



2023 IMPACT REPORT

LOCAL PEOPLE. LOCAL SOLUTIONS.



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2023 Highlights

8,606

Marine Resources
Committee (MRC)
volunteer hours

47

local and regional
projects and programs
led by MRCs and the
Commission

25

years of
collaborative marine
conservation work

Welcome

Dear friends and partners of the Northwest Straits Community,

On behalf of the Northwest Straits Commission, I am pleased to present our 2023 Impact Report. This report acknowledges the tremendous impact Marine Resources Committees (MRCs), partners, Commission and MRC staff, and volunteers deliver on an annual basis. In fact, we are **celebrating 25 years of impact** with the release of this report! You will find a timeline of achievements, regional project accomplishments, and numerous impacts made by MRCs across four areas including:

Conservation & Restoration

Protecting and restoring marine and nearshore habitat and species. Pages 9-13

Education & Outreach

Engaging the community to encourage local stewardship and sustainable resource use. Pages 14-20

Monitoring & Research

Collecting environmental data to inform local government and resource managers. Pages 21-26

Advisory

Serving as an advisory group to local government on marine resource issues. Pages 27-32

As we celebrate 25 years of protecting and restoring the marine waters, habitats, and species of the Northwest Straits region, **we would like to acknowledge all who have contributed.** Your dedication and passion have shaped the Northwest Straits Initiative into an effective marine conservation collaborative for our region.

While there's much work ahead of us, the following pages reflect the progress of **7 MRCs, 10 Northwest Straits Commission staff, and 13 Commission members, numerous volunteers, and partners.**

In this report we share the accomplishments and areas of opportunity which motivate us to press onward. Let's keep up the momentum, celebrating the achievements and hard work of everyone who keeps the Initiative's momentum alive.

See you on the shorelines!



Lucas Hart, Director Northwest Straits Commission



About this report

In the following pages, we present a summary of the Northwest Straits Initiative's work in 2023, encompassing both local and regional collaborative projects aimed at supporting the health of the Salish Sea ecosystem. **The projects highlighted in these pages are those that specifically received funding, training, or support through the Northwest Straits Commission.** Additional project materials and reports can be found on our website's [Resource Library](#).

The work of the Northwest Straits Commission, the MRCs, and the Northwest Straits Foundation all focus on the same goal--to restore and protect our marine waters. Each component of the Initiative has unique skills and organizational characteristics that allow for strong collective action. The sum of our work is greater than its individual parts.

It's important to note that the MRCs (Clallam, Jefferson, Island, Skagit, San Juan, Snohomish, Whatcom) and the Northwest Straits Foundation are engaged in a variety of projects funded by sources other than those included in this report. For more comprehensive details, we invite you to visit the respective MRC and Foundation websites. Additionally, each of the seven MRCs and the Northwest Straits Foundation produces its own annual report.

25 years. One Initiative.

Over the past 25 years we've had remarkable milestones and transformative events that have shaped the course of our history. This timeline highlights major events and accomplishments that were achievable only with the dedication of committed volunteers and partners.



Congress creates a community-led conservation model by authorizing the Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative championed by Senator Patty Murray and Representative Jack Metcalf.

1998

The Northwest Straits Commission does a pilot project creating the first guidelines for derelict gear removal. WA Department of Fish and Wildlife adopts the protocols as a standard approach for approving third party entities to perform gear removal.

San Juan MRC partners on piloting the first ever citizen science-based forage fish spawn monitoring protocol in partnership with WA Department of Fish and Wildlife.

2001

An expert panel led by Bill Ruckelshaus reviews Northwest Straits Initiative model, unanimously advising ongoing federal authorization and increased support. The report highlights the success of the Initiative's collaborative citizen-based approach.

Upon recommendation from the MRC, **San Juan County** designates the entire county as a Marine Stewardship Area.

Jefferson MRC creates their first voluntary no-anchor zone.

2004



The US Environmental Protection Agency and Puget Sound Partnership create ongoing funding for the Northwest Straits Initiative, building on a long-standing partnership to restore Puget Sound.

2011



Island MRC member, Leal Dickson observes declining kelp beds off the coast of Whidbey Island kicking off a partnership between the Northwest Straits Commission, NOAA, and MRCs to create a volunteer kelp monitoring protocol, which was implemented later in the same year.

2014



The Northwest Straits Commission partners with NOAA to begin drafting the Puget Sound Kelp Conservation and Recovery Plan.

2017



The Northwest Straits Commission kicks off European green crab monitoring, trapping, and local education partnership with WA Dept of Fish and Wildlife, WA Sea Grant, and local partners.

2020



Volunteer engagement stays strong at more than 10,000 hours annually in spite of a very difficult Covid-19 pandemic, underscoring the deep dedication of volunteers.

2021



8,606 MRC volunteer hours; 607 acres of eelgrass surveyed; 377 acres of floating kelp documented by MRCs; 280 European green crabs trapped; 13 derelict vessels removed to date; 25 years of marine conservation work.

2023

1999

A network of seven county-based Marine Resources Committees (MRCs) is finalized for the Northwest Straits. MRCs in **Clallam, Island, Jefferson, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom** counties are ready to advance local marine conservation!

Terry Williams, Tulalip Tribes tribal representative; Dave Somers the current Snohomish County Executive; and Rick Larsen receiving the paddle at the 1999 MRC conference pictured left to right.



2002

The Northwest Straits Foundation is established as a 501c3 to support marine conservation actions throughout the region.



2009

The WA Department of Fish and Wildlife launches their mussel watch program using Snohomish MRC's citizen science protocol. The WA Department of Fish and Wildlife mussel watch program continues today, with several MRCs contributing volunteer time.



2012

Island and Snohomish MRCs collaborate with partners to publish the Port Susan Marine Stewardship Area Conservation Action Plan, the plan is adopted by both counties, the Tulalip Tribes, and Stillaguamish Tribe.



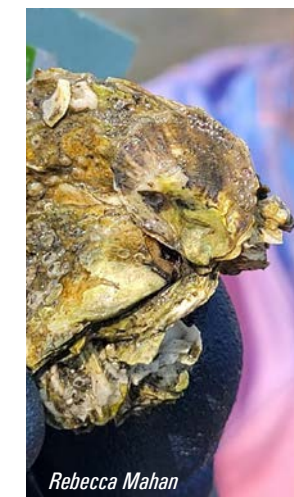
2015/16

The Northwest Straits Commission and MRCs partner with WA Dept of Fish and Wildlife to re-ignite forage fish spawn monitoring.



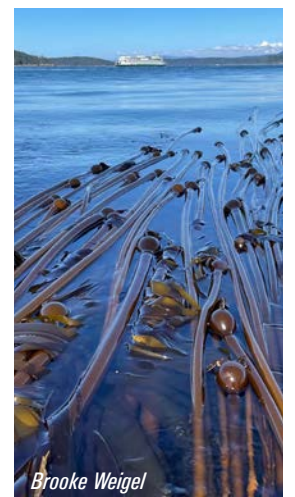
2018/19

Clallam, Jefferson, Skagit, and Whatcom MRCs Olympia oyster restoration efforts contribute 7+ acres toward meeting the Puget Sound Restoration Fund's 10-year Olympia oyster restoration goal.



2020

The Northwest Straits Commission releases the final draft Puget Sound Kelp Conservation and Recovery Plan with input from over 40 partners. The plan provides a framework to conserve this important habitat.



2022

Senator Patty Murray re-invigorates a Northwest Straits Initiative reauthorization effort and secures Congressional Directed spending for Northwest Straits conservation work.

The Northwest Straits Commission launches a Derelict Vessel work group to prioritize vessel removals with tribal partners, MRCs, and Department of Natural Resources to reduce negative impacts to habitat, Treaty Rights, and navigation.



Where we work

The Northwest Straits region includes Clallam, Island, Jefferson, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom counties and their adjoining inland marine waters.



