

Towards rewilding a city creek

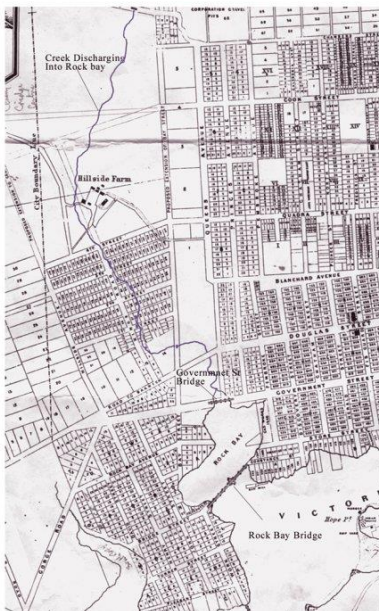


By [Maleea Acker](#) (edited)
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Dorothy Field explains her passion for Rock Bay Creek, which once flowed from Fernwood to the Inner Harbour.

STEPPING INSIDE DOROTHY FIELD'S HOUSE is like taking a voyage through a sunlit, tapestried, foreign country. Every object feels lovingly curated and the enormous kitchen skylights give way to backyard gardens, fir and oak trees. Fernwood has never seemed wilder, and if Field had her way, the whole neighbourhood would fit her aesthetic. “Even if it’s just a moment, anything that reminds people of the underlying land is really important,” she tells me. For Field, that underlying wildness is perfectly portrayed by the movement of water through each of the city’s neighbourhoods or watersheds.

Field’s latest project is to envision and steward the mapping, signage and eventual daylighting of Rock Bay Creek, the original watercourse that began its life at what used to be Harris Pond, where Vining and Stanley Streets meet. The creek—now contained within culverts and buried under streets, yards and parks—meanders north, crosses Bay Street at Fernwood and then heads west to the Inner Harbour. There it empties into Rock Bay at the remediation site of a former gasification plant, once the most contaminated land in Canada. Creeks and streams in urban areas, long the site of dumping and pollution, were historically buried to protect inhabitants against water-borne diseases such as cholera.



City of Victoria map showing location of Rock Bay Creek

Field grew up in New York's suburbs, went to Berkeley and settled as a farmer for 35 years in Cobble Hill before moving to Fernwood 12 years ago. She is the author of several books of poetry, a children's book, an extended essay on handmade paper's spiritual role in Asian culture (*Paper and Threshold*), and the co-author of *Between Gardens*. She is also an accomplished visual artist working with handmade paper.



Dorothy Field

After arriving in Victoria, she began working on the Fernwood Community Mapping project with help from Ken Josephson, cartographer at the University of Victoria. The map they produced in 2015 shows Fernwood then and now, with the ghost of buried Rock Bay Creek and Harris Pond sketched over the city grid. It was that sketch that drew Field's interest toward her current project.

This year, Field received just under \$5000 from the City of Victoria to create and install art and signage along Rock Bay Creek's route and at the former location of Harris Pond. She sees this as the first step toward daylighting the creek—the deliberate uncovering of portions of a watercourse in order to reestablish some modicum of a natural ecosystem. “Living water changes people's feelings about where they live,” she says. They feel more connected with the land, so are more careful about how they treat it.

The hills, valleys and watercourses of the south island, including several springs in Fernwood that once supplied drinking water to most of the city's colonial inhabitants, have over time been erased by the city grid. Looking at the past, Field argues, shows us what we've lost, as well as what we may have the opportunity to regain.

The City of Victoria, however, is more circumspect; recently completed greenway projects would have to be redone in order to daylight the creek on public property. There will be, Fields tells me, a five to ten year wait before any shovels could hit the ground. But she remains positive, looking at Alexander Park, Blackwood Park and Wark Park as prime locations for a daylighting project, which could include rain gardens or other forms of environmental storm water management.

Creek daylighting projects have a long history in the CRD. Portions of Bowker and Craigflower Creek have been uncovered by the Gorge Waterway Initiative, the Bowker Creek Initiative, and local non-profits. Some argue that a partially uncovered creek will never regain its former vitality. Salmon and trout won't migrate up a culvert and invasive species can end up clogging daylighted sections. Water often flows too fast to support fish or other aquatic species.

But for Field the importance is not just the fragile ecosystems that can be recreated—in Bowker Creek’s case, daylighted sections harbour dragonflies, songbirds, river otters and raccoons—but the learning that can take place alongside its banks. “Without water we won’t survive,” she says. Daylighting Rock Bay Creek would help to show the creek’s original path, pinpoint watershed boundaries, and even provide natural evidence of why certain streets suffer from basement flooding after heavy rains. Earlier this year, two UVic students made a short documentary about the creek. For Field, the increasing interest just proves she’s on the right track.

http://rockbaycreek.ca/images/rock_bay_creek.mp4

A daylighted stream can have positive impacts for a whole community, but many argue that it isn’t just humans that contribute toward these changes. “Convivial ecologies” are wild spaces created by human interaction and co-habitation with the insects, birds, plants, and animals in a space, all of whom contribute toward a larger sense of how to live in the world. Studied by Harriet Hawkins in the United Kingdom, convivial ecologies recognize other species’ abilities not just to enchant us but to be equal actors in the construction of a wild space. As an example, Hawkins cites an abandoned railway line in inner city Bristol. The forgotten land was gradually reinhabited by flora and fauna—including foxes, birds, trees and meadow flowers—until it began to resemble a park, thus creating a space in which many humans also found solace. When redevelopment of the area was proposed, residents rallied behind the species that had already chosen this spot as a green space and a nature preserve was eventually born.

What if the path of a long buried watercourse were another kind of convivial ecology? The watershed of Fernwood receives drainage from Oaklands and feeds through North Park before reaching Rock Bay. The seeps, springs and streams of Victoria’s urban areas may not be visible or even audible any longer, but their voice becomes apparent in the flooding that once happened at the intersection of View and Quadra, where a former wetland long trumped the city’s attempts to tame it, or in the spring-fed well of Fernwood’s Stevenson Park, the pump of which is ceremoniously unlocked every month so that residents can fill pails and take home the bounty of water that tastes of rocks and trees. The tomatoes grown using this water, Field tells me, are also rumoured to be the sweetest in the city.

Daylighting a stream, therefore, might not be the first step in rewilding an area, but a response to the region’s already present natural forces: water running over rock, gathering force from many communities, marking a long forgotten pond, demonstrating the lay of the land we otherwise only notice when we’re on foot or bicycle. The convivial ecologies of Fernwood are already afoot; we have only to listen to their call.

During our conversation, Field jokes about “pulling up the drawbridge” on Vancouver Island, preventing an already crowded region from becoming unlivable. But in the end, she is most interested in projects that both humanize the city and connect us to the land over which it lies.

On January 21, 2017, at 10am, she will host a walking tour to trace the second half of the path of Rock Bay Creek. The tour will begin at Blackwood Park, in Fernwood, and end at Rock Bay, downtown. The walk, which will last 2-3 hours, is open to all residents of the region.

Maleea Acker is the author of *Gardens Aflame: Garry Oak Meadows of BC's South Coast* (New Star, 2012). She is currently completing a PhD in Human Geography, focusing on the intersections between the social sciences and poetry.

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