

A photograph of four people on a boat, likely the Clallam Marine Resources Committee, celebrating their 2020 kelp surveys. They are all wearing hats and sunglasses, and some are wearing face masks. They are holding up small, brown, cup-shaped objects made from kelp bulbs. The background shows the ocean and a clear blue sky.

Northwest Straits Initiative

2020 Annual Report

Clallam MRC celebrating their 2020 kelp surveys with cups made from kelp bulbs

Photo: Alisa Taylor

A message from our directors

In the year 2020, we faced unanticipated challenges. The global pandemic created a public health emergency that affected countless lives and livelihoods. It also created enormous obstacles to mission driven organizations whose existence depends upon community and volunteer engagement.

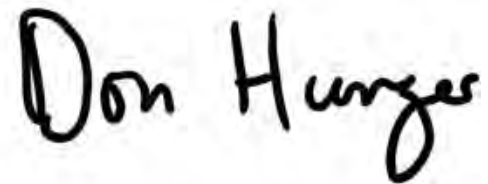
Year after year Marine Resources Committees and Northwest Straits Commission and Foundation staffs have led projects that brought people together to achieve conservation goals. Early in the pandemic, the people-centric focus of our work appeared threatened. Yet the tradition of our community approach has instilled a deep understanding of how to overcome challenges by working together. This perhaps has never been more evident than it was in 2020. Volunteers and staff acted quickly and in unison to refocus projects and identify new ways of achieving our mission.

The successes highlighted in this year's annual report demonstrate the perseverance of volunteers and staff in the face of adversity. It's also testament to the culture of community across the Initiative.

Thank you to our volunteers, staff and partners for making 2020 a successful year.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lucas Hart". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Lucas Hart, Director
Northwest Straits Commission

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Don Hunger". The script is bold and slightly cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Don Hunger, Director
Northwest Straits Foundation



*Aerial view of Sunlight Shores restoration site on Whidbey Island.
Photo: John Githens*

Who we are

The Northwest Straits Initiative is a community-led collaboration working to protect and restore the marine environment of northwest Washington.

The Northwest Straits Initiative carries out our work through the Marine Resources Committees, the Commission, and the Foundation.

Marine Resources Committees (MRCs) are locally-based advisory groups comprised of volunteers with an interest in protecting their local marine waters. MRCs receive base funding through grant agreements with the NWS Commission to accomplish priority restoration and protection work in their local areas.

The [Northwest Straits Commission](#) provides funding, training and support to seven county-based Marine Resources Committees. It facilitates regional coordination among the MRCs and connects the MRC work to regional planning efforts.

The [Northwest Straits Foundation](#) is the nonprofit arm of the organization established to leverage additional financial resources to accomplish the work of the Initiative. The Northwest Straits Foundation raises private and public funds and also manages large regional projects such as the removal of derelict fishing gear.



Strait of Juan de Fuca with Mount Baker in the distance. Photo: Alisa Taylor

We are a collaborative group that convenes a broad spectrum of community interests, including economic, recreational, conservation, and scientific.

2020 Highlights

Now in our 23rd year, the Northwest Straits Initiative (Initiative) is an established and vital part of the Salish Sea marine recovery community. Projects range from single events to regional and transboundary programs, with dozens of projects carried out in 2020.

The heart of the Initiative is the local MRCs that provide grassroots structure and give a voice to local communities on marine issues. The combination of local people, strategic partnerships, and state and federal support makes the Initiative a model of collaborative action.

Featured here are just some of the highlights from 2020, organized around four categories. To dig deeper, check out the [Resource Library](#) on our website.

- Conservation and Restoration - Protecting and restoring marine and nearshore habitat and species.
- Education and Outreach - Engaging the community to encourage local stewardship and sustainable resource use through outreach and education.
- Advisory - Serving as an advisory group to local government on marine resource issues.
- Monitoring and Research - Collecting environmental data to inform local government and resource managers.

“Investment in the Northwest Straits Initiative benefits the Salish Sea and the people who live here. As a former member of the Skagit MRC, I understand first-hand the benefit to community and environment that this tremendous organization provides.”

