



Island County Marine Resources Committee

2021 Annual Report



About the MRC

The Island County Marine Resources Committee (MRC), established in 1999, is an advisory body of volunteers appointed by Island County Commissioners. The members are from the local community, and represent a wide variety of backgrounds, interests, and expertise, with the unified goal of protecting and restoring the local marine environment.

The MRC's purpose is to **investigate, research, and identify local marine resources**, and marine resource and habitat issues; **recommend remedial actions** to Island County agencies and authorities; **carry out such recommendations** where so approved; **and build local awareness** of the issues and broad-based community support for the remedies. The MRC conducts monitoring, restoration, and outreach projects, in addition to its advisory role to the County Commissioners.

The Island County MRC is one of seven Marine Resources Committees supported by the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative (NWSI), with the goal to restore and protect our marine waters. In addition to collaborating with the Northwest Straits Commission, Foundation, and other MRCs, Island County MRC also works with many local and regional partners, including: Sound Water Stewards, Whidbey Island Conservation District, Snohomish Conservation District, Whidbey Camano Land Trust, Washington State University Extension – Island County, Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, Washington State Parks, and others. These partnerships are key to the collaborative effort of protecting and restoring the marine species and habitats that surround our island home.

This report was prepared in October 2021 by Ann Prusha, Island County staff, and Anna Toledo, Island County MRC Coordinator, and represents work conducted from October 2020 through September 2021.

Cover page photos, clockwise from top left: MRC member Gwendolyn Hannam with the watering truck at the Cornet Bay restoration site, photo by Ann Prusha. A volunteer processes forage fish samples, photo by Ann Prusha. Young starfish on eelgrass, photo by Ken Collins. Lowell Point bull kelp survey, photo by Ellyn Thoreen.

Back cover photo: Sunset at Sunlight Shores, photo by Dawn Spilsbury Pucci.



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Membership

The MRC is comprised of up to thirteen voting members, appointed by the Board of Island County Commissioners, as well as non-voting ex-officio members and technical advisors. The MRC relies on the hard work and dedication of its members and other volunteers to conduct monitoring, restoration, and outreach. **In the 2020-2021 year, the MRC recorded 1,316 volunteer hours!** Thank you to our members and volunteers for your dedication to protecting and restoring the marine resources of Island County!



Member	MRC Projects, Sub-Committees, and Group Representation
Current Members: September 2021	
Kelly Zupich, Chair	Executive Committee, Outreach
Hannah Liss, Vice-Chair	Executive Committee, Bull kelp, Outreach
Barbara Bennett	Outreach, Island Local Integrating Organization (ILIO), Bull kelp
Scott Chase	Sound Water Stewards, Outreach, Port Susan Marine Stewardship Area (MSA)
Ken Collins	Bull kelp, Forage Fish
Ed Halloran	Port of South Whidbey, Outreach
Gwendolyn Hannam	Restoration, Outreach, ILIO, Salmon Recovery, Whidbey Island Conservation District
Andi Kopit	Outreach, Schools
Jill Lipoti	Executive Committee, Microplastics, Outreach
Alexandra Plumb	Island County Public Works
Elsa Schwartz	Port Susan MSA, Northwest Straits Commission Representative
Kestutis Tautvydas	Eelgrass, Seining
Ex-Officio Members (non-voting)	
Jennifer Johnson	Island County Department of Natural Resources
Tim Lawrence/Jerilyn Ritzman	WSU Extension – Island County
Janet St. Clair	Board of Island County Commissioners
Technical Advisors (non-voting)	
Michael Bianchi	Outreach, Navy
Florian Graner	Outreach
Matt Kukuk	Monitoring
Tom Leschine	Science
Linda Rhodes	Science, Bull kelp, Smith & Minor Islands Aquatic Reserve
Mark Stamey	Restoration
Todd Zackey	Tribal: Tulalip Tribes

Operations

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, MRC meetings continued to be held virtually throughout the year.