Tribal acknowledgment

We acknowledge the lands we're on today are the ancestral and current homelands of Indigenous Nations who have stewarded them since time immemorial. We respect their sovereignty, support their Treaty Rights, their right to self-determination, and we honor their sacred spiritual connection with the land and water. These Indigenous Nations include the **Jamestown S'Klallam, Lower Elwha Klallam, Lummi, Makah, Nooksack, Port Gamble S'Klallam, Samish, Stillaguamish, Swinomish, and Tulalip Tribes.**

Why we use a tribal acknowledgment

Our restoration and stewardship projects are also situated on ancestral and current homelands of these tribes. The current land acknowledgement was approved in 2021 to recognize these partnerships and the commitments the Northwest Straits Commission has to our tribal partners. It also reminds us of our shared interests in ecological restoration, ecosystem health, and local community action.

The Murray Metcalf Report, the founding document of the Northwest Straits Initiative stipulated that the work of the Northwest Straits Initiative not interfere with tribal Treaty Rights, that work be done with tribal authorities, that scientific recommendations be made in coordination with tribal entities, and that the Marine Resources Committees and the Northwest Straits Commission designate tribal seats. The Northwest Straits Commission pursues these commitments throughout its operations. Our long-standing relationships and partnerships with tribal communities and nations in the Puget Sound region align with our goal of representing a broad range of interests and everyone who inhabits the Northwest Straits.



VISION

We envision a thriving, resilient, and healthy **Salish Sea**, where individuals are engaged in the health of their local ecosystems.

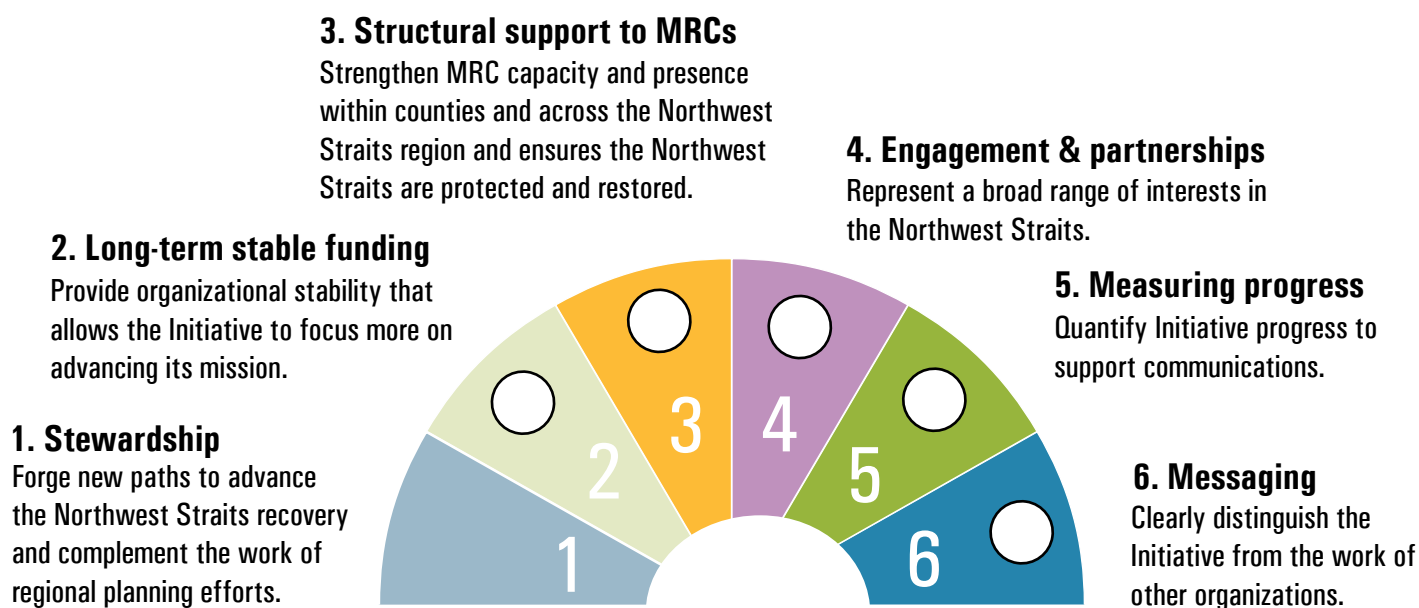
MISSION

To protect and restore the marine waters, habitats, and species of **the Northwest Straits region** to achieve ecosystem health and sustainable resource use.

Harnessing collaborative expertise

The Northwest Straits Initiative remains focused on advancing our 2019-24 Strategic Plan, harnessing the collaborative expertise of the MRCs, the Northwest Straits Initiative boards, dedicated staff, and valued partners. Our strategic plan embodies the culmination of diverse insights, ensuring a comprehensive approach to our objectives. Comprising six dynamic themes, each element is bolstered by a set of meticulously crafted goals and objectives, serving as our compass in navigating towards impactful outcomes. Designed with inclusivity in mind, our objectives maintain a flexible framework, accommodating the grassroots structure that underpins the essence of the Northwest Straits Initiative.

2019-2025 Northwest Straits Initiative strategic goals



Focusing on Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

The Northwest Straits Commission deepened our commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in 2023 by adopting a vision and goals statement as well as implementing DEI actions to grow our understanding of diverse communities and to support accessibility. While we have made significant strides as an organization in this area, there is still much work ahead of us to achieve our goals.

Vision:

We envision a broad, diverse, and inclusive group of individuals engaged in the health of their local ecosystems to ensure a thriving, resilient, and healthy Salish Sea. Our hope is that pursuing an equitable approach to marine conservation will engage, empower, and benefit all who inhabit the Northwest Straits.

Goals:

- Achieve Northwest Straits Initiative membership and engagement that is representative of the diverse communities within each county.
- Deliver projects that are meaningful to and benefit the diverse communities within each county.
- Create equitable and inclusive career opportunities in marine conservation through the Northwest Straits Initiative staff, internships, and staff support (consultants, etc.) positions.
- Create inclusive and relevant messaging for the diverse communities in the Northwest Straits region to ensure information and materials are accessible to all.

Achievements:

