

# ANNUAL REPORT 2020

## San Juan County Marine Resources Committee



## ABOUT THE MRC

The San Juan County Marine Resources Committee (MRC) is a citizen advisory committee to San Juan County dedicated to the protection and restoration of marine resources in the San Juan Islands. The San Juan MRC was the first marine resources committee established in the region. The Committee was created in 1996 as a local management alternative to an initiative for establishing a national marine sanctuary in the San Juans.

The MRC provides a citizen forum to advise the County Council on marine issues. In addition to policy issues, the MRC supports marine research and provides education and outreach.

## MRC GOALS

### **Ecological**

- To protect and restore the marine biological diversity, ecosystem processes, representative ecosystems, and special natural features.
- To conserve fish populations and the upland, nearshore, and deepwater habitats that support them.
- Prevent further reductions in marine populations including marine birds and habitats within the San Juans and increase populations of marine species to levels exceeding present levels, within the range of natural variability.

### **Cultural, social and economic**

- To recognize and appreciate the existence values provided by a fully functioning marine ecosystem. To protect and restore the marine ecosystem so that these benefits will be available for future generations.
- To recognize and protect direct use benefits for marine resources, including ceremonial, subsistence, recreational and commercial fishing.
- To acknowledge cultural heritage resources and encourage understanding and appreciation of them.
- To recognize the need for scientific research opportunities and the benefits that accrue from this research.
- To promote increased education and awareness of the marine environment.
- To protect marine-based recreational resources, including fishing, recognizing that on (and in) the water recreation and enjoyment is an important part of not only our local economy but also our community, culture and the coastal legacy we leave for our children.



## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

This extraordinary time of the COVID pandemic did not slow San Juan County's Marine Resources Committee (MRC) or the Marine Program from its work or planning for the future. In fact, the unique challenges of these times gave insight into the increased use of our marine county for recreation. The islands became a refuge for boaters, many of them novice. Increased use of bays, marinas, public docks, state parks, and shorelines are precursors to a future when a million more people will locate in the US section of the Salish Sea basin within 20 years. For most of the summer, there was hardly a place for one more boat in the San Juan Islands.

In thinking about the capacity of San Juan County's marine waters, what do we want for our future? A healthy marine environment for sure, but what management practices need to be in place for nature to thrive and people too? Those of us that have lived here for a long time wish the beauty of the Salish Sea, and especially the San Juan Islands, matched with the actual health of the marine ecosystem. Instead, we know the systems are steadily declining. The Northwest Straits Initiative link the seven counties along Washington's northern straits together to share information, guide practices, and learn how local communities can care for where we live. MRC members volunteer their time sampling for forage fish, searching for invasive green crabs, adopting a beach for Plastic Free Salish Sea, keeping eyes on the water for derelict boats, educating with the whale flag, serving in regional advisory roles from vessel traffic to whale watch licensing, and so much more. With our network of shared alliances, we are planning for designated "anchor-out" areas to protect eelgrass beds, contemplating a buoy reservation system, and hope to secure permanent funding for the county's marine program. With the pressure on the San Juan Islands and the region, the future is ours to plan without delay.

Government plays the most critical role in marine ecosystem funding, management and recovery. Skilled staff members of San Juan County's Environmental Resources Division are cranking out the work. Government to government collaboration with regional Coast Salish tribes builds our cultural and scientific knowledge, and our shared goals for ecosystem recovery are invaluable. The careful piecing together of local, state, and federal funding allows for a range of projects, many detailed in this report.

We owe a big thanks to volunteers that work for the Salish Sea marine environment and especially to the talented public servants executing this broad scope of critical work.

*Christina Koons, MRC Chair*





# MEMBERSHIP

The San Juan MRC is currently comprised of representatives from San Juan County, the Tulalip Tribal government, the University of Washington’s Friday Harbor Labs, environmental organizations, local marine-based businesses, and residents, all of whom bring a diversity of perspectives and expertise to the San Juan MRC. Two members stepped down in 2020 —Terry Turner, a long-standing member of the committee, and Jeff Friedman. The MRC welcomed new member Beth Tate, a wildlife biologist with Jen-Jay Consulting in 2020.