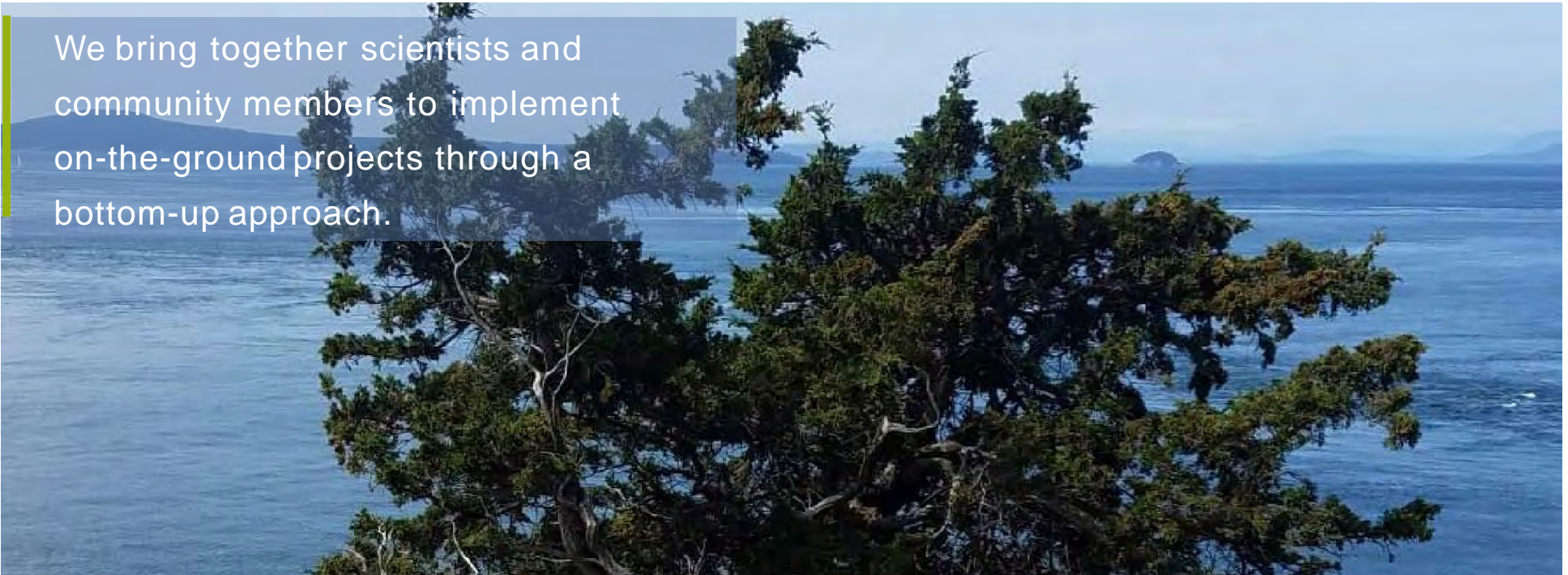
Senator Liz Lovelett, 40th District

Our 2020 Environmental Leadership Award



Caroline Gibson holding the 2020 Environmental Leadership Award, a paddle by Dale Faulstich, retired carver for the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe.

In 2020, the Northwest Straits Initiative presented our Environmental Leadership Award to Caroline Gibson for her vision to pursue kelp conservation as a keystone program. Thanks to her recognition of kelp as a vital link in the Salish Sea ecosystem and her unique blend of enthusiasm and collaboration, we're on a path that has brought together community engagement, focused partnerships, and regional attention.



We bring together scientists and community members to implement on-the-ground projects through a bottom-up approach.

Strait of Juan de Fuca. Photo: Alan Clark

Conservation and Restoration

The Northwest Straits Commission and MRCs strive to improve marine habitat and species, and seek to prevent their further decline. This includes activities related to shoreline restoration – such as feasibility or project design – along with actions that preserve existing habitats or species, including voluntary protection areas and stewardship plans.

These actions improve our environment for fish and other wildlife, as well as for people to enjoy for recreational benefits and to support our water-dependent economy.

“The Whatcom MRC has been concerned about, and monitoring for, European green crab for years here in Whatcom County waters. We were alarmed but prepared when our volunteers discovered this infestation in Drayton Harbor.” - Glen "Alex" Alexander, Green Crab Committee Lead for Whatcom MRC



Measuring a European green crab caught in Drayton Harbor. Photo: Allie Simpson

European Green Crab

[European green crabs](#) are one of the world's worst invasive species, damaging shellfish beds, ruining eelgrass meadows, and displacing native crab species. Uncontrolled, they can cause devastating ecological and economic impacts.

