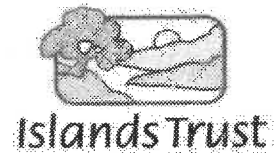


Trustee Notebook *By Laura Busheikin*



Personal Statement on Racism

Recently, all of us have been asked, or perhaps I should say forced, to confront hard questions, painful realities, and urgent challenges around racism. After some thought, I have decided to make a public statement as an Islands Trustee. Please note that this is a personal statement coming from me and me alone.

Systemic racism pervades our culture, our communities, our institutions, and our individual minds. It expresses itself both brutally and subtly in all these spheres.

I have asked myself how systemic racism plays out in the Islands Trust and its work. The Trust is a land use planning agency with an environmental mandate, creating zoning and other regulations for the islands in the Salish Sea. We also advocate to other agencies on behalf of the islands' ecosystems and communities, and engage in education and coordination to help protect the environment of the islands while sustaining healthy communities.

That doesn't sound racist. But the lands and waters of the Salish Sea are home to over 30 First Nations, and have been since time immemorial. This land, like all of Canada, was forcibly and viciously "settled" by Europeans, leaving a tragic legacy that has not been redressed.

The Islands Trust was created by the colonial Provincial Government in 1974, with very little consultation (possibly none) with First Nations. It proceeded to make decisions about the islands for decades with no or very little Indigenous input. We have literally been governing and living on the bones of a people who were pushed off their homeland and almost exterminated by colonial practices. Until recently, we rarely mentioned or thought of this, let alone changed what we do or how we do it.

This is systemic racism.

Since I became a trustee in 2011, the Trust has taken steps towards decolonizing its work. There has been ongoing learning, with many workshops for staff and trustees. We now have a full time senior staff member devoted to Indigenous issues. We are changing our language, our timelines, our practices and our attitudes. We are slowing down our work to more fully involve First Nations. We have created a Reconciliation Action Plan and are gradually implementing it. We are building relationships with many of the Nations in this region.

I am hugely grateful for this, and also wish the process could go faster, go further, and dig deeper. I am full of questions. Sometimes I wonder if the whole thing should be dismantled. Can we actually decolonize an organization that has its roots in systemic racism? And even though I feel deep in my heart an ardent longing to contribute to justice, I still fail at this regularly. I have to continually remind myself, and be reminded, to filter my work through the lens of decolonization.

This means continually asking how my work as a trustee can either uphold or challenge systemic racism. When I ask myself, "How might land use decisions affect racialized people differently than white people?" I wonder: do our systems—how we set up permitting processes, how we communicate, how we run meetings, how we charge fees, the language we use, the way we look and feel—leave some people out, based on their racial identity and background? Do we automatically do our work in a way that reflects "white" (European-based) Canadian culture and biases, and if so how can we change that?

Who shows up for meetings? Who doesn't? Who makes land use applications? Who leads community campaigns? Who sits at the Islands Trust Council table? Who doesn't? And why?

Also I wonder, in a world where racialized people consistently end up with less socio-economic power due to systemic racism, if there's a way for us to 'preserve and protect' the islands that also enhances equity and accessibility for everyone? How can we put limits on development in a way that doesn't end up making living on the islands something only people with lots of privilege can access?

I don't have clear answers, but will continue to ask myself, and my colleagues, these questions. Asking questions, mulling over answers, and choosing new ways of acting (or not acting, in some cases), is how I do my work of countering systemic racism.

I would love to talk with any Denman Islander about these issues. I'm not afraid of uncomfortable conversations. They help us work together to dismantle systemic racism. This is work we can do, work that will give our lives more meaning, that will make our communities more resilient, vibrant and caring. It is work that can change the world.