



# A Trail Runs Through It

Exploring the Fraser River's  
Canyon to Coast Trail

**By Diane Selkirk**

The tiny fishing village of Finn Slough is one of the many interesting sites along the Fraser River.



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or me, the Fraser River has many personalities. I've explored the waterway on foot, by bike and by boat—but it's difficult to get the whole measure of any river, let alone the Fraser. It's not just that it's a vast waterway that curves across 1,375 kilometres of British Columbia, but the river also holds a central place in our region's story.

For the first time, there's a trail system trying to tie together the many identities of the Fraser. The long-term vision is for Experience the Fraser (ETF) to have 640 kilometres of blueways and trails (half of which are already in place) connecting communities from the Fraser Canyon to the Salish Sea. Conceived as a 2010 Olympic legacy project, Jason Lum, Chair of Board, Fraser Valley Regional District, says, "the ETF isn't just about outdoor recreation, there's also a cultural component. There are so many layers of history on the banks of the Fraser."

**FIRST NATIONS HAVE** lived in the Fraser River basin for at least 10,000 years. People including the Musqueam, Stó:lo, Nlaka'pamux, Syilx, Secwepemc, St'át'imc, Tsilhqot'in, Dakelh, Sekani and Wet'suwet'en were deeply connected to the waterway, utilizing the Fraser for food and transportation. Explorers, including Sir Alexander Mackenzie, who followed a portion of the river in 1793, and Simon Fraser, who traced its complete path in 1808, were searching for a navigable route to the coast. In 1827, Fort Langley was erected on the river's shores, eventually helping to secure the province's 49th parallel border. In 1857, gold was discovered on the sandbars south of Yale, setting off the Fraser River Gold Rush.

Even today, the river dominates the

character of BC. After flowing from its headwaters near Mt. Robson, on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains, the upper section courses northwest 1,400 metres down the Rocky Mountain trench past the Cariboo Mountains before turning south just north of Prince George, where it's met by the Nechako River. As it streams south across the Interior it's joined by the Quesnel, Thompson and Chilcotin rivers. Then it enters the Fraser canyon, and becomes the frothing stretch where explorer Simon Fraser once noted, "no human being should ever venture for surely we have encountered the gates of hell."

In its lower reaches, the Fraser is a wide meandering waterway that's bordered by large floodplains of fertile farmland. Along its length it supports salmon, sturgeon, trout, deer, moose, mountain goat, marmot, black bear and beaver—while industry, towns, forests and parks line the shores.

**STANDING ON THE** waterfront outside the Fraser River Discovery Centre in New Westminster, it's hard for me to imagine the journey the flowing water has taken. Judging from the logs drifting upstream, the mud-brown river is still tidal here, even 25 kilometres from the sea. Tugs and fishing boats ply the wide stretch and, almost lost in the fog on the far bank, freighters from far-off places are unloading their cargo.

The Fraser River Discovery Centre is the perfect place to put this stretch of river into context and to plan out my future exploring. Despite my familiarity with the Fraser, the centre's exhibits offer me the most complete understanding of the river I've ever had. The interactive displays outline life and history along the length of the upper and lower Fraser and show how industry, environment and habitation interact to create the modern river.

The biggest complication in caring for the river's ecosystem is finding a way

to balance the needs of so many opposing demands, says the centre's executive director Stephen Bruyneel. Between industry, fishing, First Nations, environmental concerns and recreation, it can be tricky to find agreement. He points to the ETF trail system as a great example of all the stakeholders working together to keep the river healthy.

The trail system is a partnership between the Province of BC, Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley Regional District with input from First Nations and other community groups. Envisioned as a series of loop trails where visitors can cross the water by bridge and explore both sides of the river—the ETF is a long-term project designed to

encourage people to reconnect with the river on a variety of trail types.

"It's been called the Mighty Fraser," Lum says. But the Fraser, which was once a vital transportation route, has in many ways faded from our consciousness. "The trail is meant to help re-establish our connection to the river."