The MRC meets on the first Tuesday of every month. Meetings are open to the public, and often feature an educational speaker as well as discussion on business topics and project updates.

The MRC was pleased to welcome three new members. Ken Collins, Jill Lipoti, and Alexandra Plumb all joined the team in 2021.

MRC Members Randy Berthold, Michael Bianchi, and Matt Kukuk resigned in 2021 to pursue other adventures, and the MRC is thankful for their dedication! Michael and Matt have agreed to stay on as Technical Advisors.

With two part-time staff members, staff support to the MRC is equivalent to approximately 0.75 FTE.

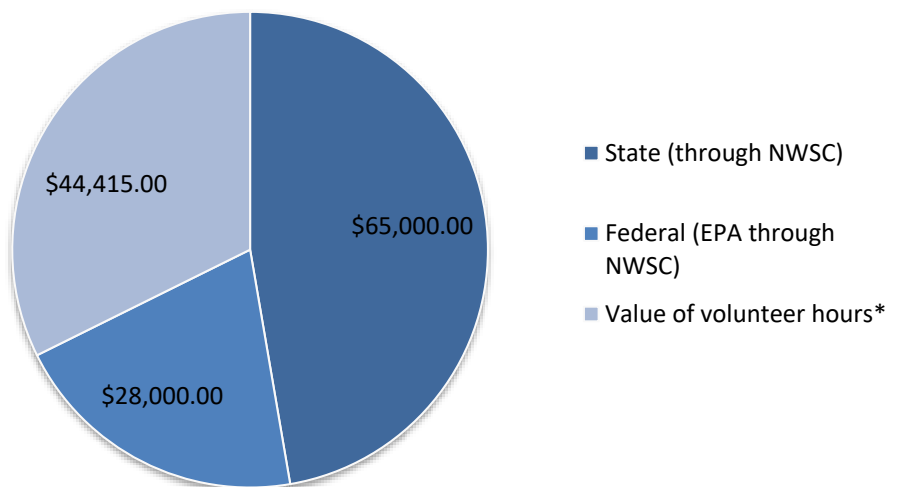
The MRC brings important environmental and economic value to Island County, and engages the local community to preserve and protect our beautiful Island home.

Through grants and volunteer hours, the MRC has brought a total value of **\$137,415.00** to Island County in 2020-2021.

Accomplishments

- Scheduled, organized, and held 12 MRC meetings.
- Developed the 2021-2022 work plan.
- Presented proposed MRC projects to the Board of Island County Commissioners.
- Attended monthly Northwest Straits Commission meetings and seasonal MRC staff meetings.
- Participated in Island Local Integrating Organization Technical Committee meetings and Salmon Recovery Technical and Citizen Committee meetings.
- Regularly updated the website with meeting agendas and minutes, project updates, and announcements.

Funding Sources



**The value of volunteer hours is calculated using the most current [Value of Volunteer Time by State graph](#) from Independent Sector.*

Advisory

The MRC is uniquely positioned as an advisory body to the Island County Commissioners, comprised of members of the community who understand and represent local issues and perspectives. The MRC also connects with marine issues of regional importance through representation on the Northwest Straits Commission, Island Local Integrating Organization, and Salmon Recovery Technical and Citizen Committee.

The MRC participated in a tour of a proposed restoration site for an incoming Commissioner. The tour took place at Hoypus Point, in Deception Pass State Park, and highlighted the work and process of nearshore restoration, including: project identification, community and stakeholder engagement, feasibility, design and permitting, implementation, and stewardship.

Accomplishments

- Presented to Island County Commissioners about MRC projects.
- Participated in nearshore restoration tour of Hoypus Point for incoming Island County Commissioner.
- Island County Commissioner participated in Puget Sound Days on the Hill and highlighted the importance of support for community science.



Shoreline armoring at Hoypus Point. Photos from Island County MRC.

Monitoring: Forage Fish

Forage fish are small schooling fish that are a key component in the marine food web, as a vital food source for salmon, seabirds, and marine mammals. Surf smelt and Pacific sand lance, two species of forage fish, lay their eggs on sandy-gravelly beaches around Puget Sound.