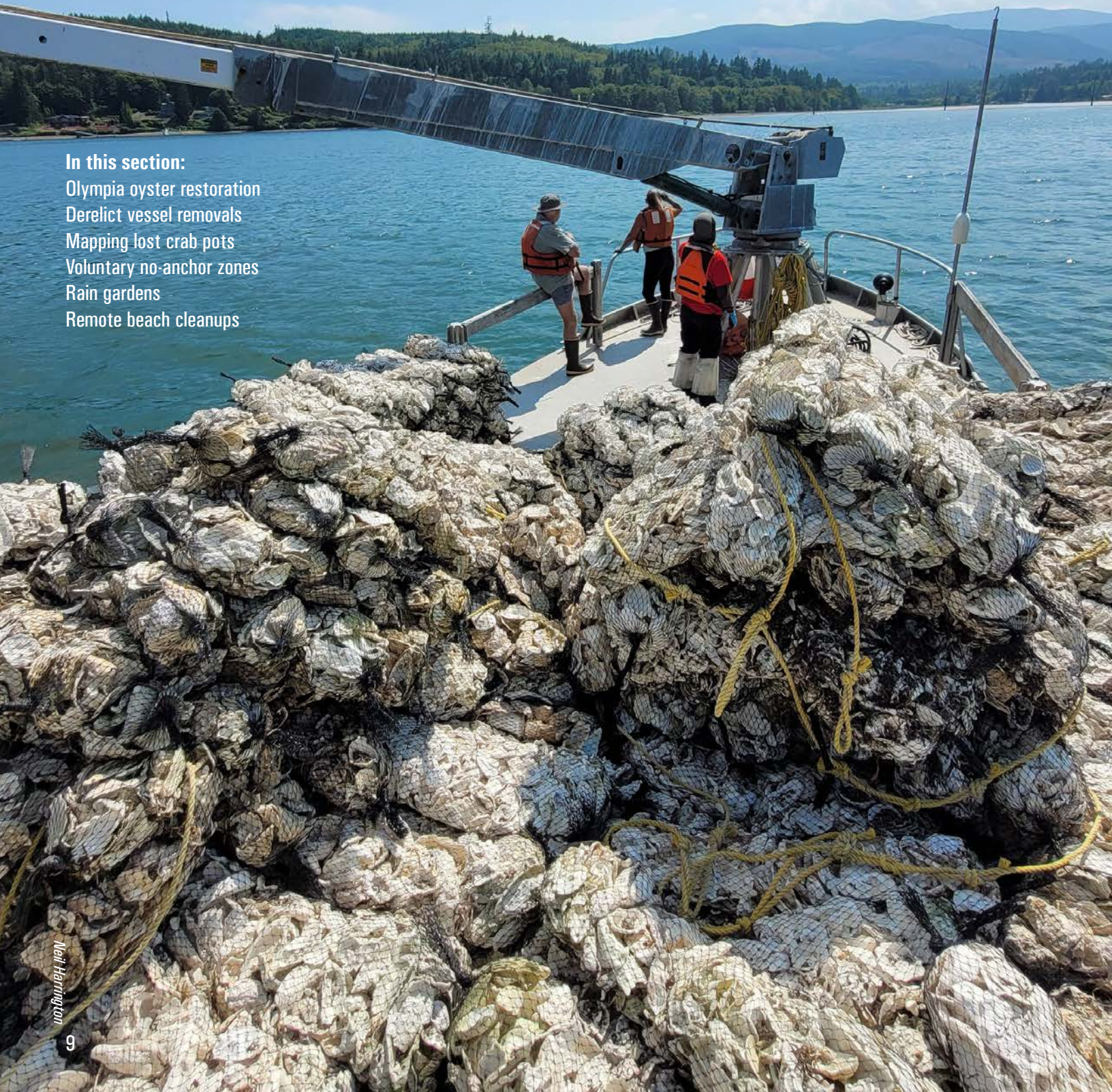
In 2023, Commission staff attended 21 DEI trainings, actively developed, and procured DEI resources for staff and MRCs, and worked toward weaving accessibility, diversity, and equity into everyday work from operations to communications.

Conservation & Restoration

Protecting and restoring marine and nearshore habitat and species

In this section:

- Olympia oyster restoration
- Derelict vessel removals
- Mapping lost crab pots
- Voluntary no-anchor zones
- Rain gardens
- Remote beach cleanups



Olympia oyster restoration

MRCs in four counties play a key role in regional efforts to restore Olympia oysters, the only oyster species native to Puget Sound. Olympia oysters are important contributors to three-dimensional habitat and water quality. Because of habitat loss and overharvesting, their populations are a fraction of what they once were prior to the arrival of settlers in the mid-1800s.

Skagit, Jefferson, Clallam, and Whatcom MRCs are focused on restoring native Olympia oyster beds that are self-sustaining and increase in size and density. This long-term effort includes outplanting and monitoring the oysters over time, as well as exploring and testing new sites for future restoration efforts. [Learn more about Olympia oyster restoration.](#)



Leah Skare

7+

acres of
Olympia oyster
restoration sites
were monitored
by MRCs

4

sites, maintained and monitored including
Jefferson County - Discovery Bay,
Clallam County - Sequim Bay,
Whatcom County - Pilot program in North
Chuckanut Bay,
Skagit County - Fidalgo Bay

3+

million
Olympia oyster
seeds have been
planted to date

In the news

[Radio Pacific, Inc April 26, 2023](#)
[Sequim Gazette February 1, 2023](#)

DID YOU KNOW? Native Olympia oyster beds are vital “foundation” communities in Puget Sound and coastal estuaries, offering valuable ecosystem benefits. They provide complex habitat for various species, including Dungeness crabs and juvenile salmon, and improve water quality by filtering large volumes of water. Restoring these beds positively impacts the Northwest Straits marine ecosystem.



Neil Harrington



Patte Mulcahey

Derelict vessel removals

Derelict and abandoned vessels can create navigational hazards and impact recreational and cultural access. Additionally, derelict vessels pose a threat to the marine environment as both a physical impediment to habitats and processes and a potential source of pollutants and marine debris.

In 2023, the **Northwest Straits Commission** formed a working group made up of **seven county-based Marine Resources Committees** and **tribal partners** from the region to guide the collaborative project. The workgroup aimed to benefit the nearshore environment, cultural and Treaty Rights, and recreational resources. Together with the **Washington Department of Natural Resources, Derelict Vessel Removal Program**, they prioritized the removal of 13 derelict vessels to carry out the removals.

Learn more about [derelict vessel removals](#).

View the [2023 Derelict Vessel Accomplishments Report](#).

\$663 K+ 13

project funds for
removals

derelict vessels
prioritized by MRCs
and tribal partners
were removed

Mapping lost crab pots

Jefferson MRC and the **Sea Dragons**, a student-run underwater robotics team, are working collaboratively to develop a new method for recovering lost crab pots in the Salish Sea. The Sea Dragons focused on designing and operating submersible remotely operated vehicles (ROVs). The goal of this partnership is to remove lost crab pots from our local waters, as well as to demonstrate how ROVs can serve as a community-driven crab pot recovery method. In 2022, the MRC and Sea Dragons piloted the use of an ROV for removing derelict crab pots. Pots were located using side-scan sonar surveys in Discovery Bay, near Adelma Beach and between the Cape George Marina and Beckett Point. In 2023, the team focused its efforts on Port Townsend Bay where they recovered 17 pots. In doing so, they provided learning opportunities for new robotics students and built partnerships across the Salish Sea, including hosting a shellfish biologist with Tulalip Tribes, who is working on developing an ROV lost pot recovery program for the Tulalip Tribes.

17

crab pots
recovered by
the student
run ROV



International award
"Storytellers of the Year" Student
Award in the ArcGIS StoryMaps
Competition



Jefferson MRC



Recovering Lost Crab Pots of the Salish Sea

Developing new methods for
recovering lost crab pots with a
remotely operated vehicle and
community partnerships.

In partnership: Jefferson MRC & Sea Dragons with
support from NW Straits Initiative, WDFW & NOAA

[Recovering Lost Crab Pots StoryMap](#)



Rain gardens

Jefferson MRC works with community partners to build and maintain a network of rain gardens in suitable, priority locations across East Jefferson County. Rain gardens treat stormwater runoff, remove contaminants and improve water quality to benefit nearshore and marine ecosystems. Expected outcomes of this project include reduced flow of contaminated stormwater and increased understanding about stormwater issues through volunteer engagement in rain garden installations and maintenance.

This year, the MRC installed two new rain gardens, tackled maintenance needs at several established rain gardens, and began creating the foundation for an “Adopt-a-Rain Garden” program, and published a StoryMap. Going forward, the MRC will focus on maintenance of its existing network of 19 rain gardens (13 in Port Townsend, 3 in Port Hadlock and 3 in Quilcene). [Learn more about Jefferson MRC’s rain gardens.](#)

150+

volunteer hours
contributed to the rain
garden project in 2023

2

new rain gardens
installed in 2023



[East Jefferson Rain gardens StoryMap](#)

Remote beach cleanups

As a part of the Plastic Free Salish Sea campaign, **San Juan MRC** and partners led the effort on two significant community beach cleanup events: the Spring cleanup event and the biannual Great Islands Cleanup. [Learn more about Plastic Free Salish Sea.](#)

