

Stanley Park Environmental Art Project: Year Two Ecological Response

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August 11, 2011

***Listen* by John Hemsworth and Peter von Tiesenhausen**

In 2009 when I first looked at this artwork I remarked that its large piece of cedar would likely have the same fate as any other cedar tree that falls in the forest: It would gradually decompose with the help of insects, bacteria, and fungi over a long period of time. A western red cedar tree can take hundreds of years to decompose completely and serve as a vital component of the forest ecosystem for plants and wildlife. The piece would decay, becoming a porous, moist microhabitat which would provide shelter for animals and form a growth substrate for colonizing plants. It could also serve as a territorial calling platform for songbirds, as escape cover for small mammals or as a breeding site for terrestrial salamanders.

Evidence of these natural functions are evident at the site two years later. The wood is starting to become covered in moss and fungus is working its way into the cambium layers. The unnatural shape of the wood has led it to be less used by colonizing plants than the raw tree stem beside it, but tiny western hemlock seedlings have still found enough of a platform to begin to grow. Spiders are the predominant animal using the cedar orb, as they find refuge in the dry interior, similar to the central cavity of raw logs. These cavities may be some of the few available dry places in the wet rainforest.

Other insects, rodents, and terrestrial salamanders may also be hiding under the orb and there is some evidence that songbirds perch on it as well.

Since the artists created this work off-site and then brought it to its current location, there was minimal soil compaction or vegetation trampling during its installation. However, there is some evidence of soil compaction around the base of the artwork as people want to take a closer look.

The intention of this piece was to provide a place for people to “take the time to hear what the forest has to offer.” I have been gratified to come across a number of people in this remote location of the park appreciating this artwork and taking the time to investigate this fallen, but transformed giant.

K'Ayacht'n! (We Hold Our Hands Up To You!) by Davide Pan & T'Uy'Tanat Cease Wyss

This artwork was predicted to benefit the park in two ways: The wood would benefit the plants and animals and secondly it would help to speed up the natural regeneration of the site. Two years later, there is evidence that this piece is being used by native wildlife and the site around it has been transforming.

Carving the stumps sped up the natural decomposition process and the addition of plants also accelerated the naturally slower process of colonization that happens to decaying wood in the forest. This modified timeline has allowed for the use of these platforms by animals and there is evidence that wood boring insects, rodents, and songbirds are all using the art piece as habitat.

Some of the planted species have not survived, while others that were not planted have taken hold. Along with the thimbleberry, red huckleberry, red elderberry, and deer fern that were planted, trailing blackberry and tiny western hemlock seedlings from the area have also used the wood as a platform on which to grow. It is hard to tell if the planted species helped in the re-vegetation of the damaged site by spreading spores and seeds, but this site has been rebounding rapidly and is lush with new growth.

Animals in evidence include insects such as spiders and beetles, but there is also evidence of birds using the wood as calling platforms and it is possible that rodents and terrestrial salamanders may be using them as well.

Although this art work succeeds in “honouring the land and all that it provides”, unfortunately its more public location means it has been subjected to less admirable behaviour. The site seems to be a prime location for partying in the park and has become badly degraded with litter. The art works themselves have been subject to vandalism and some of the carved pieces have been tampered with.

Cozy by Shirley Wiebe

Cozy provided a protective blanket of wood over an existing stump and was meant to “address the importance of mature trees in the forest.” Over the past two years I have seen many people leave the designated main path to investigate this piece and hopefully gain an appreciation for the stump’s role in the ecosystem.

I thought initially that the cozy would rot faster than the stump below it and create a unique substrate on which new plants could colonize and provide homes for small organisms. Two years later, this piece is the most highly decomposed of all the art works that make up the environmental art project. The twine holding the tree cookies together has broken in some areas allowing the wood to fall to the ground. The porous nature of the artwork enabled it to form a rich, moist microhabitat, and the recolonization of the stump was almost immediate. Red elderberry and salmonberry shrubs as well as some grasses are using the artwork as a platform on which to grow as insects, bacteria, and fungus have begun to breakdown the wood.

The cozy and stump may already serve as a territorial calling platform for songbirds, escape cover for small mammals, a home for terrestrial salamanders, and the hemp fibers may have provided nesting material for a variety of birds.

Since the artist chose a stump that was away from the main trail, a small, temporary wood chip path was laid down before the installation of the piece. This path has prevented soil erosion and vegetation trampling, but will need to be restored and replanted if the site is to become completely intact and undisturbed in the future.

Entwined by Tania Willard

This artwork “explored the interconnectedness of Stanley Park's ecology and how the different uses, experiences and perspectives of both indigenous and non-indigenous people, plants and materials are interwoven.”

Entwined is unique in that it was suspended from a cedar tree, and my initial thought that this piece may stay intact for many years to come has been realized. The weaving looks very much as it did when the piece was installed, although there appear to be fewer oyster shell buttons and the fibers have become frayed from the elements.

It is possible that the fibers have provided nesting materials for birds and that insects have colonized this structure high up in the air, but it is hard to confirm this from my vantage point on the ground. Perhaps the missing buttons have been removed by crows or ravens who sometimes show interest in shiny things, or maybe they simply fell to the ground to join the other shells that are found in this area in ancient shell middens.

It was predicted that visitors to this site would not contribute to any soil erosion or vegetation trampling because the art work is located on the trail and this seems to be the case.