

Cowichan Climate Change Collaborative

*Climate Adaptation  
in the  
Cowichan Valley*

SOCIAL POLICY  
TOOLKIT

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Cowichan Climate Change Collaboration

The Cowichan Climate Change Collaborative was established in 2014, in response to a community need for a collective, organized approach to tackling the challenges our region will be faced with in coming years, due to a changing climate. We are comprised of more than 20 environmental and social benefit organizations, local government and First Nations, faith organizations, and provincial government agencies. We have been involved with researching and participating in local, hands-on solutions to building resilience in our region, with a particular focus on identifying vulnerabilities within our communities, and working towards supporting these populations in adaptive measures that improve their resilience to climate change. We recognize and value the importance of developing policy and adaptation strategies alongside our community, not just on their behalf, which is why the involvement and participation of our community members in this process is essential; particularly for future community planning.

## What is Climate Change?

Climate change is an unfolding global phenomenon that is causing unprecedented changes to our weather patterns and the condition of our environment and ecosystems. Due to increased levels carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in our atmosphere, largely caused by the production and consumption of fossil fuels, humans have altered Earth's natural ability to regulate itself and maintain the necessary conditions conducive to healthy ecosystems.

## How Will Our Region be Impacted by Climate Change?

- More fall, winter and spring rainfall, causing more **flooding**
- More extreme summer **drought** conditions; water shortages
- **No more winter snowpack** on the mountains
- More frequent **storm events**
- **Rising food prices** as a result of drought, land degradation & global conditions
- Higher levels of **toxins in fish**, and fish mortality
- Increase in **disease-carrying pests**
- **Rise in sea level**, putting coastal communities at risk
- **Food shortages**
- Greater **wildfire events**; more **air pollution**, especially from smoke

# OBJECTIVES

## Purpose and Basis of the Toolkit

The purpose of this social policy toolkit is to help residents of the Cowichan region develop climate change adaptation plans while building local resilience to the impacts of climate change. This toolkit is a first step in expediting adaptation efforts that will ensure social vulnerabilities are included when developing climate change adaptation plans at a regional level. The information in this toolkit is based on direct feedback we received from neighbourhoods and community members living in the Cowichan Valley, and the lessons we have taken away from their valuable input and contributions. This toolkit has the ability to be expanded upon as we connect further with the diverse communities in our region, and discover what adaptation looks like for them and the unique needs they have based on their physical and social location.

## Why is it Important to Consider the Social Implications of Climate Change?

Processes of global environmental change not only lead to extreme events, but exacerbate chronic problems of poverty and environmental stress, which is why identifying, understanding, and then creating policies that protect our most vulnerable populations are so important in climate change adaptation. Within this process, it is important for these vulnerabilities to be identified by the community members themselves. Creating policies that support the resiliency of our built and natural environment, but also support the people that live within these communities, is essential to ensure we remain strong, resilient, happy, and healthy as we head towards an uncertain future. If meteorologists systematically monitor weather variables, and biologists monitor species and ecosystems, then why aren't we monitoring the impact of climate change on our communities, households, and institutions over time?

## How Will this Toolkit be Used?

It is important for the community to understand the adaptation process and be involved in every step along the way, so this toolkit can be used as an outline to ensure the social implications of climate change are considered, and consistent consultation between decision-makers and our most important stakeholders, community members, is maintained.

# THE STORY SO FAR

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## NEIGHBOURHOOD ADAPTATION PROJECT

Since its inception in 2014, the Cowichan Climate Change Collaboration has been involved with researching and participating in local, hands-on solutions to building resilience in our communities, with a particular focus on protecting our most vulnerable populations from the negative impacts of climate change. We know that climate change affects people and regions in a vastly diverse number of ways, based on factors such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, access to transportation or healthcare, and education, among many other elements. We cannot build resilience in our communities if we don't know who they are made up of, and what strengths and weaknesses we possess. Similarly, we cannot draft adaptive policies without consulting the populations we are encouraging to change, as adaptation requires mobilization at the neighbourhood level, and we need our community members informed and on board.