6,625

pounds of debris collected at the
spring and fall cleanup events

50

miles of San Juan County roads
and beaches were cleaned up



Voluntary no-anchor zones



Ron Thom

The Northwest Straits Commission, Northwest Straits Foundation, and MRCs are working to build a regional effort to protect eelgrass. This work is modeled after the highly successful Voluntary No-Anchor Zones established by Jefferson MRC in 2004 to encourage boaters to anchor outside of eelgrass meadows to reduce physical impacts to the critical nearshore habitat. Two MRCs have established voluntary no-anchor zones: **Jefferson** and **San Juan MRC** work to maintain buoys, monitor vessel use, and educate the local community. The Northwest Straits Commission is supporting additional regional expansion of this program by collaborating with MRCs to assess eelgrass sites in need of protection from vessel anchoring impacts, leading the development of a shared social marketing campaign, and coordinating with partners across the Salish Sea. Collaboration involves a transboundary network of partners building a shared approach to eelgrass protection strategies. **Learn more about [voluntary no-anchor zones](#).**

100% **voluntary compliance** by vessels anchoring outside of no-anchor zones at Odlin County Park (San Juan) and Port Townsend (Jefferson) waterfront

13 **organizations** in both British Columbia and Washington state participated in re-occurring transboundary workgroup meetings to discuss shared project approaches and strategies





In this section:
Youth programs:
Plastic Free Salish Sea
Salish Sea Stewards
Shore Friendly outreach
Fidalgo Bay Day
Communications
MyCoast
SoundIQ

Education & Outreach

Engaging the community to encourage local stewardship and sustainable resource use through outreach and education

Interns

8

student
interns

Clallam, Skagit, and Jefferson MRCs provide learning and internship opportunities for students to build the confidence of youth in the scientific process, inspire future careers in science, provide relevant experience, and promote stewardship. Projects include: Salish Sea School forage fish Student Training as Research Scientists or STaRS program, outreach to recreational crabbers, community rain garden stewardship, storm surge citizen science monitoring program, support for MRC fieldwork and operations, and assisting with MRC project communications.



Dana Flerchinger

I learned more about where/what type of areas the forage fish eggs prefer being, and I learned more about the different stages of forage fish eggs.

– 7th grade student Skagit MRC

Kids on the Beach

135

6th & 8th
grade students
participated in
the spring & fall
programs

Skagit MRC and Padilla Bay Reserve collaborate on the “Kids on the Beach” project, which educates students in the art of marine science. This year, the program immersed 6th grade students from Conway and 8th grade students from Sedro-Woolley in mudflat investigations and encouraged them to share their discoveries through presentations. The program incorporates projects and investigations such as fish seining and surveying for forage fish eggs.



Annie England

The program allows kids to collect meaningful data and learn in a setting where information is easy to absorb. It's really important for students to have authentic learning experiences with scientific practices.

– Padilla Bay marine educator Annie England

Beach Seine with Schools

166

4th grade students
participated from
Bellingham School
District and Lummi
Tribal Schools

In 2022, **Whatcom MRC** piloted a new project titled Beach Seine with Schools. The goal of the project was to provide an opportunity for elementary school students to see juvenile salmon using their intertidal habitat along the shoreline. The event was supported by Lummi Natural Resources, local, and tribal leaders, and (new this year) the Salish Sea Conservation Corps. Each field trip included:

- Transportation and all materials needed for the field trip.
- A pre-field trip classroom lesson and post-field trip classroom lesson.
- A short talk by a Lummi Nation elder or marine scientist who discussed the ecological and cultural importance of salmon.



Dana Flerchinger

I liked the microscope. We saw live plankton.

The barnacles were my favorite. – 4th grade Lummi Nation School student

Plastic Free Salish Sea

Plastic Free Salish Sea is a partnership created and led by the **San Juan MRC**. The initiative seeks to raise awareness, change residents' behavior, and alter the culture around plastic use in San Juan County and the surrounding Salish Sea region. The MRC maintained a Plastic Free Salish Sea website as a means of broadening the reach of its efforts throughout the county and around the Salish Sea with the following core goals:

- Growing the Adopt-a-Beach and Adopt-a-Road programs in San Juan County
- Engaging the community through regular beach clean-up events, such as the Great Islands Clean-up in April and September, and the San Juan County Fair
- Increasing community engagement and reporting cleanup efforts by beach and road stewards
- Assisting with diverting plastic film recycling from the landfill through a pilot recycling program
- Assisting with plastic film recycling pilot with SC Johnson.

Learn more about [Plastic Free Salish Sea](#).



Katie Fleming

62

active beach stewards

28

beach and road clean-up
locations covered



Skagit MRC

Salish Sea Stewards

Salish Sea Stewards is a volunteer community science training program of **Skagit MRC** in partnership with **Padilla Bay Reserve**. The Salish Sea Stewards program offers approximately 40 hours of training to residents who are interested in learning about the marine environment and different volunteer opportunities with local organizations to help make a difference in the community. A program evaluation provided valuable feedback that will be used to inform the 2024 training season. Learn more about [Salish Sea Stewards](#).

In the news

[Skagit Valley Herald January 2023](#)

47K + 24

volunteer hours
contributed since 2014

participants completed
the program in 2023

West Elwha beach stewardship



Since the removal of the Glines Canyon and Elwha dams on the Elwha River, the expanded beach has become a popular spot for visitors and residents. The area was adopted by the **Clallam MRC** for stewardship to reduce pet waste on the beach, which includes a bag dispenser and disposal bin, as well as a portable toilet for human waste. In 2023, the MRC conducted usage surveys to track the effort’s effectiveness. People and dog numbers were randomly tracked along the access trail and beach, using three methods to select survey dates and times: random, targeted (on good surf days), and as an additional task during forage fish spawning surveys. These surveys aim to estimate annual usage patterns, with the random method providing data for extrapolation, and the targeted method capturing high usage on favorable surf days based on local knowledge and online information.

Shore Friendly outreach

40

homeowners
participated in the
shoreline homeowners’
workshop in 2023

Island MRC hosted a Shoreline Homeowners’ Workshop which featured presentations on how homeowners can enhance the resilience of their shoreline properties. Overall, the workshop was well received, and there are plans to organize more such events with the shore friendly program in the future.

As part of a grant initiative, Island MRC assembled local resources and then shared them with realtors, who can then provide them to new shoreline homeowners. These resource packets encompass information about the Shore Friendly Program and other valuable resources such as “Your Marine Waterfront.”

Fidalgo Bay Day

Fidalgo Bay Day is **Skagit MRCs** signature public outreach event held annually for the last 19 years (with a 2-year Covid hiatus in 2020 and 2021, when an online marine themed scavenger hunt was held). The event is designed to raise awareness about the Salish Sea marine environment and the challenges it faces. The Samish Indian Nation has graciously hosted the event at Fidalgo Bay Resort in the heart of Coast Salish traditional territory for no charge each year since its inception. The event runs smoothly because of amazing volunteers, partner organizations and businesses that contribute expertise, time, energy, and other generous support to the event. **Learn about [Fidalgo Bay Day](#).**



900

volunteer hours
contributed

350+

community members
attended

63

event
volunteers

42

organizations and
businesses
participated

DID YOU KNOW?

The goal of Fidalgo Bay Day is to build connections with participating organizations, increase public awareness of the marine environment, and to foster environmental stewardship with educational presentations and booths.



In the news

[Skagit Valley Herald April 28, 2023](#)

Northwest Straits Initiative Conference



Photos L-R: Chairman Ron Allen, Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe. Lucas Hart, Director Northwest Straits Commission introduces Chairman Ron Allen. Dr. Tessa Francis, recipient of the Northwest Straits Environmental Leadership Award. Snohomish MRC members workgroup. Caitlyn Blair and design workshop facilitator Travis Tennesen (WWU Center for Community Learning). Photos: Jessica Owens

100

attendees at the November
2023 conference

The Northwest Straits Initiative Conference returned for the first time in three years! About 100 attendees gathered on November 3-4, 2023, at the Northwest Maritime Center in Port Townsend. Participants included members of all seven MRCs, Commission, Foundation, and project partners. The conference was strategically designed to offer MRC and Northwest Straits Initiative members valuable opportunities to delve into projects from various counties, pinpoint collaboration prospects, and foster connections for joint initiatives. **Learn more about the [2023 conference](#).**

This conference was interesting from day one! Look at all these people who are volunteering their time to talk about the issues in the local community, the environment, with local government, so that we can strategize to make things better for all of us and future generations, regardless if it's our current climate or the future state of the climate. We all are trying to solve these issues together.