The MRC conducts forage fish spawn surveys at selected beaches in conjunction with completed, planned, and proposed shoreline restoration work. The MRC also partners with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to assist in conducting surveys at index sites – locations with public access and a known history of spawning presence. Volunteers collect and condense beach sediment samples, which are then transported to WDFW for analysis.

In early November, the MRC and WDFW hosted a volunteer training event, and welcomed several new volunteers. After a pause from November 2020-March 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions, volunteers were eager to return to surveying in the spring.



Forage fish spawn surveys. Photos by Ann Prusha.

Accomplishments

- Conducted surveys at three restoration sites: Hoypus Point (pre-restoration), Cornet Bay (post-restoration), and Hidden Beach (pre-restoration). Another site, Seahorse Siesta, had ongoing construction and could not be surveyed.
- Initiated surveys at one new restoration site: Sunlight Shores (post-restoration).
- Conducted surveys at two index sites: Glendale and Maple Grove.
- Trained several new volunteers.
- Trained volunteers to use WDFW's iForms app to submit data electronically.
- Volunteers reported 236 hours of service.

Monitoring: Bull Kelp

Bull kelp forests serve as an important habitat and feeding source to a wide variety of species in the marine environment, providing critical support throughout the marine food web.

Prompted by documented declines of bull kelp in South Puget Sound, the MRC initiated boat-based bull kelp surveys in 2015 in coordination with the Northwest Straits Initiative and other MRCs. Volunteers monitor the size of bull kelp beds using GPS units while paddling a kayak around the perimeter of the bed.

Kelp bed perimeters were tracked during the summer months at five sites around Island County: Hoypus Point, Polnell Point, Ebey's Landing, Possession Point, and Lowell Point.

Volunteers also collected temperature data using temperature loggers at varying depths and collected images of plants and animals observed in the kelp beds.



Possible squid egg sac at Possession Point. Photo by Ron Beier.



Volunteers conduct bull kelp surveys at Possession Point. Photo by Ron Beier.

Accomplishments

- Conducted kayak surveys at five beds around Island County during the summer growing season.
- Added a new site (Hoypus Point) to improve geographic coverage.
- Transitioned to a new program lead and trained new volunteers. 18 volunteers reported approximately 160 hours for this project.
- Deployed temperature loggers to measure temperatures across multiple depths.
- Collected images of plants and animals within kelp beds.

Restoration: Hoypus Point

The MRC has continued its partnership with the Northwest Straits Foundation (NWSF) and Washington State Parks (WSP) to conduct a restoration project at Hoypus Point in Deception Pass State Park.

This site contains remnants of an obsolete ferry terminal that served the location in the early 1900s. It is approximately one mile from the Cornet Bay restoration site where the MRC has been involved in restoration and monitoring efforts.

A feasibility study and conceptual design completed in 2020 recommended the removal of approximately 350 feet of shoreline armor, including large rock and concrete debris. The design also included removal of fill, regrading the shoreline to a natural slope, placement of appropriate beach substrate, and installation of native vegetation.

The project will restore a bluff-backed beach and the marine riparian connection. Restoring these ecosystem elements and nearshore processes is expected to improve habitat for salmon as well as spawning habitat for forage fish.

The MRC has worked with the NWSF (project sponsor) and WSP to move the project forward into final design and permitting. The NWSF will lead the project through construction as the MRC continues to partner in the restoration and monitoring process.



Shoreline armoring at Hoypus Point. Photo from Island County MRC.

Accomplishments

- Participated in design review and permitting planning meetings.
- Participated in MART permitting process, to pilot a more efficient process for permitting restoration projects.
- Provided site tour for Island County Commissioner.

Restoration: Cornet Bay Stewardship

The MRC has been partnering with the Northwest Straits Foundation, Washington State Parks, Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group (SFEG), and additional partners to restore shoreline habitat at Cornet Bay in Deception Pass State Park.

