

San Juan County Marine Stewardship Area Plan Overview

Overview of the MSA planning and review processes
resulting in strategies for implementation

Prepared for the San Juan County Council
by the San Juan County Marine Resources Committee

July 2007



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The San Juan County Marine Stewardship Area (MSA) Plan is ready for presentation to the San Juan County Council. It is the product of three years of work by the San Juan County Marine Resources Committee (MRC) with contributions from numerous scientists, technical advisors, resource managers, community leaders, business owners, and citizens. The plan is accompanied by a resolution for its adoption and use. The intent of the plan is to guide the San Juan County Council, County department and the community in actions that will help to preserve and protect the marine ecosystem. Adoption obligates the County to consider information and strategies in the plan as it updates and applies the critical areas ordinance, as it builds roads and buildings, and as it manages stormwater, shoreline development and upland activities that affect marine habitat and water quality. We expect that the County Council will use this plan to influence policy and work with state, federal, tribal, and other marine managers to move the strategies in the plan forward.

History

Over the past 30 years, populations of rockfish, forage fish, salmon, seabirds and orcas have declined in the San Juan Islands. Recognizing that our community depends on thriving populations of fish and wildlife for the recreational, aesthetic, spiritual, educational, and economic value they afford, the San Juan County Board of Commissioners designated the entire County as a voluntary marine stewardship area in January 2004. Resolution No. 8-2004 directed the MRC to conduct a formal study of the area and deliver a plan to protect and restore marine resources.

Since 1995, surf scoter populations have declined by more than half.

*State of the Sound 2007
Puget Sound Action Team*

Conservation Planning Process



The MRC partnered with The Nature Conservancy, the Northwest Straits Commission, the Surfrider Foundation, and the SeaDoc Society to create the plan using an adaptation of a science-based process developed by The Nature Conservancy. A core group representing these organizations tapped the expertise of dozens of scientists, technical advisors and resource managers to identify and evaluate the condition of key species and habitats that represent the complexity of the entire marine

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The Nature Conservancy's conservation approach

ecosystem in the San Juan Islands. It also enlisted the help of business and community leaders to understand how economic and social values are at risk from declining marine health. In late 2006, this work culminated in a draft Marine Stewardship Area (MSA) Plan that describes the primary threats to key marine resources and economic and social values, establishes benchmarks for achieving conservation goals, and outlines 35 protection strategies to meet the goals. The plan is accompanied by an Excel® work book, which documents the analysis and allows tracking of conditions to enable adaptive management.

A detailed description of the conservation planning process and list of participants is included in the MSA plan.

Public and Marine Manager Review

In the spring of 2007, the MRC presented the draft MSA plan at four public meetings and asked more than 200 citizens to choose the top strategies they are most willing to carry out as individuals and to support in their civic lives as voters and active members of the San Juan community and citizens of Washington State. People were also encouraged to suggest strategies missing from the plan. In addition to the prioritization of strategies in the plan, people offered nearly 500 suggestions for how to protect seabirds, marine mammals, salmon, bottomfish, marine habitat, and water quality as well as preserving cultural traditions and the livelihoods and enjoyment which depend on a thriving marine environment.



Waldron Island musicians play at the public workshop on Shaw Island.

Shortly after the public meetings, the MRC held a two day work session for marine managers from local, state, federal, and tribal agencies and environmental organizations with management responsibilities in the San Juan Islands. The managers learned of the top strategies chosen by the public, did their own ranking of strategies, identified strategies they are currently working on or planning to move forward and explored opportunities for working together on specific strategies.

The MRC used the feedback from the public and marine managers, along with interviews with community and tribal leaders, to select and refine the six principal strategies that will be initially advanced in implementing the plan. However, the committee emphasizes that each strategy in the full plan is important and recommends that none be set aside. We don't have the resources to do everything in the plan at once, and it makes sense to do some things before

doing others. To make effective use of limited resources in a phased approach to plan implementation, the strategies that citizens and managers are ready and able to support offer the best opportunities for cooperative action and successful outcomes. Results from the public and manager meetings are located in appendix B.

Top Strategies

Citizens and marine managers agreed in their choice of the two most important protection strategies. The top two strategies are broad based in their ability to address a range of threats and achieve protection for the entire ecosystem.

The four remaining strategies described in this section were also important to citizens but are not listed in order of preference. Strategies and current steps for implementation are described below.

1) Foster a marine stewardship ethic in residents and visitors.

As one of the fastest growing communities in the state holding some of the healthiest remaining marine resources, San Juan County is at a crossroad for achieving a sustainable future for marine resources or losing them by degrees, one rockfish, eelgrass bed, or orca calf at a time. The path toward sustainability requires that residents and visitors take personal responsibility for caring for the natural wealth held in private ownership and in the public trust.

We are reestablishing and confirming an ecologically rich and economically vital community.

Citizen comment from public meeting on Orcas Island.

Implementation

Stewardship is primarily achieved through education and providing opportunities for active involvement. Outreach and education is the focus of the MRC's 2007 work plan.

Most of the funding that the MRC receives from the 2007 – 2009 Northwest Straits Commission grant will foster stewardship through a Clean Water Campaign in partnership with the many outreach and education groups working in the San Juans. The Beach Watcher program managed by Washington State University Extension is a valuable local resource for involving citizen volunteers in marine issues. The Surfrider Foundation will be providing in-kind and financial assistance to the MRC to help with the outreach campaign over the next two years.

To keep up with the rate of growth and rapid turn-over in population, reaching landowners before they build and educating newcomers, part time residents, realtors, developers and landscapers about sustainable practices is a long term outreach strategy.

Tourists flock to the San Juans to enjoy the beaches, fishing and recreational boating. Working with the tourism industry to foster stewardship in their own practices and in visitors is an important element in the MSA outreach campaign.