- Conference participant,
Patrick Havel Island MRC

Communications

The Northwest Straits Commission is focused on growing awareness and we communicate our work to a variety of audiences through an emailed newsletter, website, and social media channels.

View our [2023 newsletters](#)

Join our [mailing list](#) and find us on social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Vimeo) to stay up to date on regional news or to find an event near you.



monthly newsletter

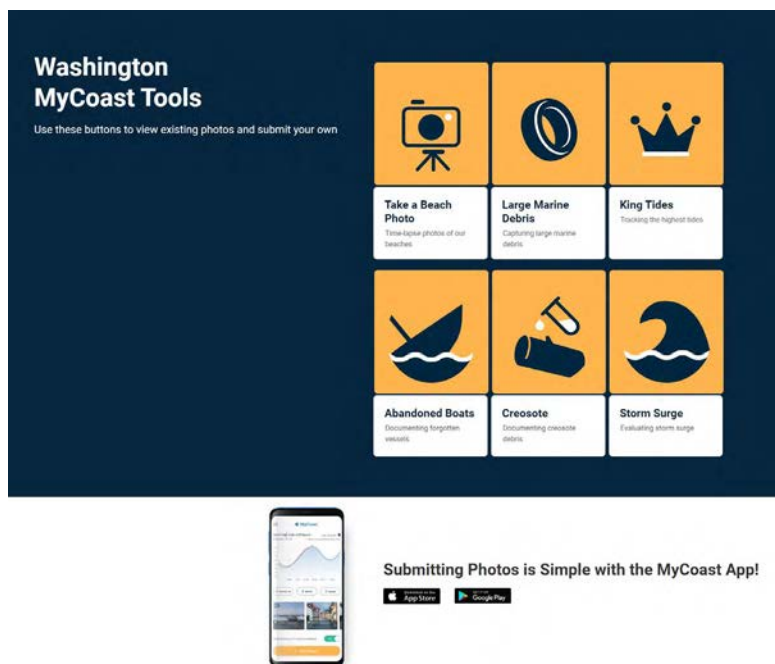


Instagram feed

MyCoast

The MyCoast reporting tool is for beach visitors to share observations with resource managers and coastal decision makers that can guide future restoration and protection efforts.

MyCoast started as a project of the Snohomish MRC to engage beachgoers and provide a way for them to share information about local conditions with decision-makers and stakeholders. It later expanded statewide thanks to a partnership with Washington Department of Natural Resources and other partners, including US Geological Survey, Washington Sea Grant, the Snohomish MRC, and the Northwest Straits Initiative. The Molt Search reporting tool was added to MyCoast in 2023, allowing for a broader participation in European green crab early detection.



Download the app from Google Play or the iPhone app store or browse reports online at mycoast.org/wa

+28%

**MyCoast user
increase in 2023**

1,440+

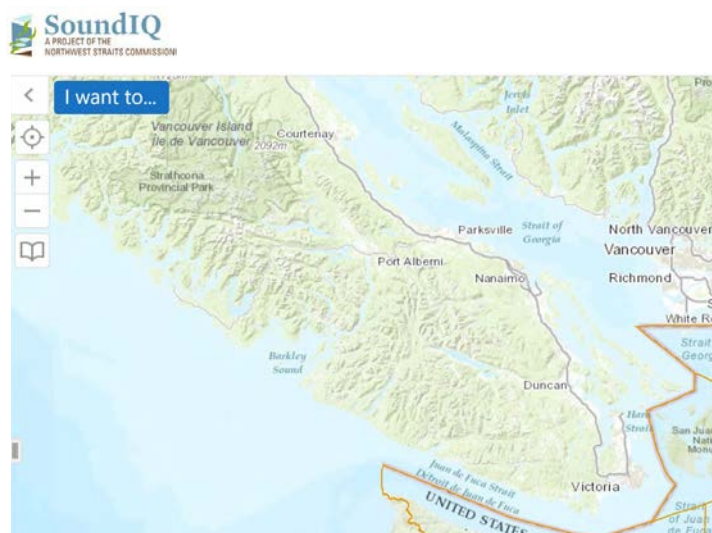
MyCoast reports were submitted
in the seven-county Northwest Straits region
including creosote reports, king tides, abandoned
boats, storm surge, large marine debris, and take a
beach photos.

3,200

**registered MyCoast
users in WA in 2023**

SoundIQ

SoundIQ is the Northwest Straits Commission's web-based application, serving as a platform to share data gathered through the Northwest Straits Initiative including the seven MRCs. SoundIQ showcases an extensive dataset in a user-friendly map format, allowing seamless access and visualization. Within SoundIQ, data from the Northwest Straits can be seamlessly integrated with supplementary information from diverse sources and collaborators, making it universally accessible to all. Its users encompass a broad spectrum, including members of the Northwest Straits Initiative, project collaborators, county planners, students, and curious members of the public. **Learn more about [SoundIQ](#).**



Monitoring & Research

Collecting environmental data to inform local government and resource managers



In this section:

- Floating kelp monitoring
- European green crab trapping & removal
- Forage fish spawning sampling
- North Chuckanut Bay Pollution Identification & Correction
- Pinto abalone monitoring & restoration
- Water quality monitoring

Floating kelp monitoring



The kelp kayak monitoring program monitors 20+ floating kelp beds annually in the Northwest Straits region between June and September, to better understand the trends and extent of local kelp. Coordinated by the Northwest Straits Commission, this regional project is led by **Clallam, Jefferson, Island, Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom MRCs** and carried out by community volunteer kayakers.

The Northwest Straits Commission also works with partners outside of the Northwest Straits Initiative, including **Washington Department of Natural Resources**, to further develop the project and expand the use of the collected data. This includes the use of MRC kayak data in WA Department of Natural Resources' new Floating Kelp Indicator, a part of Puget Sound Partnership's Vital Signs.

In partnership with **Washington Department of Natural Resources**, data collected since 2015 suggests that the majority of monitored floating kelp beds have no general trend. However, some notable changes in monitored floating kelp beds since 2015, include the decrease and eventual loss of the Mukilteo and Meadowdale floating kelp beds in Snohomish County, and expansion of Ebey's Landing and Possession Point as they have grown and merged with adjacent beds in Island County. [Learn more about floating kelp monitoring.](#)

377

acres of floating
kelp documented
in 2023

258

miles collectively paddled
by volunteers in 2023

54

volunteer kayakers
participated in
2023 floating kelp
bed surveys



[Floating Kelp Monitoring StoryMap](#)

DID YOU KNOW?

Kelp forests, particularly floating kelp beds, are declining in many regions of Puget Sound. Substantial decreases and disappearances of floating kelp beds have been observed in South and Central Puget Sound.

European green crab trapping & removal

5,055

trap sets in Drayton Harbor and Samish Bay

280

invasive European green crabs trapped and removed from Samish Bay and Drayton Harbor by crews coordinated by the Northwest Straits Commission



The Northwest Straits Commission coordinates and supports trapping and removal efforts of invasive European green crab in the region, particularly in Drayton Harbor and Samish Bay, as well as other areas within Whatcom and Skagit counties. Commission staff are engaged in community outreach, educating residents on green crab identification and emphasizing the significance of monitoring and removal. This is often done in collaboration with county Marine Resources Committees.

Commission staff, in collaboration with **Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife** and **Washington Sea Grant**, developed a strategic monitoring and control trapping program to remove green crabs from Drayton Harbor and Samish Bay. Commission staff work with Veterans Conservation Corps interns, Washington Conservation Corps crew members, WA Department of Fish & Wildlife technicians, Salish Sea Conservation Corps members, local shellfish growers, and local volunteers to coordinate and carry out frequent and intensive removal trapping efforts at these two sites. The Northwest Straits Commission staff builds capacity for additional trapping and outreach efforts in the region through partner engagement.