In 2019, a previously unknown population of green crabs was found in Drayton Harbor. The Northwest Straits Commission and Whatcom MRC joined a team of partners at the WA Department of Fish and Wildlife and Washington Sea Grant, to launch an extensive green crab removal effort in Drayton Harbor.

The team faced challenges - the COVID pandemic, wildfire smoke, not being able to engage volunteers, and getting stuck in the mud - but were able to set over 3,000 traps and remove 253 green crabs from Drayton Harbor in the 2020 season.



Pilings in the Snohomish Estuary. Photo: Snohomish MRC

Creosote Piling Prioritization

Snohomish MRC is interested in streamlining piling removal as a habitat action due to the water quality and sediment quality impacts that creosote-treated pilings can have in the aquatic environment.

In 2020, Snohomish MRC evaluated 15,500+ pilings in the Snohomish Estuary and found 45% are high priority for removal based on removal feasibility and ecological benefit. [Read the full report on the Snohomish Estuary Creosote Piling Prioritization Plan.](#)



Sunlight Shores restoration site. photo: Northwest Straits Foundation

Sunlight Shores Restoration

This coastal resilience project resulted in the restoration of 350 linear feet of waterfront property, removal of 747 cubic yards of shoreline armor and debris, and uncovered 11,294 square feet of beach, salt marsh, and backshore habitat.

The Northwest Straits Foundation led the project, partnering with Island MRC and Sunlight Shores Country Club. In 2020, community residents enthusiastically took on the maintenance of new plants and aerial monitoring of the site by drone.

More conservation and restoration project highlights

Rain gardens – Jefferson MRC installed two new rain gardens, adding to their network of rain gardens that now filter water from over 9,100 square feet of land before it enters Puget Sound.

Eelgrass protection zones – Jefferson MRC maintained voluntary no-anchor zones to protect 52 acres of eelgrass, noting roughly 98% boater compliance over the course of the summer boating season.

Pinto abalone – Skagit MRC's pinto abalone project resulted in more than 2,300 pinto abalone seeded to four sites in Skagit County, helping to restore this state endangered species in an area with prime rocky habitat.

Olympia oyster restoration – MRCs in four counties were key partners in helping to reach the 10-year, 100-acre goal for restoring native oysters in Puget Sound. MRCs maintain nearly seven acres of oyster restoration sites in Clallam, Jefferson, Skagit and Whatcom counties, planting nearly 3 million oyster seed to date.



Left: Rain garden in Port Townsend, photo: Monica Montgomery.

Right: Boater outreach sign for voluntary no anchor zone to protect eelgrass, photo: Jefferson MRC

Partnerships are an essential element of many of our projects, leveraging resources to gain mutual benefits. One example is Puget Sound Restoration Fund - a long-time collaborative partner on Olympia oyster, pinto abalone and kelp projects.



San Juan MRC member Jeff Dyre joined in on the Great Islands Cleanup efforts, riding his bike to a local beach trailing an inflatable kayak to collect floating debris from pocket beaches. Once loaded up he pedaled it all off to for disposal at the solid waste facility, filling two full size trashcans, all while keeping his carbon footprint small!

Beach cleanup – MRC members and staff participated in local beach cleanup efforts, such as the Great Islands Clean Up and International Coastal Cleanup Day. These efforts removed over 350 pounds of trash from our beaches in 2020.

Derelict crab pot removal – As part of a 3-year project with Clallam and Jefferson MRCs, the Northwest Straits Foundation removed over 100 derelict crab pots from Port Townsend and Dungeness Bay.

Derelict vessels – Snohomish MRC worked in collaboration with WA Dept. of Natural Resources to remove four derelict vessels from the Snohomish River Estuary in 2020. To date they have removed 12 boats from the Snohomish River estuary and Everett nearshore area since 2018.

Shoreline restoration and stewardship – MRCs are key partners in pre- and post-restoration stewardship of sites in Skagit, Island, Whatcom and Jefferson counties. This includes planting and maintaining native vegetation and monitoring the project's impact.

