

# 1 Why protect Garry oak areas?



Garry oak areas are the richest land-based ecosystems in southwest British Columbia, providing habitat for more than 100 species of birds, 7 amphibian species, 33 mammal species, more than 800 invertebrate species, and about 700 plant species.



## ENDANGERED ECOSYSTEMS, ENDANGERED SPECIES

Garry oak areas are some of Canada’s most endangered ecosystems. Once common in coastal areas of southwest British Columbia, less than 5% of these ecosystems remain in a near-natural condition.

Land development, invasion by exotic species, fire suppression,<sup>1</sup> trampling by people and their pets, and poor management practices all contribute to the loss of Garry oak areas. More of the remaining areas are likely to be lost in the next decade.

As the ecosystems disappear, so do the species they support. There are more than 100 species at risk in Garry oak areas —species that are identified by the federal or provincial governments as ‘at risk’ of becoming extinct.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, protection measures and conservation strategies often focus only on the oak trees. While protecting Garry oak trees provides important habitat for many species, it is even better to protect whole ecosystems, including the understory shrubs, ground cover and wildflowers, and to avoid small ‘islands’ of native trees surrounded by non-native landscaping or pavement.



Photo left and top: Chris Junck

**Garry oak areas (or ecosystems) are more than just trees. They include woodlands with Garry oak, arbutus, or Douglas-fir trees, often combined with rock outcrops, natural wildflower and grassy meadows, coastal bluffs or seasonal pools.**

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO PROTECT AND RESTORE THE REMAINING GARRY OAK AREAS?

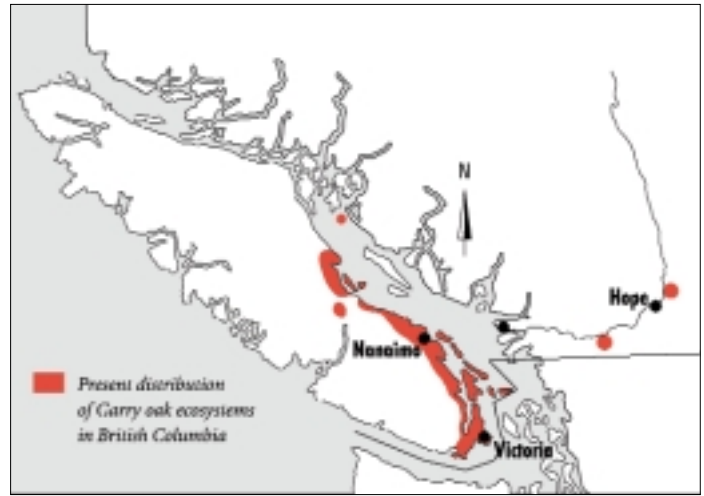
*As the song says, “you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”*

- **VISIBLE BENEFITS:** Many attractive species are found in Garry oak areas. People love to look at the wildflowers, butterflies, mosses and birds. Protected areas such as Mount Tolmie in Saanich, Mount Tzuhalem near Duncan and Ruckle Park on Salt Spring Island provide delightful views and places of serenity to walk and enjoy nature.

1 Fire suppression allows Douglas-fir and other trees and shrubs to invade Garry oak areas, shading out and eventually replacing the trees and wildflowers.  
 2 For a listing of species at risk, see the GOERT website [www.goert.ca](http://www.goert.ca).

- **HIDDEN BENEFITS:** We often take for granted the valuable services that plants and animals provide, such as the insects that pollinate our gardens and orchards. Sharp-tailed snakes — a species at risk in Garry oak areas — consume the slugs that gardeners love to hate.
- **CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:** Garry oak areas are important to the rich and complex culture of the First Nations of this region. In the past, some First Nations deliberately burned selected woodlands and meadows to maintain open conditions and promote the growth of berries, nuts and root vegetables such as camas.
- **FIRE RESISTANCE:** The open nature of Garry oak woodlands and meadows poses a low risk for high-intensity wildfires.
- **A SOURCE OF MEDICINES:** Medical discoveries often originate from native plants and animals. Pacific yew is a source of an anti-cancer drug. Frogs are a source of painkillers and treatment for schizophrenia. First Nations have used plants found in Garry oak areas for a variety of medicinal purposes. Perhaps — as yet unknown to us — a species in Garry oak ecosystems holds the cure for Alzheimer's or AIDS.

Protecting Garry oak areas is a kind of insurance for the future — for people as well as for the plants and animals that these ecosystems support.



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**Garry oak ecosystems are found on southeast Vancouver Island, on the Gulf Islands, and in two small areas in the Lower Fraser Valley. They occur nowhere else in Canada.**

**These ecosystems are also found in Washington, Oregon and California (where the trees are known as Oregon white oaks). In Canada, the Garry oaks are at the northern extent of their range.**



Photo: Judith Cullington

Photo: Chris Juncak



**Garry Oak  
Ecosystems  
Recovery Team**

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