Leah Skare

DID YOU KNOW?

European green crab, considered one of the world's most damaging invasive species, could threaten native organisms and nearshore habitats in Washington inland marine shorelines, as has been seen in other parts of the world where they have established invasive populations.

Additional information

[Northwest Straits European green crab](#)
[Report a green crab](#)
[Washington Sea GrantCrab Team](#)
[Salish Sea Transboundary Action Plan](#)

In the news

[Skagit Talks Radio Thursday, July 6, 2023](#)
[Northern Light August 23, 2023](#)

European green crab outreach & awareness

Skagit MRC's 2023 European green crab outreach project targeted landowners along shorelines of Samish, and Padilla Bays where there has been an increased detection of European green crabs. Outreach efforts included informational letters to shoreline homeowners, identification rack cards, and wallet cards, outreach booths, and a matching game for in-person education.

1K+

people engaged in 1:1 public interactions, presentations, and outreach events

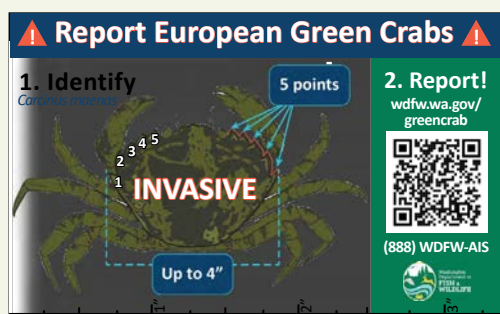
505

European green crab homeowner letters containing outreach materials were mailed to shoreline property owners*

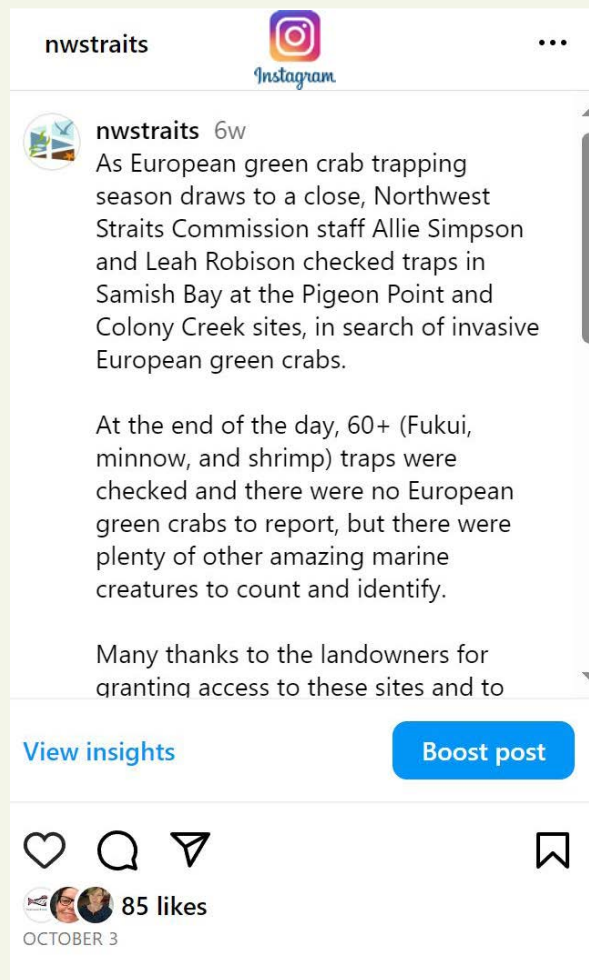
**Partners on the homeowner letter included: Skagit MRC, Northwest Straits Commission, WA Department of Fish and Wildlife, WA Sea Grant, Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Samish Indian Nation, Taylor Shellfish, WA Dept of Natural Resources, and the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community.*



Northwest Straits Commission's top Instagram post



Wallet identification cards



Northwest Straits Commission's top Instagram post

Forage fish spawning sampling



Forage fish have long been a focus of the **Northwest Straits Commission, Foundation, and MRCs**. Sand lance and surf smelt are two species that lay their eggs on the beach, where volunteers conduct regular sampling to collect important baseline data on spawning trends of these critical fish. This monitoring is done at restoration sites to evaluate the effectiveness of restoration efforts, as well as index sites identified by MRCs in coordination with WA Department of Fish and Wildlife to understand long-term spatial and seasonal spawning trends. These survey results are entered into WA Department of Fish and Wildlife's long-term monitoring database and used on the [Forage Fish Spawning Map](#). **Learn more about [forage fish spawning sampling](#).**

400+

beach sediment samples for forage fish spawn collected by volunteers on local beaches in 6 counties

19

forage fish volunteers attended training to learn about the program and the sampling protocols

15%

of beach sediment samples collected contained sand lance or surf smelt eggs



DID YOU KNOW?

Pacific herring, sand lance, surf smelt, and other forage fish are key to the health of marine food webs throughout the Salish Sea. They are fuel for seabirds, salmon and orca whales. They are bait for commercial and sport fisheries and a tasty treat to many people.

Pollution Identification & Correction



Whatcom MRC is a partner in their county-wide Pollution Identification and Correction (PIC) project aimed at identifying sources of bacterial pollution impacting shellfish beds in North Chuckanut Bay. In 2023, they identified five sites that did not meet long term health standards. Their work contributes to protecting recreational shellfish harvesters and educating the general public about how our on-land activities can affect the marine environment. **Learn more about [pollution identification & correction](#).**

496 household were invited to an outreach event with Whatcom County Health and Public Works, offering a chance to explore MRC projects, including PIC

14 freshwater and marine sites sampled

Pinto abalone monitoring & restoration

Restoration efforts for pinto abalone in Washington state, led by the Puget Sound Restoration Fund in collaboration with various organizations, government agencies, universities, and tribes, have been ongoing since 2003. These efforts involve conservation aquaculture, captive breeding, juvenile and larval outplanting, aggregation, and other strategies.

Skagit MRC has partnered with **Puget Sound Restoration Fund** since 2014 to support these efforts. Over the years, nearly 45,000 healthy, genetically diverse hatchery-produced juvenile pinto abalone have been outplanted at 28 different restoration sites across Skagit, San Juan, and Island counties, with 18,000 of them placed in rocky reef sites in Skagit County waters. Annual diver surveys indicate that the abalone are growing in size and density, with their populations increasing and spreading beyond the original plots near Fidalgo Island. Additionally, water quality loggers and time-lapse cameras are used to monitor environmental factors and abalone behavior at the outplant sites. **Learn more about [pinto abalone monitoring & restoration](#).**

4,893

juvenile abalone were outplanted in 2023

21

genetically distinct families of pinto abalone represented

6

seeding sites in Skagit (2 sites established in 2023)

In the News

[Skagit Valley Herald January 27, 2023](#)



Advisory

Serving as an advisory
group on marine
resource issues

In this section:

Science Advisory Committee
Puget Sound Kelp Conservation & Recovery Plan
Kelp Plan Status Update
External Relations Committee
Marine Stewardship Area
Elected officials
Oil spills
Climate change
Shoreline master program

Science Advisory Committee



Science Advisory Committee 2023: David Trimbach, Tessa Francis, Julia Parrish, Tom Mumford, Ron Thom, Kathy Wolf. Photo: Caitlyn Blair

The Science Advisory Committee enhances the Commission’s credibility as a science-based organization. Members of the committee include experts in a variety of environmental disciplines. These individuals keep the Commission aware of scientific studies and questions that can inform local and regional projects and educate key individuals in the scientific community about the work of the Commission. **Learn more about the [Science Advisory Committee](#).**

The Science Advisory Committee serves critical functions within the Commission, which include:

Advise	Review	Integrate	Guide
Providing scientific input and guidance to the Commission on emerging issues and opportunities.	Conducting technical review of Marine Resources Committee projects, where appropriate.	Identifying ways to effectively integrate our work with scientists and their projects around the region.	Serving as an advisory group to local MRCs on project development.