The first phase of restoration occurred in October 2012, and included removing a creosote-treated bulkhead, re-grading the beach to a natural slope, and planting native vegetation.

The next phase of restoration occurred in November 2015 and included removing fill along the shoreline, re-grading the slope, expanding the salt marsh area, and planting native vegetation.

The native vegetation has been maintained through regular weeding, watering, and installation of additional plantings as needed.

Thanks to dedicated volunteers, this site continues to become more established and provides much-needed habitat for nearshore life.

Accomplishments

- Volunteers from SFEG and the MRC installed 200 plants and spread 19 yards of mulch at a volunteer event in the spring.
- A total of 622 plants were installed in 2021.
- MRC staff and member watered and weeded bi-weekly throughout the summer months of 2021 in the newest phase of restoration.



Vegetation maintenance at Cornet Bay. Left photo by Gwendolyn Hannam, right photo by Ann Prusha.

Education and Outreach:

Site Visits with Congressman Larsen

The MRC hosted a visit with Congressman Rick Larsen to two nearshore restoration sites, in partnership with the Northwest Straits Foundation and Shore Friendly program.

The first restoration site was Seahorse Siesta, located in southeast Whidbey Island. MRC Chair, Kelly Zupich, shared about the work of the MRC. Community members and partners shared about the project identification, restoration goals, and community involvement. The project, which went into construction shortly after the site visit, involved the removal of a grounded barge and bulkhead from the toe of a feeder bluff.

The second restoration site was Sunlight Shores, located in southwest Whidbey Island. Anna Toledo, MRC Coordinator, shared about the MRC's role in outreach and monitoring at restoration sites, as well as the connection with the Shore Friendly program. Partners shared about the Northwest Straits Commission, the impact of federal support, the value of leveraging partnerships, and the habitat and recreational benefits of removing shoreline armor.

Accomplishment

- Congressman Larsen visited two nearshore restoration project sites at Seahorse Siesta and Sunlight Shores on Whidbey Island.



Left: Kelly Zupich shares about the accomplishments of the MRC with Congressman Larsen at the Seahorse Siesta restoration site. Photo by Anna Toledo.



Right: Congressman Larsen visits the Sunlight Shores restoration site. Photo by Lance Porter.

Education and Outreach:

Eelgrass Storymap

The Eelgrass Storymap delves into eelgrass and its role in our ecosystem, eelgrass research that was conducted by a community science team in Island County, the MRC, and ways that community members can help protect this critical habitat. It features stunning photography and relatable science in an immersive platform. It was published on May 14th, 2021, and can be accessed through the [MRC's Eelgrass Survey webpage](#).

After interacting with the Storymap, viewers were encouraged to fill out a learning assessment. The results showed that the Storymap was an effective educational tool, and increased respondents' understanding of eelgrass and its role in the ecosystem.

Accomplishments

- The Eelgrass Storymap was published and distributed.
- A Learning Assessment accompanied the Storymap to help measure reader engagement.



Photo 1: Cover image for Storymap. Photo by Jan Kocian.

Photo 2: Elephant seal in eelgrass. Photo by Florian Graner.

Photo 3: Eelgrass. Photo by Mary Jo Adams.

