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Lodge builds loyal following; Host and guests keep up their parents' traditions

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Illustrations: Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to Times Colonist / Guests at Yellow Point Lodge relax in the big lounge in the evening, chatting in groups, playing cards and board games or reading.

Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to Times Colonist / Richard Hill likes to join guests in the lounge and gauge what will make their stay most comfortable.

Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to Times Colonist / Guests amble around the point that gives the lodge its name, looking over Stuart Channel toward De Courcy and Mudge islands.

Would-be developers of Yellow Point Lodge near Ladysmith need not pester lodge owner Richard Hill about selling his waterfront property any longer -- most of it will soon be untouchable. Hill is placing about half his 185 acres on the Point under a conservation covenant, which means neither he nor any future owner will be able to log it.

Hill says he gets regular calls from people wanting to purchase the pristine, barely developed property that sits on a rocky promontory of land with a 270-degree view of the Gulf Islands, but now they won't stay on the phone long.

"In the past few years I used to say, it's a dollar more than you've got, but now I can hang up quickly because I can tell them we're in negotiation with The Land Conservancy and the Nanaimo Area Land Trust and we're going to be signing a large block of the main property into a conservation covenant."

The 90-acre parcel that will be protected is part of the coastal Douglas fir zone, "which is quite sparse to begin with and very much under development pressure," says Jay Rastogi, manager of Wildwood, a forested property owned by The Land Conservancy a few kilometres from Yellow Point Lodge. "It's significant enough that it will affect business on that property for the future, forever."

Marilyn McCrimmon, who wrote a biography of Richard's father, Gerry -- the original owner of Yellow Point Lodge -- says if Gerry Hill were still alive, he'd be thrilled.

"That was his vision when he first saw the property and that was the whole reason behind the title of the book, Custodian of Yellow Point, because he never thought that he really owned that property. [He thought] that he was just looking after it for generations to come and I think Richard has the same philosophy. They're two of a kind, those two."

Perhaps not surprisingly, that philosophy has resulted in the lodge's regular guests -- and they are legion -- feeling like they, too, have a claim on the property.

"My husband Rod and I have 'our' cabin -- beach cabin number 1 -- it's very much our cabin," says McCrimmon. "We even talked, long ago, about buying property up-Island ourselves and then we

decided no, we had Yellow Point Lodge and Richard just looks after it for us when we're not there."

The lodge is renowned for repeat visitors such as McCrimmon and her husband, who have been coming four or five times a year for two decades. They have regular bookings in June, August, September and December -- all weekends except for their "precious" week in August. "And if things come up in your life, like a family wedding, you try to sublet it to a friend and that keeps the reservation for a year and then you get it back again."

A few years ago, Hill gave two guests a week's stay on the house to reward 50 years of loyalty. "I just said to them, 'You know what? You don't get a bill this week this year.' They had not missed a year, not one year, made it every single year for 50 years."

The joke at Yellow Point Lodge is that someone has to die before you can get a reservation. The re-booking rates pretty much confirm that, at least in the summer months, when Hill says over 98 per cent of guests reserve their spot for the following year, a track record that must make him the envy of other resort owners.

Half the guests come from the mainland and many are second-generation visitors, such as Paddy and Carole Ducklow from Horseshoe Bay, who were relaxing in the spacious lounge one evening recently. Paddy's parents honeymooned here in 1945 and Paddy and Carole have been visiting for almost 30 years themselves. "It just feels like home," says Paddy.

"We got here the other night and walked into White Beach cottage, put our suitcases up and thought, 'Ahhhhh, OK,'" sighs Carole. "You know what to expect when you come, even what you're going to have for dinner that night because it's the same every week and has been the same every week for years."

That feeling of contentment doesn't happen by chance, but is carefully cultivated by Hill, who chats up guests every Friday and Saturday evening. "I want to know what's going on. The only way we can run the place in a way that will make people happy is if we find out what makes people happy."

Sometimes that means rolling up the carpet in the

lounge for people to dance, but not before Hill consults the guests. "You usually get a pretty good idea on Friday what kind of crowd you've got, and then on Saturday, if it looks like they're ready to go, you lead off with a little bit of loud music and that gets people going. If there's other people you're not sure about, I go around and do a little straw poll. [I say] 'There's this group that wants to dance, they might have a majority, how do you feel about that?'"

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Hill also likes to let guests know about any changes he's making to the property, particularly the cabins, some dating from the 1930s. "If someone has been coming to a place for 20 or 25 years, they've got it in their hearts and they don't want big changes. What we try to do is the necessary repairs and replacements, putting the cabins back almost exactly as they were."

Unlike many resorts, where bigger and grander is considered better, the cabins at Yellow Point are small and rustic. Hill doesn't like guests to be surprised in a bad way, so on his website, he leaves no doubt about what they can expect if they book a beach cabin, for instance: "These are the most rustic accommodations available anywhere shy of a tent. One cannot overstate just how Spartan they actually are ... the phrase 'You get what you pay for' really applies here."

That honesty and consideration for others has won Hill -- and his father before him -- many friends, including a group officially known as the Friends of Yellow Point. Usually volunteer groups are associated with public places such as parks, and they often struggle to keep members, but not this one. The Friends of Yellow Point has 300 paid-up members.

"It's an amazing thing. We get a little blase talking about it at times, but it is an amazing thing," says Kim Morgan, secretary for the group. Work parties -- where members spend a couple of days six to eight times a year chopping firewood, pruning trees and painting cabins -- are so popular that more members sign up than can be put to work. "In any one year, we might be able to accommodate 50 or 60 people in work parties and we'd easily have 100 people wanting to do it"

Some members don't mind working in exchange for staying at the lodge for a couple of days; others do it for the camaraderie and exercise, says Morgan. Even though he lives 15 minutes away by bicycle, he still comes to the lodge with his wife a couple of times a year as a guest. "It's stunningly beautiful," he says of the waterfront with its white-shell beaches and rocky point jutting into the ocean.

Morgan isn't surprised by Hill's decision to place a large chunk of the property under a conservation covenant. "He's been committed to keeping it as beautiful as possible and as simple and natural as possible."

Still, Morgan agrees protection is important for the long term, when a future owner might not have the same benevolent outlook as Richard Hill and his father before him. "It's pretty wonderful."