

Fears for cliff jumpers keep taps turned off at Thetis Lake

Times Colonist · 20 Nov 2010 · BILL CLEVERLEY

Capital Regional District director Mike Hicks wants taps opened at Thetis Lake next summer so water will flow into Craigflower Creek and improve fish habitat.

But CRD parks staff are worried that lower water levels in the lake may increase the risks to visitors who go cliff jumping.

For years, water was routinely released from the lake into the creek to help local fisheries, but last year the tap was shut off, Hicks, director for Juan de Fuca, said Thursday.

“Coho have to live in the stream for a whole year after they are born,” Hicks said. “So they have to live in the stream during the dry months, and they have to have water to live. But the mortality of the Coho and the trout is huge in Craigflower Creek because, as the creek dries up, they’re picked off by seagulls and everything else, or the water dries up and they die.”

CRD parks administrator Lloyd Rushton said his department recognizes the value of the downstream flow of water. But he added that a major issue with releasing water from Thetis is the risk to cliff divers.

“This was one of the flags raised by our risk staff and that is when the hold was put on it in the height of the summer. So that flag was raised, and this year we did not release water,” Rushton said.

“We will report back to [parks] committee in February or March on what needs to be done, if anything, as it relates to the risks associated with jumping and releasing and/or lowering the lake in the summertime.”

CRD parks is responsible for several dams, and the department is assessing the risks at each one, Rushton said. A normal release would see levels at Thetis drop by about a foot, Hicks said.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the Ministry of Environment, the Songhees First Nation, the Esquimalt Angling Association and Living Rivers — Georgia Basin and Vancouver Island, a trust fund committed to healthy watersheds and a sustainable fish population, have approached Hicks over the issue.

The Thetis Lake dam was upgraded in 1981 to include a spillway and release valve. The CRD acquired the dam in 1993 and water releases were suspended in the late 1990s, Hicks said.

In 2008, Living Rivers approached CRD parks about releasing water, and a test was carried out in 2009, he said. In August this year, Living Rivers was told everything was on hold while the CRD established a committee to develop dam policy.