

A Valley Called “Paradise”

The Squamish River watershed lies in the rugged terrain of the British Columbia Coast mountains. Squamish, and its major tributaries the Cheakamus, and Mamquam Rivers, have prolific runs of late spawning chum salmon (>250,000). This river was the most important salmon fishery within the territories of the Squamish Nation which had many villages along its length. They were there primarily because of chum salmon.

By far the largest spawning chum salmon aggregation is located in a 4-kilometer section of the lower Cheakamus River. This area is known locally as the “Paradise Valley”. In some years more than 150,000 chum salmon can spawn in this short reach of the river.

The “Paradise Valley” is also known for the abundance of groundwater upwellings along the Cheakamus River banks and in its various side channels.



Cheakamus River, Squamish, BC, Canada

Water from rains and river flows in the upper river infiltrate through deep layers of sand and gravel laid down as the valley glaciers retreated 5000 years ago, to form an extensive aquifer deep under the Cheakamus River for 10-kilometers upstream from the Paradise Valley. Due to an underlying sill of confining bedrock and glacial deposits at the lower end of the valley the waters from the earth begin their rise toward the light as they upwell in this productive 4-kilometer lower reach.

Over the past four decades much has been done to protect and enhance the various groundwater side channels in this important section of the Cheakamus River. Various groundwater side channels of the lower river, known by locals as Tenderfoot, BC Rail, Lower and Upper Paradise and Moody’s have been expanded and enhanced for chum salmon spawning.

[Cheakamus Centre](http://www.cheakamuscentre.ca/about-us/conservation) (CC), an environmental education facility was first established in 1969. Dave Marshall DFO initiated the first salmon restoration project back in 1981 and then Principal, Vic Elderton and Property Manager, Carl Halvorson carried on the charge for the next 35 years to restore the school property into the ecologically focused salmon and eagle refuge it is today. In recognition of his contribution to this effort, Cheakamus Centre have dedicated these restored salmon habitats on the property as the “Dave Marshall Salmon Reserve” .<http://www.cheakamuscentre.ca/about-us/conservation>.

Restoration of Cheakamus Centre floodplain continues today with CC staff partnering with committed individuals such as Randy Lewis, Edith Tobe and Dave Nanson, representatives from the Squamish Nation, Squamish River Watershed Society (<https://www.squamishwatershed.com/>) and Fisheries and Oceans Canada.



Cheakamus Centre is located on 420 acres of ecological reserve in the Paradise Valley, in the heart of this groundwater chum salmon reach. This Centre is owned by the North Vancouver School District and gives its students a very real interaction with nature in this unique place intended to instill in young learners a life-long respect and appreciation for the natural world.

Cheakamus Centre also welcomes all those that truly love nature and wish it to be a part of their most memorable experiences. Through nature camps and retreats and more recently weddings surrounded by nature, this unique location calls those who care about such places.

The “Big Tree” Paradise Valley

The very name of this place, Cheakamus, is an anglicization version of the Squamish name, ***Ch'iyákmesh***, which means "people of the fish weir". The Squamish people lived on those lands for untold generations and placed their fish weirs in the various channels of the lower Cheakamus River to harvest the abundant runs of late season chum salmon. Ch'iyákmesh was not only important to the people of the watershed, but the

great numbers of chum salmon also nourished a broader community of wildlife during late fall and winter.

The Squamish River Valley and the Cheakamus River have been long recognized as a very important wintering area for bald eagles in western North America. However, during the winter of 1994, Squamish set a new world record count of 3,769 eagles surpassing the previous record count observed on the Chilkat River a decade before. In 1999, the Brackendale Eagles British Columbia Provincial Park, was established in recognition of its importance to eagles. Once again, a unique intersection of geology, biology and human culture makes the Squamish/Cheakamus River, a memorable place indeed.

The “Year of the Dog Salmon” celebrates the abundant chum salmon, which have been shaped by the wonders of geology and which themselves have supported complex indigenous salmon cultures around the Pacific Rim. [Read the full story here.](#)

To help raise awareness of the “International Year of the Salmon” project, the Fraser Valley Watersheds Coalition presents the “**Salmon on the Rough Edge of Canada and Beyond**” series of 10-short stories which will bring the readers into the lives of some of the individuals and groups that strive to preserve and restore the iconic salmon species of the North Pacific Ocean.

<http://fvwc.ca/>