Education and Outreach: Needs Assessment

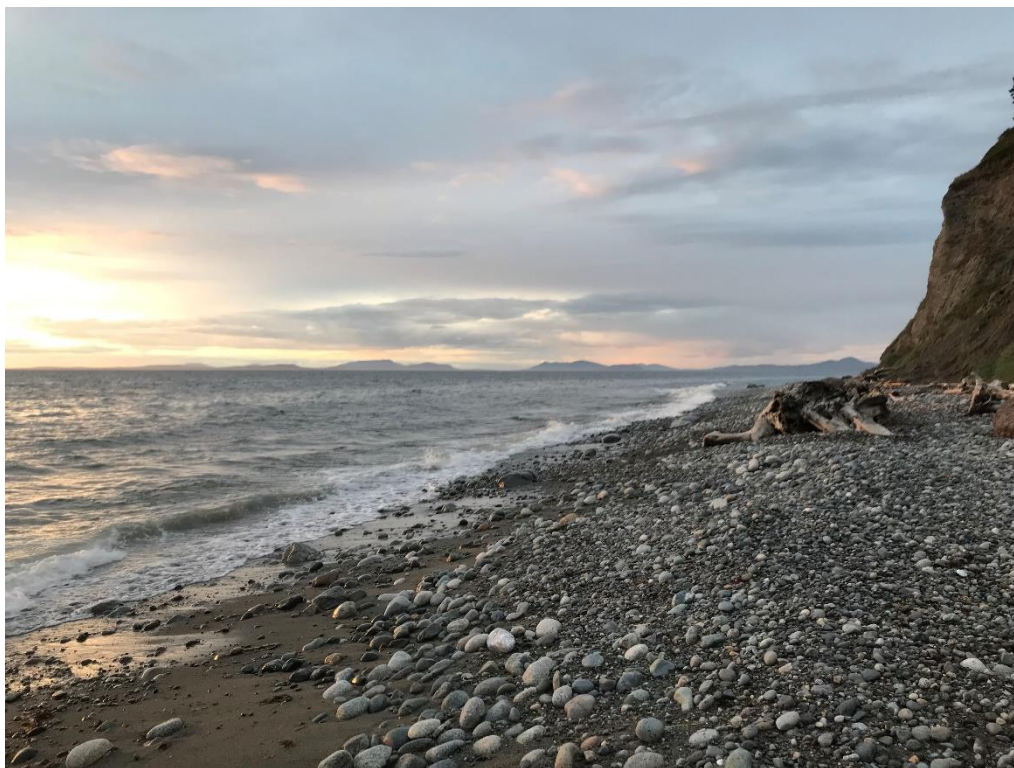
The MRC conducted a needs assessment in winter 2021 to aid strategic planning for the coming 3-5 years. The effort was led by MRC member Barbara Bennett.

The goal was to identify pressing and emerging marine resource issues in Island County and to learn what MRC roles and projects are most valued. The MRC conducted interviews with community partners and County leadership to understand the needs of the community in relation to marine resources, and opportunities for the MRC to engage with local priorities and partnerships. The information from this was condensed into a short overview.

The Needs Assessment Overview was presented to the Board of Island County Commissioners in September, and then distributed to stakeholders.

Accomplishments

- Published the Needs Assessment Overview and supporting documentation on the MRC website.
- Presented to County Commissioners.
- Distributed to partners and interviewees.
- Dedicated time in most MRC meetings to discuss incorporating results into strategic planning efforts.



West Beach. Photo by Ann Prusha.

Education and Outreach:

Meetings, Events, and Presentations

The MRC engaged in several outreach efforts throughout the year. Outreach is an integral part of each MRC project. By helping the community understand what the MRC does and why, the MRC strives to increase public interest in learning about and caring for the local marine environment.

As like many organizations this year, the MRC adapted creatively to meet COVID-19 guidelines. The MRC made adjustments to its outreach efforts, such as making more resources available virtually and social distancing during events.



2021 crabber opening day. Photos by Scott Chase.

Accomplishments

- Provided MyCoast app training and Shore Friendly workshops with partners.
- Along with partners, honored volunteer Karis Barnes as the 2021 Jan Holmes Island County Coastal Volunteer of the Year.
- Made presentations to Leadership Whidbey and Sound Waters Stewards classes of 2021.
- Distributed crab gauges, rot cord, and educational handouts to recreational crabbers.
- Contributed to the monthly Island County Natural Resources newsletter.
- Participated in Orca Recovery Day, Sound Waters University, and Island County Natural Resources Symposium.
- Contributed to Whidbey Weekly's "Make a Difference" column by submitting three different articles.



2021 Island County Coastal Volunteer of the Year, Karis Barnes. Photo from Island County MRC.



www.islandcountymrc.org