With the understanding that community must play a central role in climate change adaptation, we went door-to-door surveying 10 different neighbourhoods in the Cowichan Valley throughout the summer months, listening to our people's concerns, desires, hopes, and ideas for the future. The main takeaway message we received from every single community is that if we are going to do anything about the challenges the future will present us with, we must address them together. We build resilience through building community, and we build community through reintroducing our neighbours to one another, and starting back at the beginning with the basic principle of 'know your neighbour'.

The three main areas we focus on pertaining to climate change in our region are mitigation, adaptation, and social cohesion. Through identifying social barriers to change, we can begin building resilience from the bottom-up, starting at the neighbourhood level by meeting the unique needs of our neighbourhoods based on their vulnerabilities. The social factors that drive cities to adapt and/or prepare for the expected impacts of climate change are still widely unknown, and the first qualitative study on climate change adaptation in American cities was only completed just over a year ago in November of 2015. However, our studies have shed some light on this issue here in the Cowichan Valley, and we are largely learning as we work through this process neighbourhood by neighbourhood. What better way to determine our community's needs than to ask?

# OUR PEOPLE

When looking to the future and planning for climate change adaptation, it is important to begin now, right where we are, and start building new ways of doing things with what we already have. That is why it is important to find ways to adapt that build off of our strengths and pre-existing assets, so adaptation can be seen as a process that enhances life and the way we live in our communities, rather than one that takes away from the lives we have built for ourselves. It requires reconceptualizing how we view our relationships to one another, as well as to the natural world, like looking at neighbours as connected, not separated, by a backyard fence.

In order to design and implement effective adaptation measures suited to address the projected impacts of a changing climate in the Cowichan region, we must first become familiar with all of the existing resources we have, as well as the potential our communities possess to take initiative within their own neighbourhoods. This report acknowledges the people in our communities as resources, and looks at the mechanisms we must put in place in order to support the skills, abilities, and innovation already present within our communities.

Our people are one of the greatest assets we have to help us begin making meaningful and effective changes to the Cowichan region to help us adapt to a changing climate, and this is a resource that has gone relatively untapped thus far. Expertise through lived experience, the stories and histories of our people and the land they grew up on, as well as the love our communities have for this region all come together to create the potential we need for more substantial change. Rather than focus on adaptive measures concerned solely with infrastructural and physical changes, we are exploring a new kind of social policy that puts our people at the centre of this movement. We cannot effectively do this ‘for the people’ without including the people in the process. This must become a practice in deciding *with*, not *for*.



# ASSET MAPPING



Social cohesion plays a significant role in determining a community's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, so one of the ongoing purposes of our neighbourhood adaptation project is to foster relationship building in our communities so they will continue to build resilience into the future without our direct involvement.

The asset mapping project we set out to complete at the beginning of the summer was an invaluable part of this process, as it allowed us to identify the skills, knowledge, experience, and innovation that already exist in our neighbourhoods throughout the Cowichan Valley. We have a lot of educated, concerned, involved, and interested individuals and communities that are ready to do their part to combat the impacts of climate change in their region, and better prepare themselves for an increasingly uncertain time.

We have identified a vast array of resources the people in our communities have to offer in response to climate change, and we recognize that one of the greatest assets we have are people themselves, and all of the lived experience and knowledge they possess. While identifying our strengths is vital to adaptation, it is equally as important to identify our vulnerabilities and the ways in which we are more at risk to the impacts of a changing climate. While there are physical factors that determine vulnerability, such as proximity to the ocean or a floodplain, there are also social factors that make us more susceptible to risk, such as the number of people we know around us, or the social services available to us when we are in need.