## MRC Members

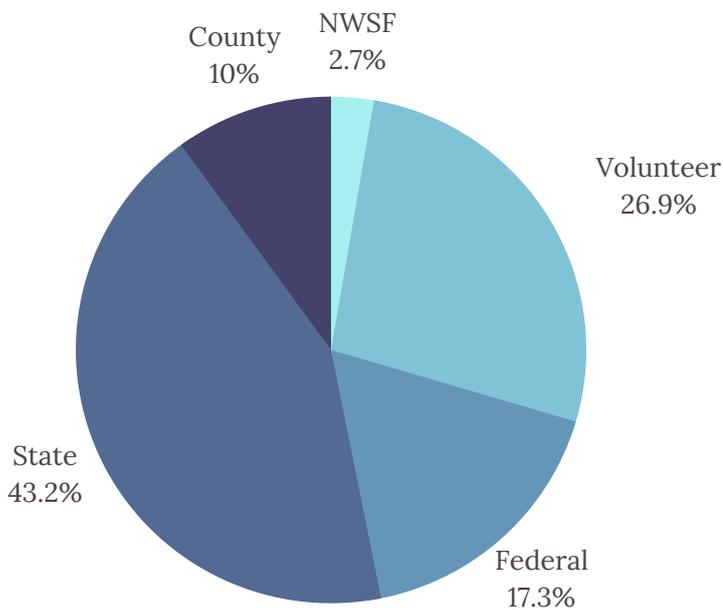
Christina Koons, Chair	Karin Roemers-Kleven, Vice-Chair
Patti Gobin, Tulalip Tribes	Lovel Pratt, Friends of the San Juans
Dr. Megan Dethier, Friday Harbor Labs, University of Washington	Kendra Smith, Environmental Resources Manager, San Juan County
Cathleen Burns, San Juan Island	Jeff Dyer, Lopez Island
Carl Davis, Orcas Island	Laura Jo Severson, San Juan Island
Kailey Genther, San Juan Island	Phil Green, San Juan Island
Beth Tate, Jen Jay Consulting	Ivan Reiff, Pintail Marine & PWWA

**Ex-Officio and Support Staff:** Jamie Stephens, San Juan County Council, Dr. Frances Robertson, MRC Coordinator, Sam Whitridge, Salmon Recovery Coordinator

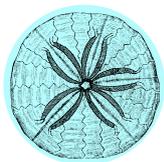


# FUNDING

The MRC is predominantly funded through a grant administered by the Northwest Straits Commission. This grant is comprised of state and federal dollars that fund the basic MRC operations as well as specific projects. In addition to these funds, the MRC received support from San Juan County and small grants from the Northwest Straits Foundation. The time and resources dedicated to the MRC by its members provide just over a quarter of the annual support for the program.



## Value of volunteer hours



\$40,561

## 2020 VOLUNTEER SUPPORT



1,228 hours

The value of community citizens volunteering their time, expertise, and resources cannot be emphasized enough. Over the 2019-2020 grant cycle, MRC members put in over 1000 hours despite many of the committee's normal activities being impacted by the COVID pandemic. This included attending meetings, organizing workshops, guiding the MRCs research assistants, participating in outreach, and beach clean-ups.



26.9%

value of volunteer hours and resources 2019-2020

## MRC OPERATIONS

The 2019-2020 year was one of great triumphs and great challenges for the MRC. The MRC successfully hosted a Marine Managers Workshop in March 2020, the last in-person gathering for almost all involved before the full impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic arrived. Despite the challenges presented by the COVID crisis the MRC successfully pivoted, continuing monthly meetings over online platforms. MRC staff maintained high-quality regular reporting to both the NWSC and the granting agencies, including administering and tracking of budgets and project deliverables and maintaining an online presence through both the MRC website and its associated facebook page.

The MRC expanded its efforts to improve local awareness of the MRC and the County's Marine Program by expanding the use of its social media platforms, reengaging in the local Stewardship Network, and publishing articles in the local media. Other accomplishments outside the regular management of the MRC grant and associated projects included an update to the MRC members manual, last updated in 2015.

