

Submission to the Canadian Coast Guard

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The Georgia Strait Alliance is a coalition of about 50 organizations (with a combined membership of 150,000) and close to 1000 individual members from communities all around the Strait of Georgia, working to protect, preserve and restore the marine environment and ecological well-being of Georgia Strait and its adjoining waters. Our member organizations include labour, environmental, aboriginal, community and recreational groups and small businesses. Our members represent a wide diversity of interests, including many people who spend a great deal of time on the water: commercial and recreational fishermen and guides, kayakers, recreational boaters and others.

Entrance Island lighthouse. Photo by Alan Wilson. Georgia Strait Alliance went on record in 1992 to oppose the attempt by the previous government to de-staff 14 west coast lighthouses. We remain opposed to any further destaffing of lighthouses.

Lightkeepers provide a number of vital services to mariners and aviators that cannot be effectively duplicated by automated devices. Lightkeepers provide accurate and timely weather updates, help mariners with mechanical troubles, provide support to people forced to seek shelter from foul weather, and assist in many search and rescue operations. Many of our commercial fishing members contact lightkeepers for on-site weather information to help guide them in making important decisions when they are travelling to and from the fishing grounds. According to the head of the BC lightkeepers' union, records from 30 of BC's lightstations show that between 1986 and 1991 keepers answered public requests for information or assistance (including emergency response) a total of 32,042 times.

Automated equipment cannot provide the level of certainty that staff can offer. While the Coast Guard commissioner has claimed publicly that there has not been a single instance of documented failure over past 10 years and the Regional Manager has claimed a 99.9% reliability record, statistics from the lightkeepers' union show that automated signals have a failure rate from 20 percent to 100 percent of the time. This difference in numbers, of course, results because the only "official" failure, as far as Coast Guard is concerned, is one that results in the issuance of a notice to shipping - and lightkeepers have done such a good job of watching for problems and repairing equipment before any notice to shipping is required, that they have, in a sense, been their own worst enemy.

Besides safety, lightkeepers play an important role in protection of the marine environment. For example, they work with federal agencies to monitor illegal pumping of bilges and oil spills and file the necessary reports and complaints. Carmanah lighthouse was the first reporting station for oil from the Nestucca spill in December, 1989; this early warning probably gave agencies a three-day start on the cleanup process. With a continual increase in marine traffic, environmental monitoring is more important than ever, and therefore it makes no sense to remove the few people who are well placed to carry out this vital work.

Lightkeepers also play a vital role in search and rescue. In the past two weeks alone, keepers rescued two boaters in Georgia Strait. On January 4, 1995, a commercial fisherman was en route from Nanaimo to Deep Bay when his boat suddenly caught fire and he had to abandon ship into a small inflatable, with no survival suit or other gear. He was rescued within 30 minutes by the lightkeepers from Chrome Island. Only eight days earlier, an experienced kayaker was en route from Gabriola Island to Nanaimo and hit a log; he was unable to get back into his craft was rescued by the Entrance Island lightkeeper after spending nearly 30 minutes in the water. Fortunately he was wearing a wetsuit and so developed only mild hypothermia, but had he been in the water much longer, it is questionable whether he would have survived.

These incidents are not atypical, and even without considering commercial traffic, the increasing number of recreational boaters on the west coast makes lightkeepers and other Coast Guard services more vital than ever. According to a 1992 report compiled by Price Waterhouse for the BC Marine Trades Association, British Columbians own more than 400,000 boats and the recreational marine industry generates 22,000-person-years of employment annually. Marine tourism alone was worth \$247 million and accounted for nearly 6,000 person-years of employment in 1989, the last year for which these statistics are available. A 1990 National Survey of Recreational Fishing in Canada showed that \$1 billion is spent every year in the BC sports fishing industry alone. Pleasure boat traffic continues to increase steadily; in 1993, 253,000 US citizens entered BC waters by boat, an increase of 26% over a four-year period. These figures almost certainly err on the low side, as they are a few years out of date and do not include the fastest-growing segment of the recreational boating population, ie. kayakers.

Along with the increase in marine traffic there has been a corresponding increase in marine accidents: from 66 vessels in 1989, to 85 vessels and 49 deaths in 1992. Again, this doesn't take into consideration the increasing number of kayakers using these waters - who are also those least likely to have adequate navigational or safety equipment such as VHF radios, GPS, radar, EPIRBs, flares and survival suits - and most likely to need quick rescue as they do not carry liferafts or dinghies. With many new and inexperienced kayakers on the water, the watchful eye of lightkeepers has become more important than ever.

Yet despite the increase in marine traffic and marine accidents, instead of increased spending on search and rescue and emergency services, the Coast Guard's budget has experienced a 12% cut over the past five years, with plans for continued cuts of 3% annually through 1998.

We would again remind you, as we did in 1992, that the LeBlond Commission (1987) heard 41 speakers and received 189 submissions - all of which opposed automation of west coast lighthouses. The ad hoc Parliamentary committee which toured BC communities in December, 1994 found the same results. Coastal residents clearly want lighthouse keepers to remain in place and see automation bringing increased risk to commercial and sports fishers, recreational boaters, commercial mariners, aviators and others who frequent these waters.

Georgia Strait Alliance opposes reduction in staff or services at any of the west coast lighthouses. Instead, lightkeepers' job descriptions should be expanded in order to officially recognize and support the important role they play in marine safety, environmental monitoring, communications and search and rescue operations, and they should be adequately equipped and trained to carry out these important roles.