# STEPS TO SOCIAL CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION IN COWICHAN

## Step 1: Survey Neighbourhoods

- Select neighbourhoods within your region and organize team to go door-to-door surveying
- Create informational brochures to leave at houses about who you are, what you're doing, and provide people with the option to complete the survey online if they don't have time to do it in person (for examples of survey questions and brochure, please visit our website: [www.socialplanningcowichan.org/climate-change](http://www.socialplanningcowichan.org/climate-change))
- Identify 'champions' in each neighbourhood that will act as your main contacts throughout this process, and will be responsible in helping organize neighbourhood gatherings

## Step 2: Assessing Neighbourhood Resilience, Assets, and Social Cohesion

- Based on neighbourhood feedback, begin to identify the strengths and vulnerabilities of each neighbourhood
- Compile preliminary list of project ideas for each neighbourhood based on identified vulnerabilities, skills, local knowledge and community interest and suggestions for adaptation

## Step 3: Building Education and Awareness of Local Impacts of Climate Change

- Ensure there are educational opportunities every step of the way for local residents to learn about what climate change is, how it is expected to impact them, and what they can do to make themselves more resilient

## Step 4: Project Planning

- Contact neighbourhood champions to begin planning community gatherings
- Host a potluck for each neighbourhood where you can report back to them with the feedback they provided you with in their surveys
- Propose project ideas based on their initial survey responses, and receive feedback on these projects
- Begin planning process with champions, determine communications plan with neighbourhood, begin implementing project plans

# STEPS TO SOCIAL CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION IN COWICHAN

## Step 5: Monitoring, Review and Follow-Up

- Maintain communication with champions to measure how projects are unfolding and levels of neighbourhood cohesion after the completion of projects
- Review process and how it can be improved
- Follow up with residents in participating neighbourhoods and receive final feedback
- Assess project impact on predetermined vulnerabilities
- Report back to local governments

**Time Required:** Approximately 18 months from initial neighbourhood survey to completion of neighbourhood project

## Communications

- Maintaining consistent communication with local governments about neighbourhood feedback is essential so they are aware of community needs
- It is also important to develop a communications plan between local government and community members so their specific needs for climate change adaptation will continue to be met
- Ultimately, the goal is for neighbourhoods to continue with adaptation strategies without your involvement, and correspond directly with local governments



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# The Social Implications of Climate Change

Climate change adaptation is often focused on infrastructural change and modifications to policies concerned with land use and planning. While it is essential to plan for the physical consequences of climate change, such as sea level rise or more frequent and intense natural hazards like storms or drought, it is also imperative to consider the social implications climate change has on communities, and how we are all impacted by the growing uncertainties of the natural world.

## How are our communities vulnerable to climate change?

- Lack of education and awareness, leaving us unprepared and not involved or participating in efforts to mitigate or adapt to the effects of climate change
- Social alienation of our older populations; they face increased vulnerability in the event of an emergency without community support
- Location and availability of social services (ex. accessible care for the elderly, proximity of community centres or hospitals)
- Lack of social cohesion; feeling disconnected from our neighbours and communities, limited social net to rely on in times of need

## Where do we find resilience?

- Through building community, getting to know our neighbours, sharing our resources, and knowing who might need help in the event of an emergency or be willing to help
- Maintaining constant communication and consultation between local government and community members on long-term adaptive strategies we all have a role to play in



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# RECOMMENDATIONS

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As a starting point, when drafting policy that seeks to meaningfully engage with climate change adaptation, we must first identify our vulnerabilities, and then mainstream adaptation into existing processes, policies, and mechanisms. While it is important to start right now, where we are, there are also important adaptive measures we must take into consideration for all future planning, particularly when developing new neighbourhoods.

