Here's to Muddy Boots!

From Phil Harvey, Outgoing Chair of KCDCS

I have had the privilege of being a volunteer Board member with the Kootenay-Columbia Discovery Centre Society for the past six years. As of late 2026, I am moving on to other things before I wear out my welcome here; but, I have to say it sure has been a rewarding experience. Why? Mainly the people it takes to make it all happen and seeing the impact we have in our community and beyond.

First and foremost, I've been able to work with a great group who all believe in the cause of education and awareness programs, in our local world-class wetland, with an emphasis on children and youth. This is so critical in this era of excessive screen-time. We also do tourism as our "side-gig" and get to meet many interesting and like-minded people there too.

This year, we said a fond farewell to our long-time Executive Director Carla Ahern and welcomed her successor, Alana Higginson. I can't say enough about how fortunate we've been to have the talents of these two and the future looks bright with Alana at the helm. It's always a treat, too, to see the energy of the seasonal naturalists who are hired to help run our school programs, summer camps and service work for the Wildlife Management Area folks.

We have a small but dedicated Board. They, and their predecessors, helped to drive our charitable society to make a lasting impact for our 1300+ members, the children and youth that we host and all of our local and tourism guests. We are also thankful to have volunteers with certain specialist skills who have helped us in areas such as building permitting. We have great volunteer activity partners like Bird Fest too. Last, but not least, the Board and Alana are fortunate have "wetland gurus" who we can reach out to as needed like Marc-Andre Beaucher of the CVWMA for birding and biology, Robin Louie of the Yaqan Nukiy for new Discovery Centre concepts (we still are on this quest!) and Norm Allard who has overseen many wetland restoration projects locally.

Our society is a bit like a duck: serene on the surface but paddling furiously underneath and all of these people plus others help to propel the duck forward.

One key challenge we had in 2026 was replacing Carla who has followed her family out-of-province. Thanks to everyone who helped in the search process, and we are super happy to have Alana on board. An ongoing challenge is annual funding. To make our operations accessible to all, our fees are low or free and usually cover only 10-15% of the annual costs (which we've kept flat despite inflation!) of delivering programs. The balance of our funding comes from grants and none of that is guaranteed. That means that every year we have to pull a rabbit out of our hat! We in recent years have diversified our grant stream to the point where we may be the only wetlands interpretive centre in Canada with a majority non-government funding. Without you, the grant maker organizations, we could not operate. To the fundraising committee members, who have worked hard on grant applications and letters of inquiry over the past few years, keep up the good work!

When I say we are a small society with a big impact I mean it: tens of thousands of guests through our Centre since 2018, 14,000 kids through school programs, thousands on canoe tours and hundreds through junior naturalist summer camps. All that plus we've contributed an incremental $3-$4 million through tourism to the local economy since we opened in 2018! Notwithstanding these accomplishments, we can't rest on our laurels and have some big challenges to tackle ahead.

While much conceptual work and public input has been done concerning a new Discovery Centre (see our updated Business Plan on the website), there remains the non-trivial issue of capital and operating funding for a new Centre. We badly need a larger organization than us to provide the seed money for a new Centre to get this thing rolling. Does anyone out there hear me?

Even our existing temporary Centre, although safe and totally fit-for-purpose with exhibits, is threatened on the building permit side of things even though government branch jurisdiction on this particular BC Crown land has not been clearly established. We feel we now have enough information to defend ourselves, but the operation of the existing Discovery Centre is not guaranteed for 2027. If the Centre were to be temporarily shut down that would obviously impact our tourism role negatively. It is important to note though that we as an organization will be on site to run wetland education programs under any circumstances.

Finally, even though we contribute lasting environmental education value for our guests and a massive economic boost to the Creston Valley on the tourism side, we have no guaranteed funding and have to pull a rabbit out of our hat once more!

It takes both staff and volunteers to make this all happen so if there is anyone out there interested in joining our Board or one of our committees, we'd love to have you! I still live in the valley so will help you recruit while out on the wetlands with my muddy boots, Alana!

Phil Harvey
KCDCS Chair 2021-26