Outreach to inform citizens about existing guidelines and regulations under the MSA, including the Bottomfish Recovery Zones is ongoing.

2) Manage upland and nearshore activities to reduce harm to marine habitat and water quality.

Many communities spend a great deal of effort and resources to fix problems caused by heedless development. San Juan County still has the chance to prevent some of these problems by adopting protective land use policies, improving stormwater management and implementing smart growth and low impact development practices.

Implementation

To promote sustainable development in the San Juans, the MRC supports and provides guidance for the County's update of the Critical Areas Ordinance, which is one tool to protect fish and wildlife habitat.

The MRC serves as the citizens' advisory committee for salmon recovery efforts.

The MRC is working with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the County on an experimental dock design program to reduce shading of eelgrass beds and other impacts to the nearshore.

We need to address causes of pollution, not symptoms. Low impact development is a promising approach

Citizen comment from public meeting on San Juan Island.

The MRC will provide education and training for citizens and businesses to promote sustainable practices to protect marine resources. Examples include low impact development for new development and retrofits, improved management of stormwater and hazardous materials, landscaping to reduce pollution and runoff, design alternatives for bulkheads and other shoreline structures, and sustainable recreation and boating practices.

The MRC will collaborate with the San Juan Initiative to assess the adequacy of current policies for addressing this strategy and explore new policies that may be needed to improve management of upland and nearshore activities.

The County should plan how it will deal with shoreline erosion, property and habitat loss as a result of sea level rise from climate change.

3) Reduce directed harvest and bycatch of selected species such as rockfish and greenling.

During the past few decades, some bottom fish species have declined to alarmingly low levels. Harvest restrictions for lingcod appear to be working to rebuild stocks while other bottom fish populations are still in trouble. Even though fishing for rockfish is closed, accidental harvest while fishing for other species is particularly hard on deep water rockfish, which often don't survive the ascent. Because rockfish are long lived and slow growing, they have a hard time recovering when populations become depleted.

Implementation

The MRC continues to educate the public about the Bottomfish Recovery Zone (BRZ) Program which designates voluntary no-fish zones in the San Juans. The MRC continues to work with the SeaDoc Society to evaluate how well the BRZs are protecting bottomfish populations and has contracted with the Soundwatch program to track compliance and education in these zones.



Since rockfish caught by those fishing for salmon cannot usually be released alive, the MRC supported prohibition of salmon fishing in the Yellow and Low Island marine reserves. This proposal was adopted by the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife this spring.

Recent monitoring of the voluntary BRZ program suggests that implementation of additional measures to aid bottom fish recovery may be necessary to fulfill the goals of the program. Therefore, the MRC plans to assess public opinion on additional harvest restrictions that would aid bottom fish recovery.

4) Reduce bioaccumulative toxins in the marine environment.



Pollutants that persist in the environment and in the food web are called persistent bioaccumulative toxins. In addition to a few toxic sites in the Islands, pollutants in urban bays in Seattle and Everett travel through the food web to the San Juans. The toxic chemicals in bottom sediments and orca whales are also showing up in our bodies.

Implementation

Educate citizens and businesses about ways to reduce toxic discharges.

Support County and Town of Friday Harbor efforts to improve management of stormwater runoff, which is a major source of pollutants.

Work with the Northwest Straits Commission to clean up creosote logs and pilings.

Support efforts to clean up toxic sites.

5) Reduce the risk of large oil spills to San Juan County waters.



Vessels transport more than 15 billion gallons of oil through Puget Sound each year. The potential devastation from a large oil spill poses the greatest threat to the San Juan Islands' marine ecosystem.

Implementation

Support efforts to fund a year-round tug that can respond to distressed vessels in the San Juan Islands.

Work with the San Juan County Department of Emergency Management to prepare the County for a major spill with local representation in the group directing the response to an event.

MRC members participate with the Island Oil Spill Association.

Maintain a relationship with the state Oil Spill Advisory Committee.

6) Preserve and manage public access to natural shorelines and marine views, coupled with a strong stewardship message and compatible behavior expectations.

Public access to the shoreline was an important issue for the public and for marine managers. While increasing public access resonates with many people, marine managers were concerned with balancing access with



protection of marine habitats and species. They expressed the need for strategies which protect critical habitat and species while affording opportunities for recreation, education and research by assigning various levels of access.

Implementation

Work with marine managers to coordinate, implement and where needed, develop public access and conservation strategies.

Inform citizens about recreation, education and research opportunities in the San Juan Islands. Educate citizens about how to be good stewards of shorelines and other marine areas open to the public.

Foster public support for shorelines and marine areas with restricted public access.

Provide better monitoring of shorelines and other marine areas to encourage stewardship and observance of restricted areas.

Measuring Success: Marine Stewardship Area Monitoring Plan

Taking care of a complex and dynamic ecosystem is challenging. Our knowledge of San Juan marine and terrestrial ecosystems is limited but growing. Sophisticated models that link habitats, species and humans are only beginning to be



used effectively in other regions. We need a monitoring program to track biodiversity and assess ecosystem health, measure the effectiveness of the MSA strategies and allow adaptive management of marine resources. The MRC will work with partners to develop a monitoring program to help assess the condition of habitats and species indicative of ecosystem health as described in the MSA plan. An effective monitoring program requires careful planning, sufficient resources and coordination. It is a long term goal which will be achieved in increments.

Implementation

A portion of funds from the 2007-2009 Northwest Straits Commission grant will fund the initial development of a monitoring plan. The MRC will enlist help from the University of Washington Friday Harbor Labs, the SeaDoc Society, The Nature Conservancy, marine managers and other partners to participate in this long term effort.