhancement of stream habitat for diverted waterways within the park;
- Preservation of the existing minimally disturbed natural environment of the area.

Cultural Values to Enhance

- Use of KFN place names or ayajuthum language in signage, trails etc.;
- Removal of invasive species (holly, ivy etc.);

The Requirement for Consultation with KFN

While a draft of this report was shared with KFN in late January 2024, I received very limited feedback on this research. This limited feedback should not be interpreted to mean limited concerns or interest, but rather reflects the fact that KFN staff is regularly overwhelmed by requests for feedback on a wide range of projects and constantly needs to prioritize their efforts. It is recommended that this report is shared by the CVRD with KFN as a first step in consultation with KFN in all plans to develop this park.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The sections above describe a range of ethnohistoric information that is relevant to KFN members past and ongoing use of the area in and around the Maris Nature Park. The corpus of ethnohistoric information describing Indigenous use of this area is not rich, but many harvesting and other cultural activities that would have been undertaken here can be inferred. Generally speaking, feedback from KFN regarding park development here includes a desire to: maintain the natural integrity of the area, increase public access to the area, and to avoid impacts to old growth trees, berry patches, and potential archaeological sites.

The walk-through of the property, subsequent discussion, and comments on this short report provide a first step in documenting KFN's interests in Maris Nature Park, but are not a substitute for consultation, and it is critical that CVRD directly consults with KFN regarding development plans for Maris Nature Park. Additionally, because KFN is exceedingly close to a vote on Treaty ratification, and ratification would involve KFN acquiring significant lands nearly adjacent to the park, KFN's interests in development in this park will need to be considered in relation to their plans for those Treaty settlement lands.

I hope that this information will be of use in planning future developments in this park.

Sincerely,

Jesse Morin, PhD

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jesse Morin', is positioned below the typed name. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial 'J' and a long, sweeping underline.

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