The MRC was represented on the Northwest Straits Commission by Chair Christina Koons and member Phil Green. Phil also represented the MRC on the Local Integrating Organization (LIO) along with MRC coordinator Frances Robertson. Both these efforts allow the San Juan MRC to contribute to local and regional planning, and funding decisions. San Juan MRC continued to collaborate with the San Juan LIO throughout the year on oil spill prevention efforts for the County. The LIO Coordinator and MRC member Lovel Pratt presented on these joint oil spill prevention efforts at the July 23 NWSC symposium. More information on this work can be found here: <https://www.sjcmrc.org/projects/oil-spill-prevention/>



## ADVISORY ROLE

The MRC has been involved in advising the county on matters related to marine resources since its inception. This advisory role is a critical part of the MRC's activities.

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The MRC provides scientifically-based guidance on issues that affect the County's marine environment.

Core advisory activities in 2020 included:

- Supporting NOAA proposals to establish or extend Critical Habitat for humpback whales and Southern Resident killer whales.
- Supporting the Puget Sound Kelp Recovery Plan.
- Participation in the Puget Sound on the Hill virtual events.
- Participation in the State Commercial Whale Watch Licensing process.



San Juan County Lead Entity for Salmon Recovery

### SALMON RECOVERY

The MRC also undertakes the role of Citizens Salmon Advisory Group for Watershed Regional Inventory Area (WIRA) #2, the local Lead Entity for Salmon Recovery in the San Juan Islands.

The MRC provides the final scoring for all proposed salmon recovery projects in the year's grant round. This is perhaps one of the most important roles that the MRC undertakes each year.

In 2020 the MRC helped ensure that **\$1,311,186** were awarded to San Juan County for Salmon Recovery.



**\$1,311,186**

Awarded to salmon recovery  
in San Juan County in 2020

## OUTREACH

The majority of the San Juan County MRC's project efforts focus on education and outreach. Education and outreach are key components to the Marine Stewardship Area Strategy focused on fostering a stewardship ethic in visitors and residents to the County. During the 2019-2020 grant year, the MRC undertook outreach efforts in two core areas:

- 1.Reducing impacts of vessels of Southern Resident killer whales.
- 2.Reducing the impacts of single-use plastics on the marine environment.

In addition, the MRC began outreach efforts related to eelgrass and the impacts of visitors on the False Bay Biological Preserve.

## SOUTHERN RESIDENT KILLER WHALES

### BOATER ENGAGEMENT

San Juan County MRC continued to engage with boaters on a local and regional scale, supporting the transboundary Be Whale Wise partnership at regional boat shows and with the distribution and installation of updated Be Whale Wise signage.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted all in-person outreach efforts that were planned for the summer boating season, including participation in the Anacortes Boat Show and dock talks around the County. However, the MRC was able to continue to share messaging through their social media platforms and through further establishing connections with the recreational boating community.



### THE WHALE WARNING FLAG

Efforts also continued around the whale warning flag. While direct outreach with boaters was limited due to restrictions related to limiting the spread of COVID-19 whale flags continued to be distributed through online sales directly with the County and through partnerships with Fisheries Supply in Seattle and the Marine Education and Research Society in British Columbia Canada. As a result, a further 294 whale warning flags were distributed over the course of 2020. Soundwatch continued to collect data on flag use and compliance rates.



### SAN JUAN COUNTY PARKS BOATER SAFETY KIOSK

The MRC partnered with San Juan County Parks to create a boater safety kiosk. This new kiosk provides boaters launching from the park with information on Be Whale Wise, KELP guidelines, the whale warning flag, and the voluntary westside salmon and whale sanctuary zone. The kiosk also serves as a life-vest loaning station. San Juan County Parks procured the life-vests through donation and will be adding them in 2021.



## A STORYBOARD FOR THE SOUTHERN RESIDENTS

The San Juan MRC and San Juan County have a long history of efforts related to the protection of the endangered Southern Resident killer whales. These efforts were compiled into a timeline using archived MRC material and interviews with one of the founding MRC members, Dr. Rich Osborne, and former Soundwatch coordinator, Kari Koski, both key players in these efforts.