The surprise has been that not only has the creation of the trail system brought new visitors to the banks of the Fraser, but it's energized the communities bordering the river. While the province and municipalities started the project, Lum has discovered that businesses and community groups have seen the value of the trail. They have added momentum to the project, making it easier for new sections to be developed.

**AFTER EXPLORING SHOPS** and checking out the industrial views along the New Westminster boardwalk, my daughter Maia and I decided to step back in history by heading to the fort-to-fort trail in Fort Langley. Like several sections of the ETF, this section of the trail is also part of the Trans Canada Trail. We had planned to start in at the original fort site in Derby Reach Park and wander through farmland to the town of Fort Langley, but the fog we experienced in New Westminster was even thicker in the Fraser Valley. So, we changed our plans and took the Brae Island Trail to the historic fort.

Cloaked in mist, it was hard to see even a few metres ahead—let alone the fabulous mountain and farm views this section of the trail is known for. What we lost

in landscape, we made up for in imagination. With a scattering of snow on the ground everything around us was quiet and still. As we made our way along the shore of Brae Island, and toward the fort there were no modern cues. It was easy to picture what the river was like during the long-ago winters when Fort Langley was the region's hub.

At the fort, our displacement continued. We'd arrived at a quiet time. Other than a few fellow visitors who were shrouded in fog, the only people we encountered were park staff, dressed in period costumes and quietly going about their historically accurate business.

**IN THE FUTURE,** the ETF's goal is to have a continuous Canyon to Coast ›



Enjoying the beach at Island 22 Regional Park.



trail opening up more of the river to exploration. Intrepid walkers, cyclists and kayakers will have the option of setting off on multi-day expeditions, and fully immersing in river life. Last year, Chilliwack opened 18 kilometres from Island 22 Regional Park to Ferry Island. In 2018, other new trails will open including a connecting trail within Sumas Mountain Inter-Regional Park from Chadsey Lake (near the top) to the Sumas River.

While I love the idea of following the Fraser over several days, for now the ETF is the perfect day trip destination for my family. Earlier in the fall we had set out to investigate a new section along the dykes in Matsqui. Our loop took us from a forested field, edged by farmland, down onto the river's sandy shore where we watched fishermen haul in their catch.

Watching the fishermen reminded me of a years-ago fishing trip when Maia and I helped land a 50-kilogram sturgeon. With the mountains rising above us and the river flowing past, we fought the remarkable fish, feeling when to wind in and then when to release. Occasionally it would leap free of the river, breaking the surface with an energy that let me know we would be at this for a while.