## **All new neighbourhood developments must include safe, communal green spaces**

- research has proven nature contributes to the development of social relationships and bonds
- encourages intergenerational interaction, which fosters important relationships and an imperative transfer of knowledge and skills
- effective adaptation is going to take all of us, so we need to mainstream communal spaces where people live and create environments that encourage cooperation, sharing, meaningful bonds, and working together
- green settings serve as social 'magnets', drawing people together and fostering social interaction, the development of friendships, and the formation of neighbourhood ties
- mentally restorative, which has many important social benefits
- nature's presence is not just protective, but its absence can be seen as a vulnerability

## **Integrate local gardens into planning**

- improves food security of neighbourhoods, the region, and island more broadly
- community members become knowledge holders and have a significant role to play in their community; fosters social participation and belonging
- creates communities of practice: continuous social learning through participation and reification
- acts as a form of living social memory; collectively managed spaces as pockets of socio-ecological memory
- urban/community gardens are sources of local resilience during times of crisis, protects species diversity
- creates social interactions between humans and other species that builds bonds, strengthening our responsibility to act on behalf of other life forms
- enhances the protection of habitats and ecosystems through understanding the necessary inputs and outputs

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Climate change adaptation must be an inclusive process

- must involve our communities and residents, as they are stakeholders in the future of this region
- hold town hall meetings, listen to our people's stories, use lived experience and memory as a tool and resource
- source experts locally and invest resources in building leaders in your own community; embrace the power of connection to place
- adopt a decide with, not for policy
- know who you're making decisions on behalf of, work to protect what they cherish
- create a strategic plan that ensures the continuity of communication and consultation between local government and the public

## Education

- we can't adapt to something we aren't aware of or don't understand
- effective adaptation requires public awareness campaigns and capacity-building in communities
- we need citizens in conversation with decision makers, but we also need citizens directly engaged in adaptation work
- strategies must be developed to educate our older populations about the risks they may face in coming years, and things they can do to adapt
- integrate knowledge of how communities coped with prior droughts and wildfires (for example) in order to better understand how new threats may play out; while unpredictable and unprecedented, we are not entirely in the dark
- demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of green-infrastructure, as well as nature-based solutions, while also acknowledging the positive social implications this has

## Embrace the power of social networks and use this to your advantage

- just as brains can do things that no single neuron can do, so can social networks do things that no single person can do
- if people are interconnected then our health is also interconnected (as well as our future)
- abundance of examples of how humans come together to achieve what they can't on their own

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Importance of creating a long-term vision

- we must rigorously adopt long-term thinking and planning to address the challenges our community will be faced with, and provide a template for our community members to follow so they understand the direction this region is headed towards
- with a great deal of uncertainty about the future, it is crucial to provide direction and clarity for peace of mind and personal planning purposes whenever possible; helps to alleviate stress and anxiety
- can be difficult to prioritize long-term needs

## Social well-being must be considered in all decision-making processes

- according to the World Health Organization, social well-being is an essential function of health
- the purpose of adapting to climate change is to protect our populations to begin with, so considering their social well-being in this process, and the environments we create in the future, is an essential component of adaptation



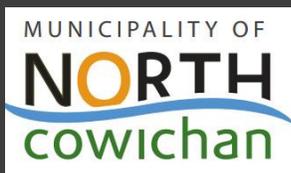
# CONCLUSION

For climate change adaptation to be effective on a local scale, it must be regionally specific. You cannot plan for something you do not understand, and while we can't fully know what the future has in store for us, we do have detailed, local projections of the physiological changes we can expect for our environment over the next 80 years.

Education is therefore an essential component of climate change adaptation, as it is important to know what kind of changes we need to make based on how things are expected to change. However, it is equally important to understand how these changes will affect our neighbourhoods differently, based on the assets and vulnerabilities we have identified within these communities.

It is crucial to include community feedback in all stages of adaptation, as community planning for the future will only be effective if we are building off of the strengths we already possess, and working on turning our weaknesses into strengths. Investing in strategies that strengthen social cohesion in our neighbourhoods, while maintaining consistent communication between our communities and local governments are also key strategies we must include when planning for the future of this region, and considering the social well-being of our community members.

## *Special* X *Thanks*



**Transition Cowichan**

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