A SUSTAINABLE LEGACY

Ruth Simons invites CapU students to a greener vision for the future

Try to congratulate Ruth Simons for her honorary doctorate from Capilano University, and she will immediately divert your attention to the promise of the University's students and the opportunities before them in Howe Sound.

Modest to a fault, she'll distract you with her vision of the pristine region at the centre of the society she worked so diligently to form and continues to manage.

"I'm humbled to be honoured this way," she said.

Then comes the pivot: "I think this could bring more awareness to the objectives we're trying to achieve. I'm focused on CapU as a partner because I fundamentally believe it's a natural fit for focusing on using this region as a living laboratory."

For many years, Ruth worked tirelessly to form the Howe Sound Biosphere Region Initiative Society. The society is a non-profit group that promotes biodiversity conservation and a marine use plan and collaborates with the Squamish Nation within the newly formed Átl'ka7tsem/Howe Sound UNESCO Biosphere Region.

She said her work with CapU instructors and students furthers her mission, inspiring students while enhancing the natural treasure in North Vancouver's backyard.

"The concept of interdisciplinary studies and using Howe Sound as a laboratory is exciting," she said. "I'm excited about the potential of projects with a true reciprocity that gives something lasting to Howe Sound."

LEADING A LIVING LABORATORY

Ruth admits she's the kind of person who gets things done and done right. She's proven this by leading and growing a family business, representing a constituency in local government and her dogged work in protecting Átl'ka7tsem/Howe Sound and forming a society dedicated to its preservation.

"Even in high school, I always was somebody who wanted to get things done. I've always been an observer of what's going on," she recalls.

After retiring from the travel insurance industry in 2007, Ruth immersed herself in non-profit work, being elected in 2008 to a seat on the village council in Lions Bay until 2011.

Starting in 2016, she became deeply involved as a champion in turning the initiative to have Howe Sound designated as an official UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

After a five-year effort, the Howe Sound region (Átl'ka7tsem) received worldwide recognition as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the 19th in Canada. This designation means it is a globally recognized model learning area for sustainable development.



> **From the bottom of the ocean to the tops of the mountains, heavy industry to tourism to research science, it's all here: a place to work on world problems at the local level.**
>
> **RUTH SIMONS**

The designation was a monumental one. But the work didn't end there.

"It's a false presumption that one can just rest after a designation, but we're busier than ever," Ruth said.

Ruth oversees the society's mandate, including being a communication hub for all the regional organizations and coordinating forums with community organizations, educators, governments and the public. A connective tissue for students, instructors and scientists.

CONNECTING STUDENTS, INSTRUCTORS AND SCIENTISTS

Ruth also serves as connective tissue between instructors and their students, the organizations, citizen scientists, and parks professionals that share their expertise on restoration, tourism and biodiversity.

The Átl'ka7tsem/Howe Sound region has a thriving tourism sector. It serves as the perfect training ground for CapU instructors such as Kara Walker, whose classes provide research opportunities on practices for biospheres, strategizing for generating revenue and signage to educate the region's visitors.

Ruth also connected CapU students with a marine sanctuary society, met with tourism students, creative professionals and park leaders to discuss ideas for interpretation signage, and connected biology students with an Islands Trust Conservancy in Gambier Island to monitor at-risk species in nature reserve wetlands.

In 2021, the society and CapU created a joint working group, creating more than 20 opportunities for faculty and students to collaborate on projects in the Howe Sound region. Longtime donor Lee Grills made it possible for the Howe Sound Biosphere partnership to fund its first research projects and student ambassador this past year.

Through the Capilano University Foundation, donors can support anything from financing student field trips and student research assistant salaries to teaching resources that benefit future generations of learners and the future of the Howe Sound.

"The UNESCO biosphere regions ensure people don't lose their connections with nature. It's a place they can look to for hope," she said.

"I see in students an excitement at the realization that there is so much learning to do right on their doorstep."