This storyboard was created by a communications assistant whose position was made possible through a Northwest Straits Foundation grant. The storyboard can be found here:

<https://spark.adobe.com/page/h09XWPsvE876O/>



## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Distributed or installed 37 Be Whale Wise dock signs
- Distributed 1000 Be Whale Wise and whale warning flag leaflets
- Dispatched a further 294 whale warning flags.
- Created boater safety kiosk and signage
- Created outreach storyboard



# PLASTIC FREE SALISH SEA



# PLASTIC FREE SALISH SEA

Plastic Free Salish Sea is a partnership created and led by the San Juan County MRC. The initiative seeks to change citizen behavior and the culture of plastic use in San Juan County and the surrounding Salish Sea region. Through 2019 and 2020 the MRC built off the efforts they had begun in 2018. With the development of the PFSS brand design the MRC set out to expand the reach of its efforts throughout the county and around the Salish Sea with the following core goals:

- Create and publish the newly branded PFSS website
- Complete market research and create a series of toolkits
- Engage with the community through annual and monthly beach clean-up events

## WEBSITE AND TOOLKITS

July 2020 saw the official launch of the Plastic Free Salish Sea (PFSS) website. This included the publication of a series of three toolkits providing guidance to individuals, businesses, and community events on how to reduce and eventually eliminate single-use plastics in San Juan County and the wider region. The website creates a central hub for information on solid waste management in the islands, tips for zero-waste living, and a curated list of organizations working towards a plastic-free future.

While direct outreach to local businesses and the community were not possible due to COVID, the PFSS initiative successfully reacted to the challenges introduced by the pandemic. The group created an infographic and published an op-ed in the local papers about how to reduce waste during COVID-19.

MRC members also participated in monthly and seasonal beach clean-ups.

## How To Reduce Your Waste During COVID-19

### Guidance from Plastic Free Salish Sea

#### REDUCE YOUR USE OF SINGLE USE GROCERY BAGS

**BEST:** Refuse a bag! Don't bag your groceries, return your items to your cart or basket and pack them into your clean, reusable bags or boxes at your car or bike, or if by foot just bag them up outside the store!

**GOOD:** Accept a recycled paper bag and bag up your groceries yourself.

**AVOID:** Using the single use plastic bags offered in the stores.

#### REDUCE THE PACKAGING YOUR FOOD IS IN

**BEST:** Buy fresh, buy local - utilize local farm stands or CSA boxes, often delivered right to your door.

**GOOD:** Choose family size to reduce how many times you go to the store or choose items packaged in plastic #1 or #2, cardboard cartons, or metal cans - these container types can be recycled.

**AVOID:** Single serving packaged items.

#### REDUCE YOUR TAKE OUT FOOTPRINT

**BEST:** Refuse the extra paper napkins, plastic forks or knives. If you plan to eat your take out at your favorite outdoor spot, be sure to have your reusable silverware set and napkin in the car.

**GOOD:** Accept single use silverware that is compostable.

**AVOID:** Single use plastic silverware and sauce packets.

#### DON'T FORGET! USE REUSABLE, WASHABLE FACEMASKS WHEN OUT IN PUBLIC

Leave the medical grade facemasks for the health professionals and sew one yourself or support a local community member who is making them - most are also donating to essential workers so it's a win-win. Gloves may feel safer but remember the best is to wash your hands often - use the hand wash stations outside groceries stores and don't touch your face!

**PLASTIC FREE SALISH SEA**  
[PlasticFreeSalishSea.org](http://PlasticFreeSalishSea.org)



## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Launched website [www.plasticfreesalishsea.org](http://www.plasticfreesalishsea.org).
- Created 3 outreach videos and published them on the website.
- Created 3 toolkits for zero waste living.
- produced guidance to reduce individual waste impact during COVID-19.
- Participated in county-wide beach cleans.

# FALSE BAY VISITOR SURVEYS

2020 saw the popularity of outdoor recreation increase. Locally, the first signs of this were with the number of visitors to the county's beaches and parks. False Bay, a biological preserve owned by the University of Washington was a popular spot for locals and visitors alike, particularly during the spring when extreme low tides allow people to walk out over the tidal flats. Concern from scientists, False Bay residents, and MRC members resulted in an Adhoc effort to conduct outreach and also a survey.



- 43 surveys were completed.
- 67% of visitors from San Juan Island.
- Remaining visitors from the Seattle Area (12%), elsewhere in Washington or out of state.
- 67% regular visitors.
- 91% aware that the bay is a biological preserve.

