

Contributed by John Buchanan

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Boat sinks, spilling 1,000 litres of oil into sound

Once a heavily polluted area, Britannia Beach had been undergoing an environmental recovery before the accident

BY CATHRYN ATKINSON
BRITANNIA BEACH

A vintage tugboat sank early yesterday at a dock in Britannia Beach, 45 kilometres north of Vancouver, spilling 1,000 litres of diesel fuel into Howe Sound.

La Lumiere, a wooden-hulled, 50-metre, Second World War-era tug that was decommissioned in the 1980s, was one of four aging vessels moored at the dock since 2001. It listed and sank at around 6 a.m., according to the Coast Guard.

Cara Barth, the co-owner of Galileo coffee shop, said she and her staff watched the tug disappear beneath the water. It had become a landmark frequently snapped by tourists against the backdrop of the sound and the mountains, she said, but was in poor condition.

"It was emotional to watch it go down. But it was just a matter of time, if these ships were left derelict, that something would happen," she said.

Dan Bates of Fisheries and Oceans Canada said a Coast Guard hovercraft had arrived on the scene and a double boom had been placed around the dock. A flyover of the area revealed "traces" of diesel had escaped into Howe Sound, he said. There was around 1,000 litres of degraded oil in its tank when it sank, far less than the 208,000 litres it was capable of carrying.

The RCMP and hazardous-material crews were also on the scene, he added. Britannia Beach, which

boasted the largest copper mine in the British Empire in the early 20th century, is a national historic site and home to the B.C. Museum of Mining. But the mine had long been known as one of the biggest water polluters in North America because of acid water leaching into Howe Sound.

A water-treatment plant opened 18 months ago to catch drainage from the derelict mine, treating 12 million litres of water and removing 450 kilograms of copper each day, said Kirsten Clausen, the museum's executive director.

She said five marine-monitoring stations around Britannia Beach had indicated a remarkable recovery from heavy-metal pollution prior to yesterday's accident, and expressed disappointment at the spill.

"An awful lot of people worked very hard on the successful remediation plan and I'm sure they're wanting to get as much information on this as they can," Ms. Clausen said.

Some confusion remained over ownership of the vessels, including the tugboat. According to a Ministry of Environment spokeswoman, the tug's owners would be liable for any costs incurred by the cleanup.

Mr. Bates said the ships were owned by the Heritage Maritime Society of Vancouver. But Paul Thomas of the society disagreed, saying that the ships were moored on Crown land and had reverted to provincial ownership.

"I don't believe we are [the owners], I'm the first point of contact, but other than that I



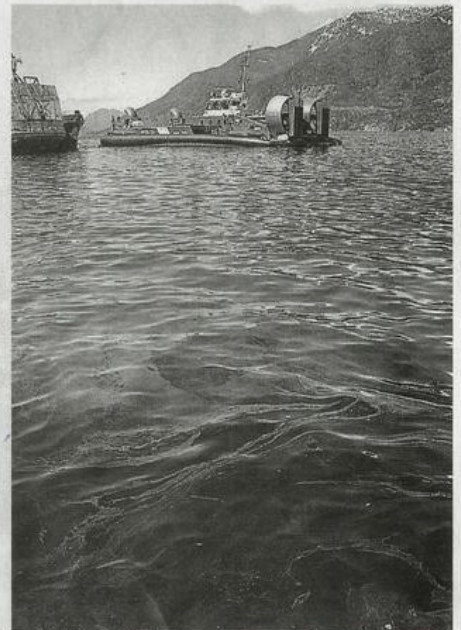
La Lumiere, a wooden-hulled, Second-World-War-era tugboat, is shown docked at Britannia Beach in December, 2007. BRIAN THOMPSON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

called the Coast Guard [to report the accident] and that was the extent of it," he said.

Mr. Thomas said the society had originally intended to fix the vessels and open a maritime museum, but funds had not been raised to do so.

"There is still some work going on [to create a museum based around the ships] but this [accident] kind of puts a different light on things," he said. "We're very disappointed."

John Buchanan of the



An oil slick is visible along the shoreline yesterday after La Lumiere sank. The Coast Guard responded with a hovercraft to help contain spilled oil and diesel fuel. BRIAN THOMPSON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Squamish Environmental Conservation Society said he had visited the site of the spill earlier this week to photograph surf scoters, large sea ducks that had avoided Howe Sound for years because of the pollution. He expressed frustration

at the accident just as the area was reviving.

"There is some irony about the fact that a species that hasn't been seen here in decades gets a diesel spill as a welcome wagon," he said.

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