Island MRC worked with consultants to develop a conceptual design to remove 350 feet of shoreline armoring at Hoypus Point in partnership with the Northwest Straits Foundation, and assisted with feasibility studies at Possession Point and Oak Harbor Marina.

Skagit MRC continued post-restoration monitoring and maintenance at [Bowman Bay](#), developing a [user manual](#) for ongoing volunteer efforts to establish a thriving nearshore plant community.



Derelict vessel near Barnum Point in Port Susan. Photo: Mike Ehlebracht submitted via MyCoast.



Cape Flattery near Neah Bay, the westernmost point of the Northwest Straits region. Photo: Dana Oster

Education and Stewardship

MRCs regularly engage with their local communities, and restrictions on in-person engagement in 2020 presented some new challenges to overcome.

Thanks to creative thinking and their ability to adapt to virtual tools, MRCs were able to continue many of their established programs in a new format, or create new ways to accomplish their outreach goals.



Kelp on Dungeness Spit. Photo: RonThom

Building connections: a virtual Symposium Series

Collaboration and sharing ideas went virtual for our seven-part MRC Symposium Series held during the 2020 stay-home order. The symposiums provided a platform to highlight the similarities and differences of each MRC's operations and projects.

MRCs presented keys to success and lessons learned on feature projects to share knowledge and build partnerships across MRCs. During the events, over 100 people tuned in.



Clallam MRC green crab intern Angelina Woods. Photo: HelleAndersen

Student Engagement

Skagit MRC adapted their [Kids on the Beach](#) program, designed to increase literacy in marine science in Skagit County middle schools. Through virtual instruction, they were able to reach 580+ students and engage with 11 teachers at eight schools.

Whatcom MRC worked with students enrolled in a marine conservation class at Western Washington University's Huxley College by providing an in-class presentation on MRC projects and asking students to develop project proposals around the presentation topics.

Clallam MRC hosted five interns and a fellow who partnered with the Makah, Jamestown S'Klallam and Lower Elwha tribes to support marine projects of mutual benefit, such as invasive green crab removal and smolt trapping. Two additional interns from the Port Angeles High School video production program [created a video](#) to highlight the MRC's work.

Island MRC sparked creativity through Salish Sea themed art contests for elementary students.

Community events and workshops

Jefferson MRC reached community members through their Discover the Salish Sea virtual beach tour and videos highlighting their [Olympia oyster](#) and [eelgrass projects](#).

Island MRC brought their [Discover Our Island Shores](#) film online for streaming, reaching community members through virtual events.

Snohomish MRC co-hosted a starlight beach walk just before COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

Whatcom MRC hosted six [public speaker series](#) events, both virtually and in person early in the year.

Skagit MRC created a [Fidalgo Bay Day](#) scavenger hunt in lieu of their signature annual event, with 14 organizations contributing activities.

Whatcom MRC hosted 35 people for a webinar on invasive European green crab as community members became aware of the significant number of green crab being found in local waters.

Island MRC hosted 27 community members to learn how to identify and report creosote debris, increasing community understanding of its impacts and spurring a 27% increase in community reports of creosote debris the following month.



Sunny day on the Salish Sea. Photo: Alisa Taylor



Salish Sea Stewards masked up and ready to go. Photo: Pete Haase.

Community science

Skagit MRC's Salish Sea Stewards training graduated 21 new volunteers, logging 1,900+ volunteer hours contributed toward Puget Sound recovery. Salish Sea Stewards have logged an estimated 35,000 hours to date.

Whatcom MRC held their fourth year of the North Sound Stewards community science program in partnership with RE Sources. Forty-three volunteers registered for the program in 2020, logging 284 volunteer hours.



Orca breaching. Photo: Florian Graner

Targeted Outreach

Southern Resident Killer Whales – San Juan MRC continued outreach to boaters, distributing nearly 300 whale warning flags in 2020 and promoting best boating practices around whales through social media and other community connections. The MRC also partnered with San Juan County Parks to create a boater safety kiosk that provides information on Be Whale Wise, the whale warning flag and other key messages for boaters, and have installed 37 Be Whale Wise dock signs to date.