My focus with the Science Advisory Committee has been advancing biological sciences, particularly in kelp and kayaks, and integrating social science expertise. I’ve championed utilizing MRC’s data through initiatives like “Actions to Impacts,” ensuring information translates into meaningful decisions. Currently, we’re refining our role and relationship with the Commission, staff, and MRC’s. It’s been a fun, exciting, and very worthwhile effort for me to help in this unique “bottom-up” effort to protect and restore the Salish Sea. I so value this connection to people and place.

-Thomas Mumford, PhD.
Science Advisory Committee member since 2015

Puget Sound Kelp Conservation & Recovery Plan

The Puget Sound Kelp Conservation and Recovery Plan (Kelp Plan), published in 2020, provides a research and management framework for coordinated action to improve understanding of kelp forest population changes and declines, while also working to implement and strengthen recovery and protective measures. As a primary author and listed partner of the Kelp Plan, the Northwest Straits Commission coordinates and facilitates implementation of the Kelp Plan.

The Northwest Straits Commission works with local community groups, tribes, agencies, non-profits, and universities as well as some transboundary organizations to promote, link, and progress Kelp Plan actions.

The Kelp Plan status update

Published in 2023, the Kelp Plan status update provides an overview of the advancements in kelp conservation and recovery since the publication of the Kelp Plan, as well as the general status, and top lessons learned and recommended next steps of each Kelp Plan action.

80+

Puget Sound kelp-related projects (taking place from 2020-2022) were inventoried

46

kelp partners participated in a Kelp Plan Action Workshop in March 2023 to assess the status of Kelp Plan actions, co-create a list of lessons learned, and recommend next steps for Kelp Plan actions

11

kelp policy recommendations were made in 2023 by the advisory committee

Kelp policy

The Northwest Straits Commission continued a project funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts to better implement existing rules and regulations for kelp in Puget Sound and identify actionable next steps that can be taken to connect resource managers and planners at the local, state, and federal level with best available science and resources to guide policy implementation. This work was done with a Kelp Policy Advisory Committee with representatives from local, state, and federal entities. The eleven recommendations outline the guidance, resources, and tools needed to better support individuals and entities responsible for implementing kelp policy and authorities in Washington, especially those at local jurisdictions.

Additional information

[Kelp Plan webpage](#)

[Kelp Plan](#)

[Kelp Plan Status Update](#)

[Kelp Policy Advisory Workgroup's policy recommendations](#)

External Relations Committee

The Northwest Straits Commission External Relations Committee, comprised of volunteers and staff from partner organizations interested in government affairs, guides the Initiative's engagement with policymakers and legislation. The committee helps to draft bills, track legislative developments, educate elected officials, and promote the Initiative's mission through effective engagement with all levels of government. Committee members also inform the Initiative about the impacts of legislation on local and regional projects.

During the past year, the committee focused on Congressional reauthorization of the Northwest Straits Initiative, working with Senator Patty Murray's staff to prepare a draft bill for introduction in the Senate. The reauthorization bill has support from volunteers, the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, Puget Sound Partnership, the Governor's office, the Northwest Straits Foundation, and commissioners of all seven county governments in the Northwest Straits region.

The progress achieved in 2023 establishes a strong foundation for continued collaboration with our Congressional champions in the coming months. [Learn more about the history of the Northwest Straits Initiative.](#)

DID YOU KNOW? There are no other initiatives like the Northwest Straits Initiative in the United States. The Northwest Straits Initiative is a unique approach to solving important issues that have a direct impact on ecosystems, economies, and cultures. Reauthorization would renew recognition of the Northwest Straits Initiative as a federal program in U.S. statute. Recognition as a federal program acknowledges the importance of the Northwest Straits Initiative as a community convener focused on marine conservation and restoration. Current federal funding is provided equally to each Marine Resource Committee through the Northwest Straits Commission. Reauthorization will help assure more predictable and longer-term federal support by authorizing Congress to appropriate funds to support the Initiative. It will assure a level of stability that will allow Northwest Straits Initiative to conduct longer-term planning.

In the news

[*Congress funds the Northwest Straits Initiative to protect and restore marine ecosystems on November 13, 1998*](#)

Historylink.org essay by Adam Sowards - November 15, 2023

[*Northwest Straits Initiative may be up for federal reauthorization*](#)

Skagit Valley Herald - September 14, 2023

[*Locals in small operation take on 'tall order' in marine ecosystem*](#)

Salish Current - September 22, 2023



Marine Stewardship Area

Port Susan was designated as a voluntary Marine Stewardship Area (MSA) by Snohomish and Island counties in 2014. Port Susan sits in ancestral homelands of the Tulalip Tribes and Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians and has been identified by The Nature Conservancy as a priority conservation area of high biodiversity importance (Floberg et al. 2004).

Between 2021-2023, **Island MRC** collaborated with **Snohomish MRC** and community partners for a 10-year review of the Conservation Action Plan (CAP) for the Port Susan Marine Stewardship Area (MSA). Snohomish MRC focused on stakeholder engagement, while Island MRC reviewed new science relevant to CAP targets. Both efforts aim to update the CAP, with insights from partners at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy and Governance Student Consulting Lab. The review highlighted opportunities, alternate pathways, and strategies to implement for environmental justice and community engagement in the ongoing conservation and restoration of Port Susan MSA. **Learn more about Port Susan:** [Snohomish MRC](#) and [Island MRC](#)

Engagement strategies



[Learn more view the Ten Years of Progress StoryMap](#)



[View the digital brochure developed by Snohomish and Island MRCs](#)



[Progress Tracker](#)

DID YOU KNOW? The MSA is a voluntary designation encouraging conservation of Port Susan's natural, cultural, and scenic values by inspiring government agencies, organizations, landowners, and citizens to take actions and advocate for the protection of these resources.

Elected officials



August 2023 visit

In partnership with the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, the Northwest Straits Initiative and Skagit Marine Resources Committee hosted Senator Patty Murray in a visit to highlight our strong collaborative partnerships. The event was held at Lone Tree Point in La Conner and highlighted numerous project successes that advance marine conservation and support tribal Treaty Rights, such as derelict vessel removal and K-12 marine education.

[Senator Murray Visits Lone Tree Point, Discusses Conservation Efforts with Swinomish Tribe and Northwest Straits Commission](#)

Press release from Senator Murray's office - August 7, 2023

April 2023 visit

The Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe hosted Senator Patty Murray and Representative Derek Kilmer at Sequim Bay to discuss invasive European green crab. Representatives from Clallam MRC, Northwest Straits Commission, Washington Sea Grant, and WA Department of Fish and Wildlife attended this visit to highlight the collaborative network tackling this important issue.

[Senator Murray, Rep. Kilmer Trap European Green Crab, Murray Discusses Efforts to Marshall Federal Resources](#)

Press release from Senator Murray's office April 5, 2023



Climate Change

In response to the request from the Board of County Commissioners, **Island MRC** authored a white paper addressing the emerging hazards, challenges, and opportunities associated with climate change in Island County. This document provides an overview of the current and anticipated climate-related issues facing the MRC, offering general recommendations to initiate proactive measures. The development of this document was a collaborative effort, involving various Island County departments, external scientific experts, and numerous volunteer hours. The MRC presented their findings from the white paper in the fall and received an invitation to actively participate in the Island County Comprehensive Plan update. Additionally, the MRC is establishing a dedicated subcommittee to further advance this work. **Learn more** [Emerging Hazards, Challenges and Opportunities Facing Island County related to Climate Change](#)



Oil spills

San Juan MRC advised the County Council regarding the environmental and social impacts of the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 project. As a result, the County Council crafted a letter to the BC Premier, offering comments on the draft provincial conditions for the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 project.

