

ANNUAL REPORT 2024

San Juan County Marine Resource Committee



ABOUT THE MRC

The San Juan County Marine Resources Committee (MRC) is an 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 1996 as a local management alternative to an initiative for establishing a national marine sanctuary in the San Juans. In addition to policy issues, the MRC supports marine research and planning and provides education and outreach.

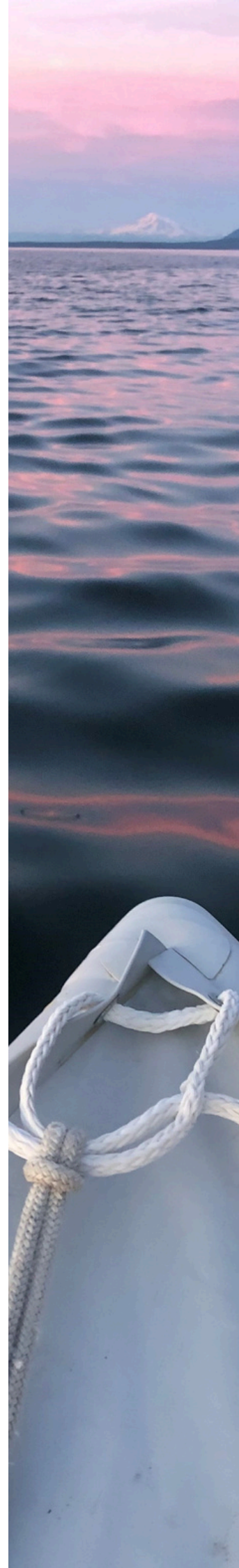
MRC GOALS

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.



MEMBERSHIP



SAN JUAN COUNTY
Marine Resources
Committee

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, the Port of Friday Harbor, environmental organizations, local marine-based businesses, and residents, all of whom bring a diversity of perspectives and expertise to the Marine Resource Committee. In 2024 we said goodbye to Jeff Dyer and Aaron Boyles. We are grateful for their contributions and efforts throughout their time with the MRC. This year the MRC was thrilled to welcome two new members, Olivia Graham and Mike Ramsey.

MRC Members

Adam Parrott, Chair	Karin Roemers-Kleven, Vice Chair
Sandy Wyllie-Echeverria , Friday Harbor Labs, University of Washington	Kendra Smith, Director, Department of Env. Stewardship
Christina Koons, Orcas Island	Lovel Pratt, Friends of the San Juans
Patti Gobin, Tulalip Tribes	Mike Ramsey, San Juan Island
Craig Smith, San Juan Island	Brian Goodremont, San Juan Outfitters
David Checkley, Shaw Island	Matt Arata, A1 Marine
Olivia Graham, Friday Harbor Labs	Aaron Boyles*, Jen Jay Consulting
Kailey Genther, San Juan Island	Jeff Dyer* Lopez Island
Beth Tate, Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife	

Ex-Officio and Support Staff:

Sam Whitridge, Marine Program Coordinator

Kari Koski, Derelict Vessel Coordinator

Dr. Frances Robertson, Marine Project Manager

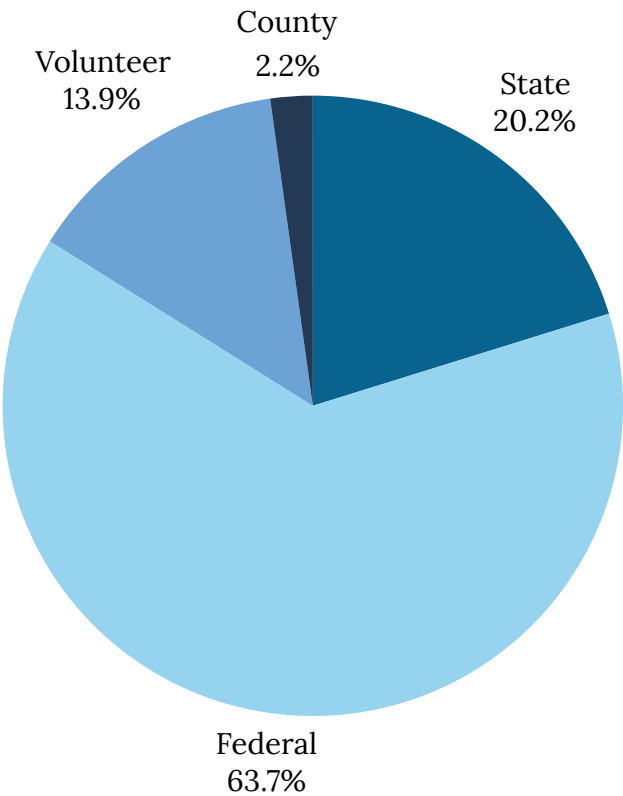
Katie Johnson, Marine Project Coordinator

Cindy Wolf, San Juan County Council



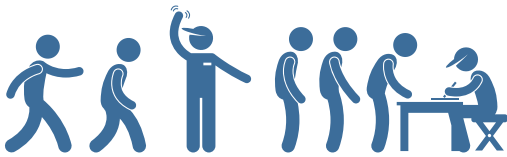
FUNDING

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 also receives support from San Juan County and may also partner with the County in seeking external grants. The time and resources dedicated to the MRC by its members provide invaluable support for the program.