Orca Recovery Day – A virtual Orca Forum hosted as an Orca Recovery Day event engaged more than 140 households from four states and British Columbia, generating great feedback. The Northwest Straits Foundation hosted the event in partnership with the Island MRC, Whidbey Island Conservation District and the WWU Salish Sea Institute.

Recreational crabber outreach – More than 250 people attended a virtual Crabbing Workshop, hosted by the Northwest Straits Foundation and WA Department of Fish and Wildlife. This was a fun, online event for anyone interested in responsible crabbing in Puget Sound.



Plastic Free Salish Sea – San Juan MRC's [Plastic Free Salish Sea](#) campaign aims to reduce and eventually eliminate single-use plastics in the county. The MRC followed the website launch in 2020 with a series of toolkits to provide guidance for individuals, businesses and community events.

In response to challenges due to the pandemic, the group created an infographic with guidance on how to reduce waste during COVID-19.

Shore Friendly Living – In 2020, the Northwest Straits Foundation launched an [educational video series](#) with the first two videos spotlighting coastal geology, impacts of shoreline armoring, and other topics.

Marine Resources Committees are the cornerstone of the Initiative, serving as advisors to local government and leading projects that make positive regional impacts.



Island MRC members on a project site visit with Rep. Rick Larsen. Photo: Lucas Hart

Advisory

MRCs serve their communities by bringing their individual expertise, varied backgrounds, and interests to the table. The MRC supports local government in an advisory role, connecting regional issues to local perspectives.

Jefferson MRC provided input on an application requesting that the Navy use state parks as training grounds. The MRC noted concerns about potential impacts to eelgrass beds, kelp, and forage fish spawning habitat conservation efforts. Their input resulted in the parks commission adopting some of their recommendations in order to protect habitat.



Island MRC member Randy Berthold enthusiastically teaches others how to use MyCoast. When a roll of barbed wire showed up on the beach, a community member he had trained used the app to submit a report. The timing worked for a WA Department of Natural Resources clean up team to remove it quickly. MyCoast users submitted more than 1,320 reports in 2020.

King Tide at North Beach in Port Townsend, submitted via MyCoast. Photo: Wendy Feltham

Advisory Resources

MyCoast – In a year when the need for physical distancing was essential, [MyCoast](#) served as an effective way to enhance awareness among decision-makers about local beach conditions. To date more than 1,750 users have submitted nearly 3,500 reports on their local beach conditions.

SoundIQ – The [SoundIQ](#) platform continues to serve as a vital resource to share environmental information collected by MRCs, augmented with relevant data from agencies and other sources. In 2020, the Northwest Straits Commission hosted a webinar with the Clallam MRC for the Clallam County Department of Community Development focused on how the system can support their work.



Aerial view of kelp surveys at North Beach. Photo: Tyler Cowdrey

Kelp Conservation and Recovery

The [Puget Sound Kelp Conservation and Recovery Plan](#), released in June of 2020, marked a huge milestone in the Initiative's leadership on kelp recovery in the region. The Kelp Plan 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. Release of the Kelp Plan has garnered media and press coverage that highlights concerns around kelp declines and the need for action.

Although we released the Kelp Plan in 2020, the work is far from over. The Initiative supports priority actions including coordinating the community science effort to monitor bull kelp, leading regular communications, and developing a new effort to link management and science needs to drive science-informed management and implementation. Stay tuned as we continue to be leaders for kelp conservation and recovery!



Orcas in the Salish Sea. Photo: Florian Graner

Southern Resident Killer Whales

San Juan MRC continues to focus efforts on supporting and advising the county on Southern Resident Killer Whale issues. The MRC hosted a discussion on proposed rules for the state's Commercial Whale Watch Licensing System, which served as a resource for County staff to provide recommendations to County Council.

San Juan MRC's community forums also raised the Be Whale Wise campaign as essential information for boaters, and worked to ensure that the State [boat license renewal](#) page now has Be Whale Wise links on every page.

Island MRC prepared a proclamation declaring October 17, 2020 Orca Recovery Day in Island County, which was passed by the Board of County Commissioners.

San Juan Marine Stewardship Area

In 2004, the San Juan Board of County Commissioners created the San Juan Marine Stewardship Area (MSA). The MRC worked with scientists and community leaders to create a management plan that would achieve a healthy marine ecosystem in balance with human use and enjoyment, finalized in 2007.

