

Wilderness beneath the forest

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Interchange putting the region's largest cave at risk, say speleologists

Squeezed into a chest-high, claustrophobic tunnel deep within Langford Lake cave, it's easy to forget about the Spencer interchange, the forest and the controversy.

More immediate concerns involve shimmying to the first cavernous opening while keeping up with the geology lessons from Adrian Duncan, president of the Vancouver Island Cave Exploration Group.

Langford Lake cave, snaking about 80 metres under the forest between Leigh Road and the Trans-Canada Highway, is unsurprisingly compact and damp. Mercifully, it's without the spiders that live to torment cavers on Vancouver Island.

As Duncan and his crew hand-holds a trio of journalists through the tunnels, he points out millennia of uneven limestone erosion and wispy root systems that transport water from the surface.

"Caves are the last unexplored wilderness on earth," Duncan says. "They give people the potential to touch something on one else has ever seen."

Physically, cave systems help regulate water flow within natural systems, influencing rivers, lakes and marshes. After another tight fit down a rocky slope, that becomes apparent as we come across a depression filled from the weekend rain.

The water is a crystal-clear contrast to the gritty, ever-damp walls. If nothing else, caves allow an environment of Buddhist-like calm and stillness.

"Caves clearly form an integral part of the groundwater hydrology. They are an integral function of the ecosystem," Duncan says. "Take any portion away and you take away balance."

Duncan, representing the B.C. Speleological Federation, is worried that blasting needed to build the planned Spencer Road Interchange will damage or destroy the Langford cave. The planned interchange route was altered to preserve the cave system, with the closest point estimated at nine metres.

While the cave presumably survived centuries of earthquakes, Duncan suspects jarring shock waves from blasting could make the cave unstable. And from depressions in the forest, he also suspects the area is littered with unseen karst cave systems.

"This area has high potential for further undiscovered caves," Duncan said. "Caves are unique and irreplaceable features. They take millennia to form and you can't compensate for their loss."

Duncan and his caving crew spent Tuesday photographing the tunnel that locals have explored for decades. In a Golder Associates archeological assessment submitted to Langford, it noted the cave wasn't surveyed due to "potential instability of the cave roof."

If and when interchange construction starts, Duncan says he will periodically inspect Langford Lake cave, gingerly of course. "I won't be in here while they are actually blasting," he says.

The B.C. Speleological Federation doesn't take issue with Langford or the interchange itself, Duncan says, as it recognizes a city's right to create infrastructure as it deems fit. But he says the route of the Spencer interchange is a problem, especially in light of the declining number of caves in the Capital Region.

Decades ago the CRD had about 20 known cave systems, he says. Now it is down to nine. Langford Lake cave is thought to be the largest remaining cave in the region.

"Greater Victoria is one of the few capital regions in North America with cave and karst features within its boundary," he says. "If we are super-natural British Columbia, we should look after the features within B.C."

Unlike other jurisdictions in the U.S., Europe and South America, British Columbia has little in the way of cave protection. Noted expert speleologist Paul Griffiths, who mapped Langford Lake cave in 1975 and again last year, has tried for decades to lobby the province to implement legislation to preserve caves.

"It's not often you have limestone caves next to residential areas," Duncan says. "It really sets Victoria apart."

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