\$36,080 **Value of
volunteer hours**

2024 VOLUNTEER SUPPORT



902 hours

The value of community members volunteering their time, expertise, and resources cannot be emphasized enough. Over the 2023-2024 grant cycle, MRC members and volunteers put in nearly 1,000 hours. This included running and attending meetings, coordinating workshops and roundtables, providing expert guidance in the County's oil spill prevention efforts, volunteering in monitoring efforts, participating in outreach and beach clean-ups.



13.9%

value of volunteer
hours and resources
2023-2024

MRC OPERATIONS

The MRC continued its regular operations throughout 2024, carrying on with collaborative meeting structure developed in 2022. We have integrated the MRC, Salmon Recovery Citizens Advisory Group (CAG), and Local Integrating Organization (LIO) committee meetings, while still maintaining committee autonomy and independent membership. MRC members regularly attend the CAG and LIO meetings, which allows for increased efficiency and better cross pollination across committees.

The MRC was represented at regular LIO regional meetings by Adam Parrot, Sam Whitridge, and Katie Johnson, contributing to scope and funding decisions for LIO implementation. The MRC was represented on the Northwest Straits Commission by Christina Koons.



MRC members and support staff participated in the annual Northwest Straits Initiative Conference. The two-day event was filled with hope, collaboration, and a shared vision for developing community-driven marine conservation systems and projects that will protect and restore the health of local marine ecosystems.



ADVISORY ROLE

The MRC has been involved in advising the County on matters related to marine resources since its inception in 1996. This advisory role is a critical part of the MRC's activities and has a widespread impact on San Juan County.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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

Core advisory actions for 2024 included:

- Participation in the Natural Resource Agencies' Congressional Staff Tour in August.
- Continued conversations about the importance of an Emergency Response Towing Vessel (ERTV) to be located in or near County waters.



SALMON RECOVERY

The MRC also undertakes the role of the Citizen's Advisory Group for Salmon Recovery in Water Resource Inventory Area #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 one of the most important roles the MRC undertakes each year.

In 2024 the MRC helped to ensure that \$2.28 million dollars was awarded for Salmon Recovery Projects in San Juan County.



San Juan County Lead Entity for Salmon Recovery

\$2.28M

Awarded to Salmon Recovery in
San Juan County 2024

OUTREACH & EDUCATION

With over 400 miles of shoreline and 400 rocks, reefs, and islands, communicating the importance of marine resources is a large undertaking. The majority of the San Juan County Marine Resource Committee'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.

MARINE STEWARDSHIP

In 2024 the MRC helped finalize the State of the Marine Stewardship Area Report. This report looks at the unique aspects and challenges of a healthy marine ecosystem. It offers recommendations for future management and conservation efforts to preserve the valuable marine resources that make the San Juans unique. This report was compiled over several years through MRC hosted Marine Manager Workshops, which coalesced experts and marine managers to set priority goals and actions for the marine environment. Through this expertise, the State of the MSA offers a roadmap for protecting the local marine ecosystem. Under the umbrella of marine stewardship, the MRC can connect with scientists and researchers, marina operators, recreational boating and fishing managers, and provide guidance around issues of oil spill prevention, tidal energy plans, derelict vessel & fishing gear prevention, response, and removal; and more.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Finalized the State of the Marine Stewardship Area Report
- Engaged community members and visitors through tabling and public events
- Began creating stronger networks for marine managers, marina operators, and derelict vessel response
- Increased visitor awareness of marine stewardship opportunities.

SOUTHERN RESIDENT KILLER WHALE OUTREACH



The Whale Warning Flag is a tool created and distributed by the MRC to alert boaters when whales are in the vicinity. Outreach efforts began in January with helping staff the Be Whale Wise booth at the Seattle Boat show.

Efforts continued throughout the busy boating season with public outreach at the University of Washington's Friday Harbor Labs Open House. MRC members and Marine Program Intern, Roan Ontjes-Degroot visited Roche Harbor Marina, Deer Harbor Marina and tabled at the San Juan County Fair pass out Whale Warning Flags and communicate with boaters. Over the course of the year the MRC distributed over 100 Whale Warning Flags to recreational boaters and interested parties. More people are recognizing and using the Whale Warning Flag, which is helping to change boater behavior surrounding whales. This will become even more important with distance regulations increasing to 1,000 yards for SRKW in 2025.