Just before the COVID-19 stay home order in 2020, the MRC hosted a marine managers' workshop to gather information and engage partners in their MSA Plan update, with research fellow Abigail Ames helping to lead the process. Abigail's experience ended up being a catalyst for a new focus in her career path.

"When I began working with the MSA, I wasn't quite sure what my future had in store, but I knew I wanted to be at the intersection of science and tangible, community driven change. Engaging with this collaborative approach motivated me to pursue a master's degree, where I aim to further develop skills in community based policy and management with an emphasis on Indigenous communities."

-Abigail Ames, research fellow for San Juan MSA Plan

The final updated plan will summarize information shared at the workshop, update benchmarks, and outline measurement goals to track the progress of marine resource conservation. [Click here to read more about the San Juan MSA and follow their progress](#)

The Northwest Straits Initiative complements the work of agencies and tribal co-managers, fostering partnerships for greater collective impact.



Snohomish MRC volunteers ready for distant and masked kelp surveys. Photo: Elisa Dawson

Monitoring and Research

Monitoring projects capture scientific information about our environment, and usually start with a question - why isn't there as much kelp as there used to be? How many native oyster beds do we still have? Curiosity paired with scientific rigor and community enthusiasm have launched many of our staple programs.

Data collected through these monitoring projects contributes to important baseline datasets, helps to assess the effectiveness of conservation and restoration actions, and informs management decisions.



The "Skagit Surf Smelt Survey Squad Socially Correct Sieve-Sloshing-Wand" in action. Photo: Pete Haase



Forage fish sampling in "before COVID-19 times" without masks in February 2020. Photo: Monica Montgomery

Forage Fish

Volunteers conducted forage fish spawning surveys at 27 sites, including index and restoration sites, providing vital information used to protect important habitat. In 2020, the samples collected by MRC volunteers made up 69% of the samples processed by the WA Department of Fish and Wildlife Marine Fish Science group.

Collecting forage fish samples required adaptations, due to COVID-19 restrictions on volunteers. Whatcom MRC hired a recent graduate from the Bellingham Technical College as an intern to lead the monitoring, and Skagit volunteers developed a prototype for socially distanced forage fish sample processing, designed by super volunteer Tom Flanagan.



Skagit MRC kelp team ready to paddle. Photo: Phyllis Bravinder

Bull Kelp

In 2020, over 40 volunteers got out on the water to paddle around kelp bulbs to contribute to the growing long-term data set created by this program. Volunteers surveyed 22 different bull kelp beds, documenting 416 acres of bull kelp forest. They collectively paddled over 230 miles to help document natural variability and emerging trends in these “forests of the sea”.

The Northwest Straits Foundation hosted a virtual kayak safety training and orientation for volunteers in advance of the monitoring season. The 2020 kelp data can be found on [SoundIQ](#).

Other monitoring and research highlights

Pigeon guillemots – Clallam MRC

monitored pigeon guillemot nesting sites in six regions, with 32 volunteers documenting their activity and feeding habits along the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Olympia oysters – Four MRCs continued monitoring Olympia oyster restoration sites to track recovery of this native species.

Whatcom MRC's pilot restoration site saw oyster growth although little new recruitment.

Shellish biotoxin – Clallam MRC collected shellfish samples to support state monitoring that allows for safe shellfish harvest.

Water quality – Snohomish MRC volunteers and staff participated in the state Mussel Watch program. Whatcom MRC performed water quality sampling at seven freshwater sites and six marine sites in North Chuckanut Bay, a key contribution to restoring the site as a recreational shellfish harvest area.