## WHY THE CONCERN

With the increase in visitors, there was concern over the number of dogs and activities that may disturb the sensitive ecosystems and species that use the bay, including migrating birds, and eelgrass (whose beds are exposed at low tide).



# 80%

visiting for nature with 75% choosing to visit at low tide.

## RESEARCH & PLANNING

During the 2019-2020 grant year, the MRC made significant progress on their update of the Marine Stewardship Area Plan and continued to exgage and advise on oil spill prevention efforts.

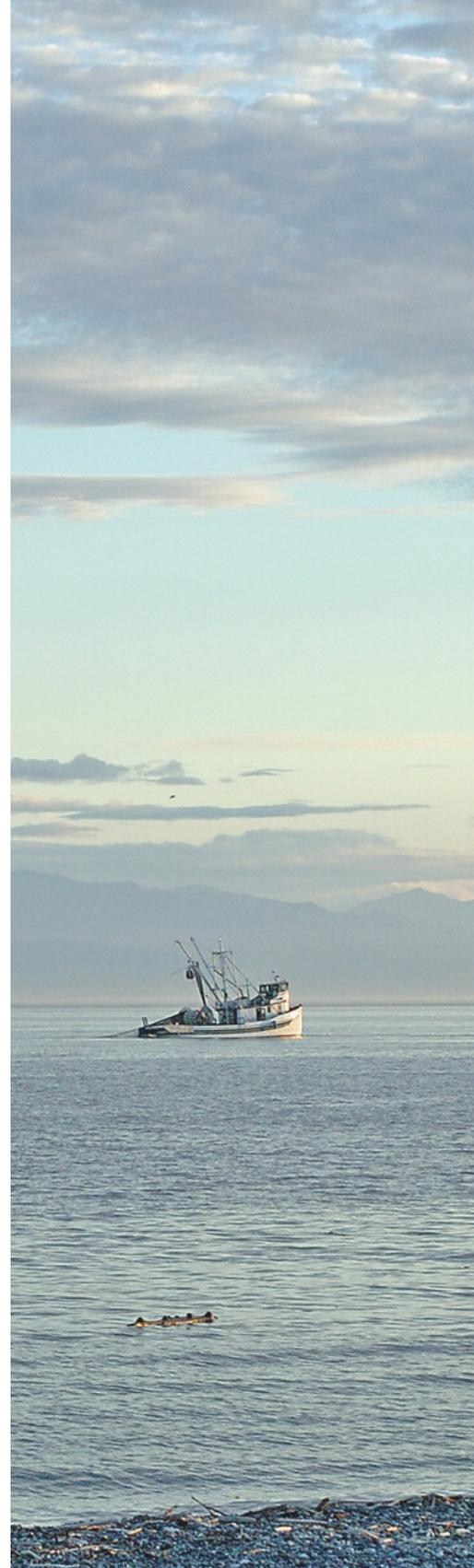
### MARINE STEWARDSHIP AREA PLAN

San Juan County MRC began a review of the Marine Stewardship Area (MSA) Plan in early 2019. This review continued in 2020, allowing the committee to update the MSA Plan by an assessment of the current state of knowledge of key species and habitats in the San Juan County MSA. The MRC was assisted by an intern which was made possible through funding from the Northwest Straits Foundation and the MRC grant.

The long-term goal of this project is to ensure that the MSA Plan includes the most relevant information regarding the County's marine resources to re-engage local residents and visitors alike in these sensitive marine habitats and resources within San Juan County.

The core goals for the first year of this project included:

- Assess the current state of knowledge of key species and habitats in the San Juan County MSA
- Host a Marine Managers Workshop



## REVIEW OF MARINE BIODIVERSITY TARGETS

The 2019-2020 grant year focused on reviewing and updating the MSA Plans' biodiversity targets. The original biodiversity targets identified in 2007 were amended slightly to include the following:

- Intertidal and Nearshore Habitats
- Kelp and Eelgrass
- Subtidal Habitats
- Rockfish, lingcod, and greenling
- Pacific salmon and forage fish
- Sea birds
- Marine mammals

A combination of methods, including literature reviews, interviews with natural resource managers and scientists, and a dedicated marine managers workshop were used to compile the data required to allow these marine biodiversity targets to be updated.