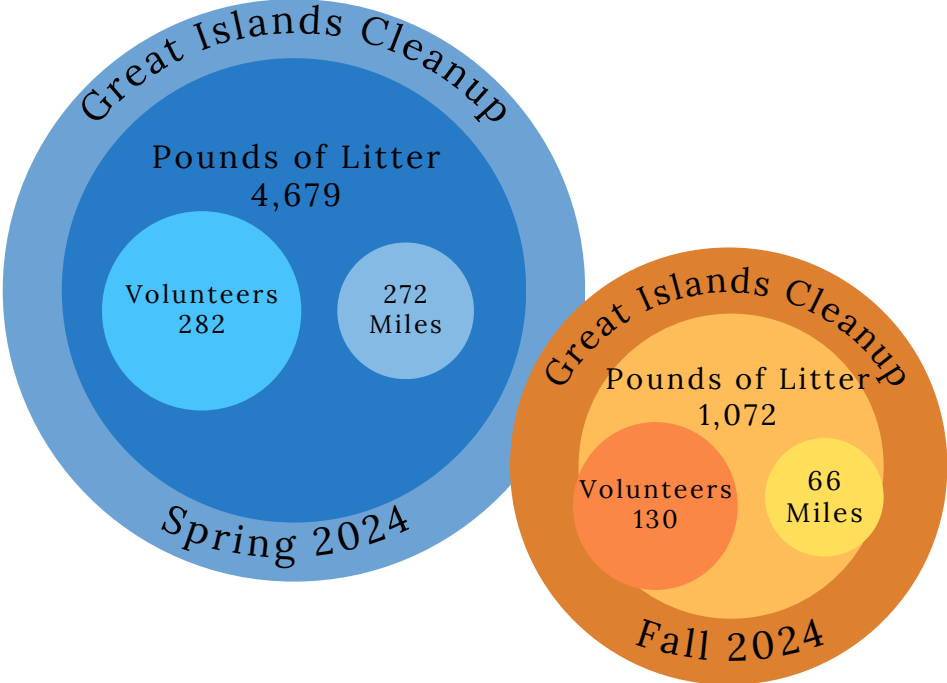
ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Successfully engaged recreational boaters in awareness of Be Whale Wise regulations around the endangered Southern Resident Killer Whales through dock talks, tabling at community events, and boat shows
- Passed out over 100 Whale Warning Flags both in person and via email inquiries
- Engaged with Be Whale Wise partners at the local and state level to ensure Whale Warning Flags have appropriate materials conveying distance messaging.

PLASTIC FREE SALISH SEA

Plastic Free Salish Sea continued to promote reducing, reusing, and recycling plastic waste throughout the Salish Sea. Ongoing efforts to steward beaches and roadways through the Adopt-a-Beach and Adopt-a-Road programs continued. The Spring and Fall Great Islands Cleanups were successful in engaging the public in litter cleanups. The MRC coordinated with non-ferry served islands to participate in cleanup activities on Decatur, Stuart, Waldron and Yellow Islands collecting an additional 905 pounds of debris.

Plastic Free Salish Sea supported the County’s Solid Waste Program with plastic film recycling on San Juan Island. Volunteers checked the bin daily. At the end of the one-year pilot, the Youth Conservation Corps helped sort and categorize a week’s worth of plastic film. The youth were shocked at how much plastic could be accumulated in just seven days. In total 4.72 tons of plastic film were diverted from landfills over the course of the pilot program.



In the Fall, Plastic Free Salish Sea expanded outreach efforts by partnering with local groups and organizations to host monthly beach cleanups focused on removing microplastics at Jackson's Beach. Orca Network, the San Juan County Sheriff's Department Guild, and the Whale Museum brought out over 40 volunteers to find and remove litter, microplastics, and nurdles to keep our seas plastic free!



PLASTIC FREE SALISH SEA

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- 410 volunteers removed over roughly 6,650 lbs of debris from beaches and roadways across San Juan County during the Spring and Fall GICUs.
- Initiated a Fall series of monthly beach cleanups in conjunction with local groups and organizations to focus on microplastics at Jackson's Beach gathering over 40 volunteers to remove 23 lbs of marine debris
- Revamped the website to further engage the public
- Shared the message of Plastic Free Salish Sea at Storming the Sound conference, the County Fair, and through social media
- In addition to the bi-annual GICU, outreach to the outer islands and removal of 905 lbs. of debris from Stuart, Waldron, Decatur and Yellow Islands.