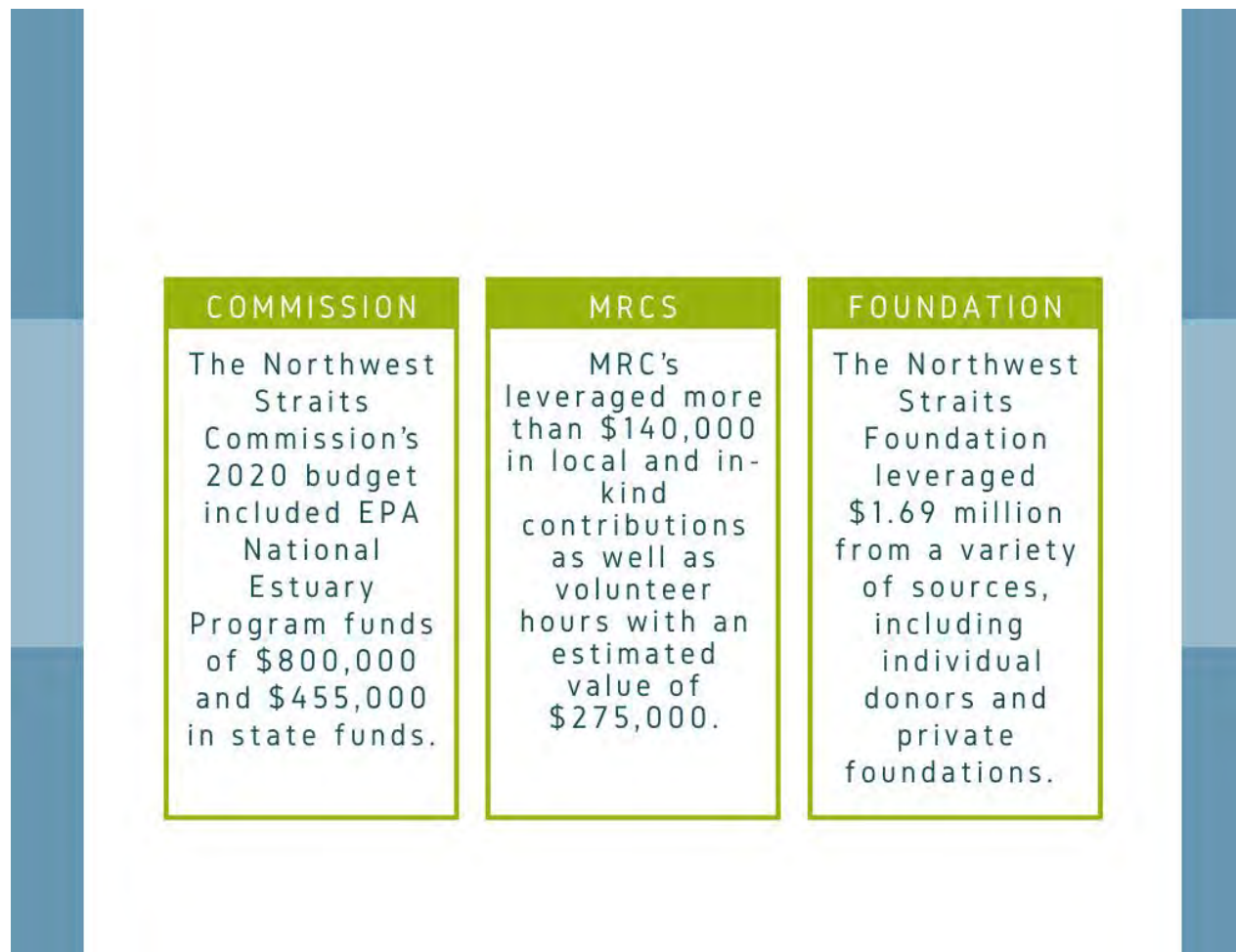
Clockwise from left: Clallam MRC intern checking smolt traps on Tumwater Creek, photo: Helle Andersen; pigeon guillemots near their nesting site on the Strait of Juan de Fuca, photo: Clallam MRC; Jefferson MRC volunteers at an Olympia oyster restoration site, photo: Monica Montgomery

Financial Summary

Funding for the Northwest Straits Initiative comes from a variety of sources. A combination of National Estuary Program funds from the US Environmental Protection Agency and Washington state funds supports the operations and projects of the Northwest Straits Commission and MRCs.

MRCs leverage additional support by securing county funds, other direct and in-kind contributions and contributing thousands of volunteer hours.

The Northwest Straits Foundation operates with a combination of private funding from individual, corporate and philanthropic foundation sources, along with state and federal grants and contracts.



Learn more about recent work of the Northwest Straits Initiative on our [website](#), or from your local county [Marine Resources Committee](#) and the [Northwest Straits Foundation](#).



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