## MARINE MANAGERS WORKSHOP

The MRC hosted a Marine Managers Workshop on March 10 and 11, 2020 at the University of Washington's Friday Harbor Labs. Forty-three individuals participated in the workshop, representing a variety of local and regional interest groups. This was the last public gathering by the MRC and the Friday Harbor Labs before the shutdowns in response to COVID.



Despite the increasing threats, stressors, and knowledge gaps identified throughout the workshop, discussions during each session revealed a growing list of positive actions that have been or are being undertaken in the County or by other groups in the Salish Sea region.

### REVIEW OF MSA STRATEGIES

The MSA Subcommittee also undertook a review of the 2007 plan's strategic actions. This enabled them to identify which entities were working on each action, and what progress or accomplishments had been achieved since the publication of the plan.

The review was compiled into a Strategic Action Status Report in which each strategic action was identified as having no progress, some progress, significant progress, or unknown/too broad to achieve. This effort lays the foundation for phase II of the MSA update to identify limitations with the original strategies and revise the strategies with achievable actions. This second phase will be implemented during the 2020-2021 grant year.

Results of Strategic Action Status Review:

- No progress or regressed: 28% (10 strategies)
- Some progress: 56% (20 strategies)
- Unable to determine: 8% (3 strategies)
- Significant progress: 8% (3 strategies)

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hosting the 2020 Marine Managers Workshop.
- Completed interviews and literature search to support biodiversity target updates.
- Identified current status, threats, and knowledge gaps for each biodiversity target.
- Completed Strategic Action status review.



# OIL SPILL PREVENTION

This risk of a major oil spill is of huge concern to the County. It was identified as the highest-ranking threat to marine biodiversity in the 2007 Marine Stewardship Area Plan and was again identified as a top threat at the 2020 Marine Managers Workshop. The MRC works closely with the County, the San Juan Local Integrating Organization (LIO), and local non-profit organizations to further efforts towards oil spill prevention.

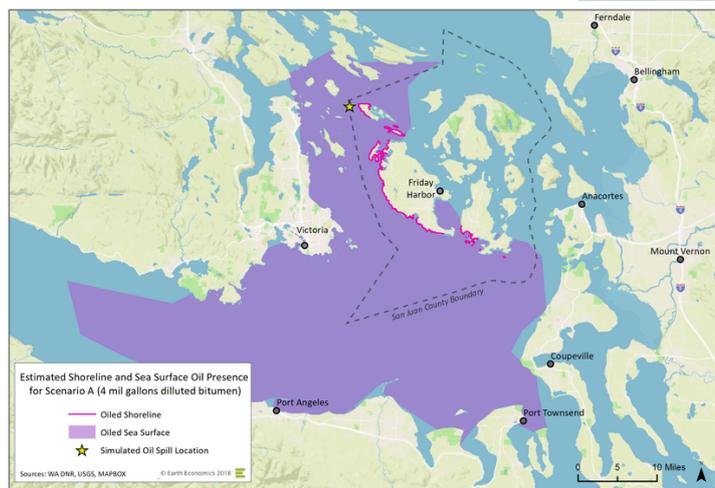
In 2016, the San Juan MRC submitted a Near Term Action proposal for a comprehensive Oil Spill Risk Consequences Assessment. In early 2018 the LIO selected the Near Term Action proposal for locally-directed \$100,000 funding. San Juan County, on behalf of the MRC contracted with economic consultants to perform an Oil Spills Consequences Assessment for San Juan County (Earth Economics) and to evaluate the cost of an additional emergency response towing vessel (ERTV, Northern Economics).

The MRC oil spill subcommittee played a key role in reviewing, approving and publicizing these reports. The reports were published in 2018 and made available on the MRC website (below). The MRC continues to play a key advisory role in the next phase of these efforts — an analysis of vessel drift and ERTV response.

[www.sjcmrc.org/projects/oil-spill-prevention/](http://www.sjcmrc.org/projects/oil-spill-prevention/)

San Juan MRC, the County's LIO coordinator, and the NWSC co-hosted an online symposium summarizing these efforts in June 2020.

