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Donor gives TWU rare opportunity to study environment and preserve endangered species on Salt Spring Island

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Karen Steensma, Director of TWU's Environmental Studies Program

Langley, British Columbia—It ranks as one of the most unique items ever granted to Trinity Western University. A donor, who wishes to remain anonymous, has leased 72.6 acres on Salt Spring Island for a minimal amount to Trinity Western for five years, with a long-term goal to gift the property to the University. That 72.6 acres will allow students to gain field experience, as they learn from Salt Spring's land and surroundings and work with residents on the Gulf Island to preserve the land's rare and diverse ecological community.

"The donor was intrigued by the University's activities and vision for the future and wanted to do something, as a family, for the University," says Doris Olafsen, executive director of development at TWU. "We're excited to work with the people on Salt Spring Island to preserve the sanctity of their land."

Located 1.5 kilometres from the village of Fulford Harbour, the property consists of coniferous forest, streams, slopes and open areas with diverse habitat. Along with a Douglas fir tree estimated to be over 500 years old, the most significant find on the property is a community of Garry oak trees, a species native to the Pacific Northwest that is currently endangered.

"One of these trees on a piece of property is a significant find," says Karen Steensma, director of TWU's environmental studies program. "But there are hundreds of Garry oak on this property. Associated with this is a whole community of rare species of wild flowers, small plants, animals and butterflies."

Steensma recently visited the property, along with Jack Van Dyke, PhD, dean of the faculty of natural and applied sciences, and two additional faculty members. The trip not only allowed the four to discover several new groves of the endangered Garry oak, but also to meet nearby neighbors and members of the Salt Spring Island Conservancy. "People from the conservancy as well as two of our neighbors walked through much of the property with us," says Van Dyke. "All of the people we met were very interested and supportive of our aims for the conservation of the property."

It is the beginning of partnership that Steensma and Van Dyke are excited to build with the Salt Spring community. "We want the people who live there to view our work on the island as being a real asset to their community," says Steensma.

Steensma is already familiar with conservation work in the Pacific Northwest. For the past 13 years, she has taken students to study marine and plant ecology on Seattle Pacific University's site on Blakely Island in the San Juan Islands, Washington.

Offering the same climate and study conditions as its U.S. counterpart in the San Juan Islands, Salt Spring Island will now replace the Blakely Island site. The new location will alleviate scheduling strains put on Seattle Pacific University and provide students with easier access through ferry service. With a fresh water lake bordering the Salt Spring Island property and the ocean nearby, students will be able to carry out fresh water studies, salt water studies and forest botany, all at the same location.

"It's an absolutely astounding biological site," says Steensma. "I'm still overwhelmed with what we've been given."

Trinity Western University, located in Langley, B.C., is a privately funded Christian liberal arts university enrolling 2,850 students this year. With a broad-based, liberal arts and sciences curriculum, the University offers undergraduate degrees in 34 major areas ranging from business, education and computer science to biology and nursing, and 12 graduate degrees including counselling psychology, theology and administrative leadership.

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