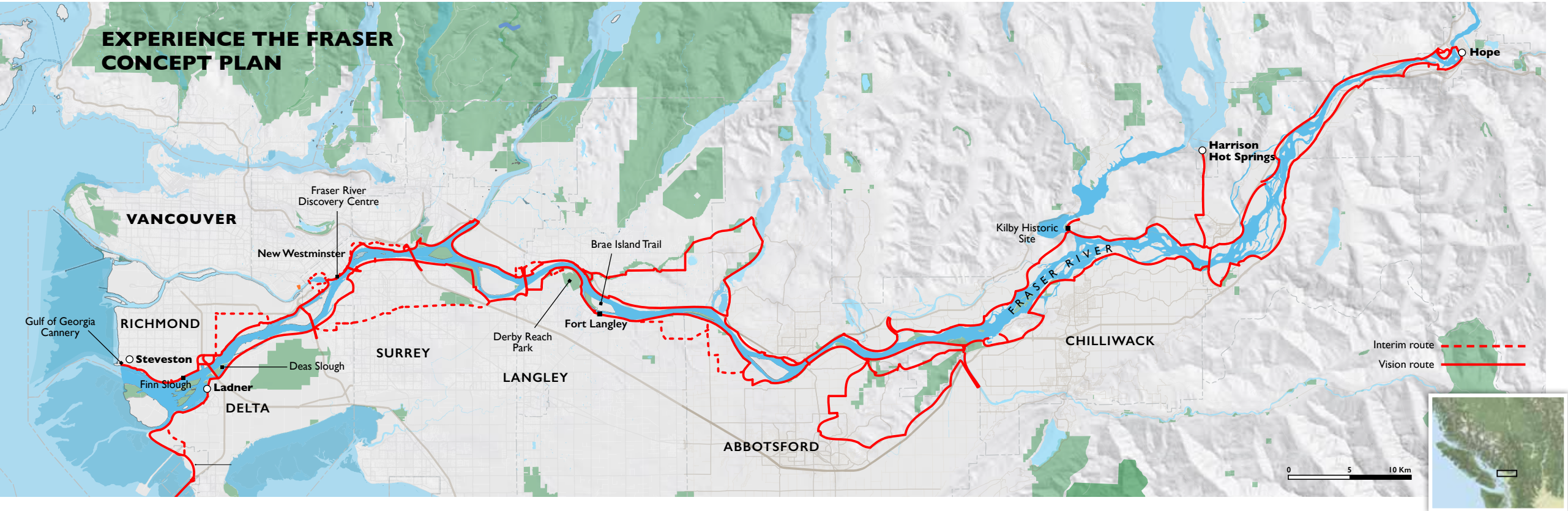
Sturgeon are long-time residents of the Fraser, pre-dating us all. But they almost became extinct and these days the fishery is all about research. Our fish was two metres long—a little guy of about 40 years who had previously been caught and tagged. Marvelling at its armour, its bizarre mouth and its odd beauty we were silent when we returned it to the river. Hopeful that in the decades to come he'd still be swimming in the Fraser.

On another day, we made our way along the dyke trail out of Steveston—taking small a detour to explore Finn Slough, a historic fishing village that's existed since the late 1800s. Built on a tidal inlet at the edge of the Fraser, Finn Slough consists of wooden walkways that lead to ramshackle float homes and houses on stilts, as well as a small fleet of both active and retired fishing boats.

Every trip I made to the Fraser has brought a new discovery—from learning about our shared past, to encountering stories of community. The Fraser is mighty and genuinely spectacular in places—but it's the quiet stretches where the river may have the most to say. It's here I've found the places where both history and hope for the future flow as one. 🐟



Fraser River Discovery Centre during RiverFest 2017.



## IF YOU GO

### EXPLORE THE FRASER'S HIGHLIGHTS

**Bike or walk** stretches along the Chilliwack Dyke, the Hope Waterfront, the Ladner Dyke, the Richmond Dyke and the Matsqui Dyke. Dykes make wonderful places for an easy ride or walk, and their elevation offers great views of the landscape and wildlife. More information is available at [letsgobiking.net](http://letsgobiking.net) and [trailsbc.ca](http://trailsbc.ca).

**Paddle** at Bedford Landing in Langley, Deas Slough in Delta or the Sumas River in Abbotsford. These are some of the most scenic and interesting paddling venues in BC, and river paddling offers some unique differences from paddling on the ocean.

**Fort Langley:** Built in 1827 and steeped in history, Fort Langley National Historic Site today brings visitors back to the sights, smells and sounds of the Hudson's Bay Company fur trade on the banks of the Fraser River. [pc.gc.ca/fortlangley](http://pc.gc.ca/fortlangley)

**Fraser River Discovery Centre** This interactive resource and learning centre offers visitors connection to the living, working Fraser River through rotating exhibits and hands-on programmes showing the rivers contribution to BC. [fraserriverdiscovery.org](http://fraserriverdiscovery.org)

**Gulf of Georgia Cannery** Built in 1894 in the historic village of Steveston, this cannery was once the leading producer of canned salmon in BC. Today, the site offers interactive exhibits, films and guided tours. [gulfofgeorgiacannery.org](http://gulfofgeorgiacannery.org)

**Kilby Historic Site** Located near the junction of the Harrison and Fraser Rivers, this historic site offers a glimpse into the past of the once thriving community of Harrison Mills. [kilby.ca](http://kilby.ca)