*Estimated shoreline and sea surface oil presence for a 4-million gallon diluted bitumen spill at Turn Point.*



# WHAT'S NEXT?



The San Juan MRC are continuing with their core projects through the 2020-2021 grant year. In addition, plans are underway for embarking on new projects and hosting virtual events.

## PLANNED EVENTS

- The MRC is partnering with Western Washington's Salish Sea Institute to host a science symposium in mid-March 2021 on the subject of Navy jet noise and impacts on the marine and terrestrial environment.
- The MRC is partnering with the County's Solid Waste Program to host a series of virtual community workshops to provide information on ways to reduce waste and use of plastics in San Juan County. These will provide opportunities to highlight and share the PFSS website, toolkits and other resources available to the community.

## FUTURE PROJECTS

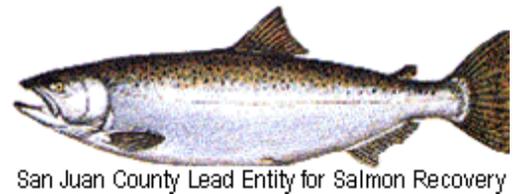
The MRC are excited to embark on new projects in the coming years. These include:

1. Re-starting the derelict vessel prevention program to support the County's Derelict Vessel Program.
2. Monitoring vessel presence and compliance at eelgrass protection sites.
3. Partnering with the Friday Harbor Labs and Friends of False Bay to monitor ecological conditions and visitor usage.
4. Continuing to build partnerships with local Tribes and local organizations for the benefit of San Juan County's Marine Resources.



# PARTNERS

The work of the San Juan County MRC is made possible through grants, collaborations, and partnerships.



San Juan County Lead Entity for Salmon Recovery



This project has been funded wholly or in part by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Environmental Protection Agency, nor does mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.



# LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Many of the photographs used throughout this report have been contributed by MRC members, staff, or partners. Credits and descriptions are provided below.

- Cover page - False Bay, San Juan Island at low tide, *Frances Robertson*
- Page 1 - Shoaling herring, westside San Juan Island, *Anne Shaffer*
- Page 2 - Kelp bed, *Northwest Straits Commission*
- Page 3 - Two Rhinoceros auklets, *Phil Green*  
Group of harbor porpoise, *Alison Engle*
- Page 4 - MRC Vice-Chair, Karin Romers Kleven looking at eelgrass, exposed during low tides at False Bay, *Frances Robertson*
- Page 5 - Sheltered pocket beach, Griffen Bay, San Juan Island, *Frances Robertson*
- Page 6 - MRC and Salmon Recovery grant advisors visiting Crescent Beach, Orcas Island, a project site for Salmon Recovery funds in San Juan County, *Frances Robertson*
- Page 7 - A large male Southern Resident killer whale surfacing with a sailboat in the background, *Sandy Buckley*
- Page 8 - Soundwatch boat, *The Whale Museum*  
Boat with whale warning flag, *Frances Robertson*  
San Juan County Park boater safety kiosk, *Frances Robertson*
- Page 9 - Lime Kiln lighthouse, Lime Kiln Point State Park, San Juan Island, *Getty Images*
- Page 11 - Beach trash collected during the Fall Great Islands Clean-up, *Frances Robertson*  
MRC member, Jeff Dyer on his electric bike towing his kayak filled with breach trash collected from beaches on Lopez Island, *Jeff Dyer*
- Page 12 - Volunteers collecting visitor survey data at False Bay, *Frances Robertson*  
Visitors to False Bay walking out over the tidal flats at low tide, *Frances Robertson*
- Page 13 - Purse seine fishing boat off South Beach, San Juan Island, *Unknown*
- Page 14 - Sunset over the islands, *Phil Green*  
Participants at the Marine Managers Workshop, *Frances Robertson*
- Page 15 - Kelp, *Phil Green*
- Page 16 - Southern Resident killer whales with a tanker ship in the background, *Sandy Buckley*
- Page 17 - Port of Friday Harbor, *Frances Robertson*  
Pinto abalone, *Washington Fish and Wildlife*
- Page 18 - A hooded nudibranch on eelgrass, *Phil Green*
- Page 19 - A Washington State Ferry moving through the Islands, *Unknown*

