

## The Bridge River Valley Way

Many Bridge River Valley residents have left behind city and suburb in favour of a more relaxed, informal “alternative” lifestyle. In contrast to the noisy bustle and formality of urban life, Bridge River Valley offers not only relative peace, quiet, freedom and self-sufficiency, but also what many would regard as more “real” contact: direct, friendly, caring and respectful interaction with neighbours. We enjoy the balance of a rural experience of nature and of “doing your own thing”, along with a satisfying sense of community and belonging.

While these experiences may be typical in many small communities, they are intensified here by the literal fact of insularity. Highway 40 in and out can be tricky and unforgiving, and the Hurley is closed for half of the year. The police are absent all but a few days of the year and our neighbours and friends are the trained personnel who would come to our aid in case of medical, fire or other emergencies. There is therefore a sense of localism and self-containment, mutual dependence and personal responsibility that is more difficult to find in anonymous urban settings or in small towns more connected by road to the outside world. This, of course, is a mixed blessing. While we are somewhat protected from the ravages of “development” and commercialism of the larger world, we are also relatively isolated here with our own limited numbers and resources. In some ways we are like a clan or an extended family.

Despite the potential unity this situation favours, there are diverse subcultures that only partially overlap; paradoxically, you may see the same faces daily or weekly at the general store, yet occasionally meet someone “new” who’s been a fellow here for twenty years!

In an urban setting, what you do may seem inconsequential measured against a vast reservoir of anonymous others. Here, your actions may have immediate consequences for people you know—and therefore for yourself as well. It is a basic truth that human beings tend to deal more fairly with those they are certain to have repeated dealings with in the future. In a situation of mutual dependence, we *need* for our neighbor to prosper and to wish us well. Unlike in the larger world, one has to think twice, for example, before opening a new enterprise that would put someone else out of business.

Country life understandably represents escape from the constrictions and regulations of denser urban living. Some visitors, for example, seem to arrive here from the city with the expectation that traffic, alcohol and noise laws do not apply, or that fire safety regulations and even common sense may be discarded. As locals, we may be glad for visitors to have a good time—but not at the expense of burning anything down or keeping us awake at night! In truth, we are subject here to the same balance of concerns that apply in the city: the needs and rights of the individual are always in relation to the needs and rights of others. This balance applies, of course, to residents and property owners as well as to visitors. In some ways, it is all the more dramatic and crucial

because of the promise of personal freedoms on the one hand and the intense nature of community on the other.

Successful life in the Bridge River Valley depends on keeping this balance more as a *harmony* than an opposition. Most people intuitively understand this and many conflicts are resolved informally through a friendly word. Though physical separation between neighbors may be greater than in the city, we live in closer psychological quarters. Our expectations may differ, bringing us into conflict. My neighbour's freedom to run machinery in their yard may conflict with my freedom to enjoy peace and quiet. The same neighbor may seem a nuisance on one day and a godsend when I am obliged to call upon them for help of some sort. There are times when friendly negotiation fails. Here too the situation is different than in the city. Police are generally present in the summer months only, when they often are overtaxed by tourists. The Regional District has zoning and land use bylaws, but there is no resident enforcer in the Bridge River Valley and the means and willingness to prosecute offenders is limited.

In conflict, as in other things, to a large extent we are thrown back upon our own resources as a community to manage our own affairs. Indeed, this is most often preferable to setting in motion the heavy machinery of legal process, which can be exhausting both financially and psychologically for all concerned. Serious conflicts can affect and drain the whole community. Much can be said for the merits of self-reliance.

A unique aspect of Bridge River Valley living is just this dimension of relative autonomy, whereby the community as a whole as well as individuals enjoy freedom of self-determination more than dependence on outside authority. The Bralorne Community Hall is a monument to the ethos of do-it-yourself, expressing both independence of spirit and community cooperation among volunteers. We are proud, in fact, of our independent "Bridge River Valley spirit" and jealously guard our distinct ways of doing things from the intrusions and seductions of the more conventional outside world.

Another symbol of this distinction is a protocol adopted to keep a friendly and respectful atmosphere during BRVCA meetings. It is based on the radically democratic premise that every member of the community carries needed information about how the community can maintain its health and plan its future through cooperative effort. This is to be assumed even (and perhaps especially) when another's point of view appears to conflict with one's own. It is also based on the proposition that such information can best be assimilated by the community when offered in a constructive way. In other words, every view should be offered in a friendly and cooperative spirit, free from personal attack, and should be heard and taken seriously in the same spirit. This is a very different political model from that of the larger world, where confrontational wrangling in governing assemblies is often manipulative, disrespectful, disorderly and does not lead easily toward consensus.

While consensus is more difficult to achieve than simple majority rule, it is also a far more satisfying and stable basis for community decisions. Where there is solid community support for an idea, it tends to go forward, and there tends to be a better

feeling among dissenters when there has been adequate chance for them to express their opinions and sometimes passionate feelings on an issue, and to have these respectfully heard and noted. Literal 100 percent agreement may be unrealistic in many cases, but it serves well as an ideal toward which to strive. This is so, if only because reaching for consensus entails thorough discussion and the sense that all voices have been heard; but also because 60 percent agreement, for example, is preferable to 51 percent!

Friendly, earnest cooperation in a spirit of problem solving and general consent may not be the model of politicking and hasty decision making we are readily familiar with in a cynical culture, but it is likely the one most suited to the long-term wellbeing of our community.

Therefore, we in the Bridge River Valley have the opportunity to co-create a different and perhaps more civil way of doing things than is usual in the wider world. No definition of “the Bridge River Valley Way” is offered here, because there will be as many conceptions of it as there are residents. Nevertheless, Bridge River Valley’s deserved community pride extends to the presumption that we have here the opportunity to forge a model for participation, respectful process and self-determination that could work even in communities that do not benefit from our insularity. We have the opportunity to have our system of direct democracy be the envy of other small communities. Partly through strong community spirit, we have largely preserved our way of life against the commercial development that has rendered much of North America’s “paved-over paradise”.

While definite advantages have fostered here a vision of community in cooperation with nature, which is a viable alternative to the mainstream culture, the fact of our insularity should not lead us to conclude that such localism cannot take root elsewhere. The only hope for the world may be that it *will* take root—*everywhere!* In this kind of idealism the notion of microcosm and a corresponding ethic is implied: we should conduct ourselves in this community in a way that, if the rest of the world did likewise, would lead to a sustainable planet and a just and satisfying sense of community around the globe. We should act as if the world is looking to us for example, giving new meaning to the adage, “Think globally; act locally”. Nor should our advantages lead us to be lax or complacent about our own situation, always precarious and under siege from attitudes and forces prevalent in the larger culture. The only reason the Bridge River Valley spirit exists from generation to generation of residents is because people repeatedly take it seriously and find their creative ways to support it and renew it through concrete action, which is usually some form of volunteer effort. The Bridge River Valley is above all a place where you can make a difference.