NW Straits archives

Shoreline Master Program

Shoreline Master Programs (SMPs) are local regulations in Washington that govern land use along the state's shorelines. These programs aim to safeguard natural resources, facilitate public access to water bodies, and plan for water-dependent activities.

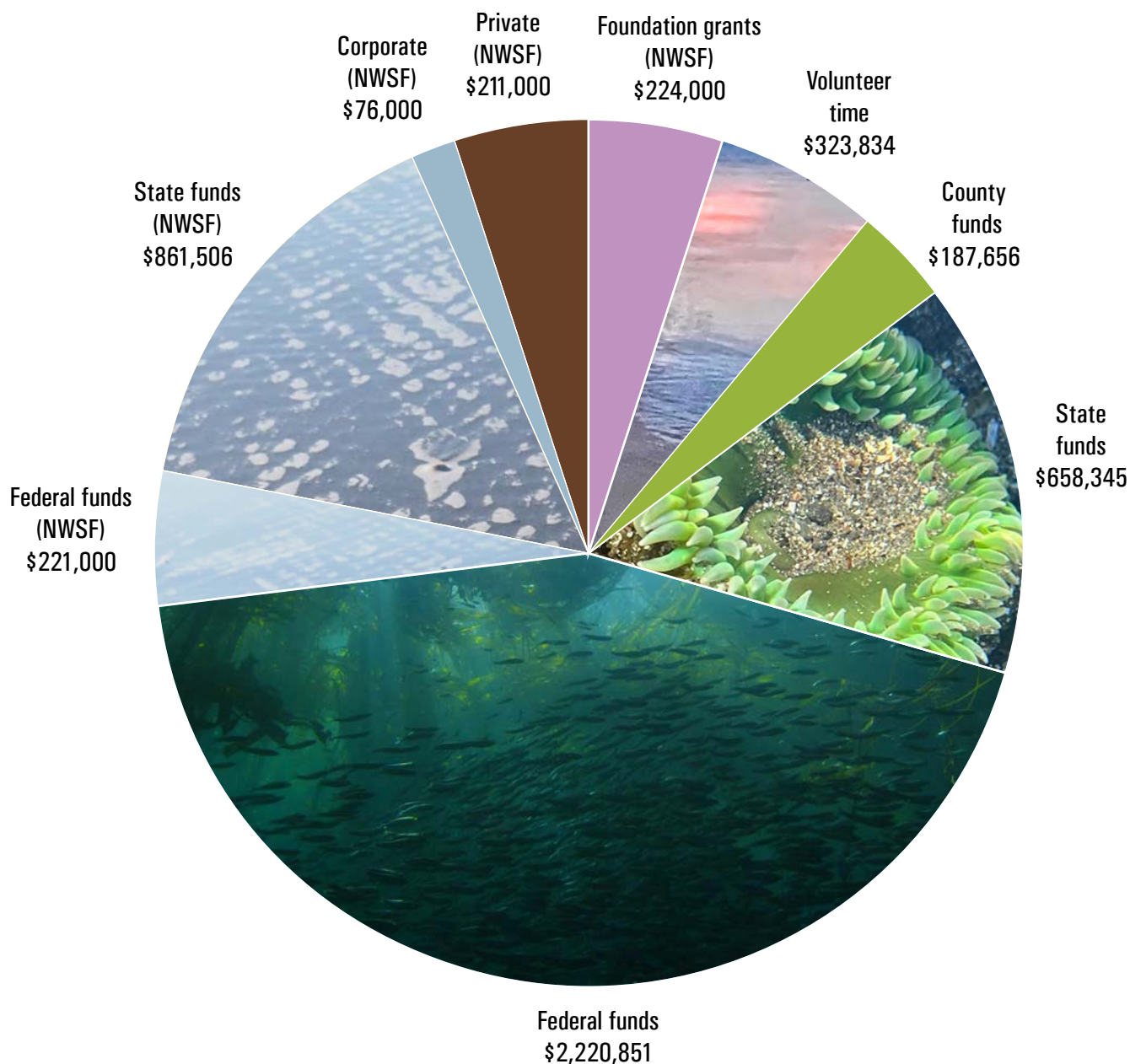
In 2023, **Jefferson MRC** reviewed and submitted concerns and clarifying comments to the Jefferson County Commissioners and Planning Commission during the public review period of its Shoreline Master Program, ensuring alignment with laws, regulations, and local plans.

DID YOU KNOW?

SMPs are required by the Shoreline Management Act to undergo an eight-year review cycle, ensuring alignment with county plans and responsiveness to changes, new data, and evolving circumstances. When it is their turn, most MRCs contribute input to their respective counties.

2023 Funding Summary

The Commission and MRCs are supported by grant funding that leverages in-kind support, local funds, and a significant number of volunteer hours. The Northwest Straits Foundation (NWSF) leverages additional funds for their work as our non profit partner, which is reflected in the graphic below.



The heart of our work

In 2023, MRC members and other project volunteers contributed over 8,606 volunteer hours. MRCs and project volunteers are the cornerstone of the Initiative, serving as advisors to local government and leading projects that make positive regional impacts. We start at the grassroots level, which allows us to have impacts locally and regionally. Volunteer time represents thousands of hours contributed to develop ideas, collect data, share information, and protect and restore natural shorelines.

Collaboration

2023 Northwest Straits Commission members

Bob Cecile *Whatcom Marine Resources Committee*
Cecilia Gobin *Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission*
Christina Koons *San Juan Marine Resources Committee*
Ginny Broadhurst *Governor's Appointee*
Diane Hennebert *Skagit Marine Resources Committee*
Jeff Taylor *Jefferson Marine Resources Committee*
Julia Parrish *Governor's Appointee*
Laura Blackmore *Puget Sound Partnership*
Nan McKay *Governor's Appointee*
Tim Ellis *Chair and Snohomish Marine Resources Committee*
Tom Cowan *Governor's Appointee*

2023 Commission staff

Lucas Hart Ph. D. *Director*

Allie Simpson *Ecosystem Project Coordinator*
Antonio Jones *Marine/Nearshore Project
Tech./Veterans Conservation Corps*
Caitlyn Blair *Program Coordinator*
Dana Oster *Marine Program Manager*
Jeff Whitty *Project Coordinator*
Jessica Owens *Communications Coordinator*
Leah Skare *Ecosystem Projects Specialist*
Sasha Horst *Operations Manager*
Suzanne Shull *GIS Analyst Padilla Bay Reserve*

2023 Science Advisory Committee

Dr. Julia Parrish *Committee Chair*
Dr. Ron Thom
Dr. Tessa Francis
Dr. Tom Mumford
Dr. David Trimbach
Dr. Kathy Wolf



Thank you, partners!

Anacortes School District
City of Bellingham
Clallam County
Drayton Harbor Oyster Company
Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve
Feiro Marine Life Center
Friends of the San Juans
Hakai Institute, UN Ocean Decade Collaborative
Centre
Island County
Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe
Jefferson County
Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe
Lummi Nation Natural Resources
Makah Tribe
Marine Agronomics LLC
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Northwest Straits Foundation
Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission
Ocean Research College Academy,
Everett Community College
Pew Charitable Trusts
Puget Sound Partnership
Puget Sound Restoration Fund
Salish Sea Institute
Samish Indian Nation
San Juan County
Sea Dragons Robotics Club
Seattle Aquarium
Senator Patty Murray
Skagit County
Snohomish County
Snohomish County WSU Extension
Stillaguamish Indian Nation
Swinomish Indian Tribal Community
Taylor Shellfish
Tulalip Tribes
US Environmental Protection Agency
US Fish and Wildlife Service
US Geological Survey
UW, Friday Harbor Labs
WA Department of Ecology
WA Department of Fish and Wildlife
WA Department of Natural Resources
WA Sea Grant
Whatcom County



Northwest Straits Commission | 10441 Bayview Edison Road | Mount Vernon, WA 98273 | 360-428-1084 | www.nwstraits.org



**Northwest
Straits**
INITIATIVE



PUGET SOUND
PARTNERSHIP



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