

Mark 'Zaida' Schneider



Tell us about your work

I'm a retired journalist and I love to sail. I spend my days cleaning up and caring for the place where I'm "anchored" – False Creek. I have a vision of False Creek as an urban marine park with the legal rights of a person. While it's an audacious act of imagination to give a natural entity legal status, it is also a growing movement in law. In Quebec, for example, the Muteshekau-shipu (Magpie River) enjoys that status.



How did you get into this work?

After retiring, I sailed for a few years and visited many small fishing villages. When I came into a bay and dropped anchor, inevitably someone came out to greet me – a park warden, a harbourmaster, a port captain. They would share information about the place and almost always explain how to keep the water clean. When I returned to False Creek, no one was there to fill that role and the marine environment had been neglected.

I co-founded the nonprofit, False Creek Friends with Tim Bray, to improve the health of this waterway. We give visiting boaters material to let them know what they need to do to protect the marine environment. We participate in City of Vancouver advisory panels, speak on invitation to community groups like Nature Vancouver, and provide educational materials for Science World.

We commissioned well-known Canadian underwater photographer Fernano Lessa to produce False Creek is Alive. Our “Creeky Cruises” aboard our tug boat host elected officials, marine scientists and environmental activists. We held a conference for stakeholders, engaging the community with scientists and activists to co-imagine the Creek’s future. We partner with the Hakai Institute, monitoring the area in their Sentinels of Change program for sea life.



What makes your work hard?

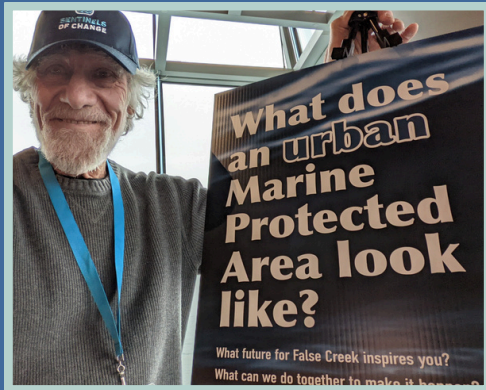
The biggest challenge is apathy. Too many passively view “the Creek” as “dead,” and fail to see it as an asset. But slowly, the message is getting out that it’s repairable and worthwhile. A huge moral and political challenge is the historical eviction of Indigenous Peoples from the Creek. That is now changing, and there is a compelling need for a vision that includes everyone.



There are also more mundane challenges, like the tangle of jurisdictional fiefdoms and contradictory legal regulations, that make it hard for boaters to understand what’s required of them. I hope we can organize a ‘False Creek Conservation Council.’

What gives you hope?

Human creativity and adaptability, particularly through the power of stories. A strong imagination creates narratives that effectively combat apathy, and stories can be an antidote to grief and despair.



Human beings can be in a responsible relationship with natural entities if we use “Two-Eyed Seeing,” combining science and traditional Indigenous knowledge.

If we understand the needs of natural entities, we can advocate for them more effectively. I wonder what kind of shifts would occur if we took the political, legal and cultural agency of other entities seriously.

What keeps you awake night?

Every time it gets unseasonably hot and another forest fire creates a shroud over the sky, I feel a horrible sense of despair. In the Vancouver area, 619 humans and billions of coastal sea critters perished in the deadly heat dome of 2021. I wonder what will happen to Max, my granddaughter. I'm terrified about the world she's going to inherit.

What do you see if we get this right?

I see lots of things already happening, and hope for more consensus and impetus behind them. We need more of a shared vision. I want to see more cohesion among Creek-users and residents about the aims and purpose of the waterway.

I think of the Highline in New York City. A narrow ribbon of concrete has been transformed into an iconic garden and public space of the city.

Its galleries, theatres, coffee shops and other businesses generate \$900 million USD every year. There is no reason why we cannot do something like this in False Creek, a narrow ribbon of the Salish Sea that comes right to downtown Vancouver. It just needs to be imagined.

What would you say to younger readers?



What help can I give you? The myths I grew up with — the pursuit of economic mobility, opportunities for extensive travel, and a sense of security — look increasingly unattainable. It has become more difficult to think beyond your own immediate needs. Yet, we need the collective imaginations of young people to envision the future.

What about older readers?

Listen to and support the young people in your lives. Older generations need to respond sympathetically to the vision of youth. Young people have difficult pressures and constraints in navigating their lives that I don't think any of us could have imagined.



Zaida Schneider lives in False Creek, Vancouver.



SPEC Elders Circle
Legacy-making as Elder-making

About Elders in our Midst

The Elders in our Midst project celebrates seniors across British Columbia and Canada who have contributed meaningfully to climate action in their communities. Through youth-led interviews and Joy Hanser's hand-painted portraits, it highlights their unique efforts and inspires all generations to foster community-driven climate action.

Learn More and Connect

Elders in Our Midst: spec.bc.ca/eldersinourmidst

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Connect: info@spec.bc.ca