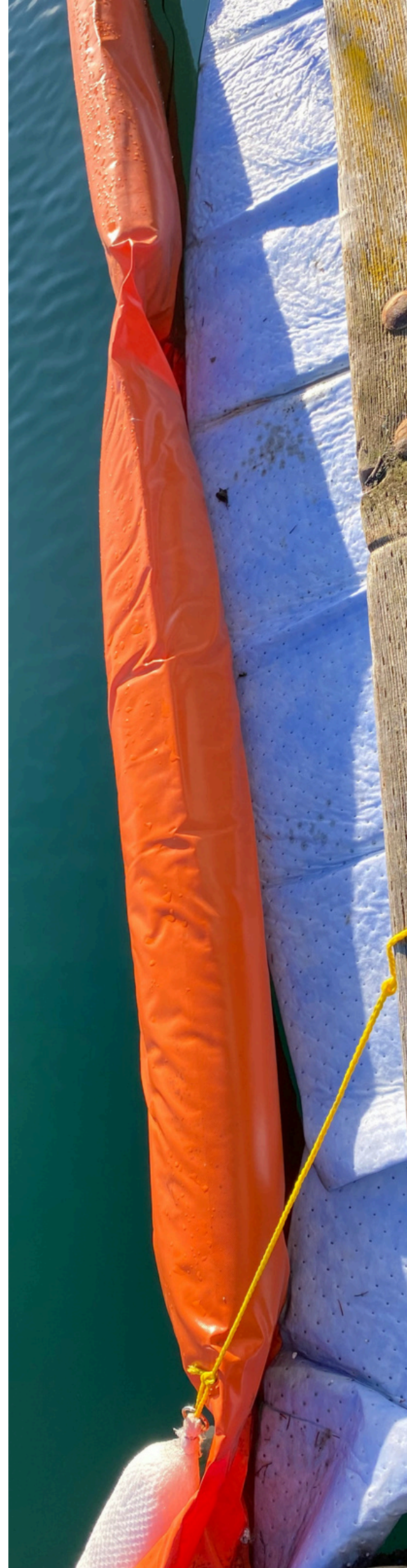
PREVENTION

Prevention efforts are hard to quantify, but ultimately prevention is much more cost effective than responding to active threats. Being prepared and aware before a disaster strikes makes a huge difference for wildlife and human health, as well as ecological, recreational and economic impacts. Preventing marine hazards, like derelict vessels and oil spills, helps to keep marine waters safe, minimizes risk, and safeguards all who call the Salish Sea home.

OIL SPILL PREVENTION

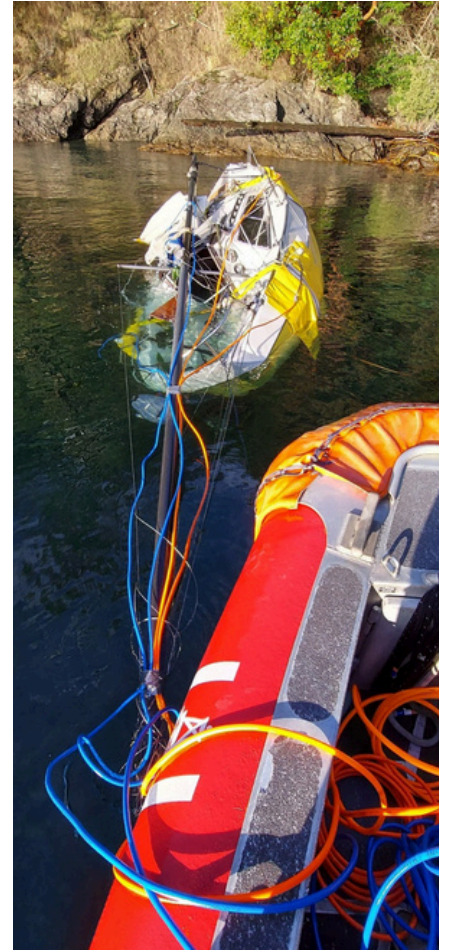
The risk of a major oil spill is a prime concern for San Juan County. It was identified as the highest-ranking threat to marine biodiversity in the 2007 Marine Stewardship Area Plan and was again identified as a top threat at the 2020 Marine Managers Workshop. The MRC works closely with the County, the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

In 2024, the MRC continued to advocate for an Emergency Response Towing Vessel (ERTV) to be stationed in nearby waters ready to act in the event of a catastrophic oil spill. Prevention is crucial in order to mitigate horrific accidents that have huge impacts on the environment and economics. The MRC is dedicated towards raising awareness around oil spill risk and providing education and resources to help. Collaborating with others helps spread the message of prevention and creates a stronger network for response. The MRC was represented at meetings with the Islands Trust Council and the Ad-Hoc Transboundary Caucus in advocating for oil spill prevention.



DERELICT VESSEL PREVENTION PROGRAM

San Juan County's Derelict Vessel Prevention Program was first established by the MRC in 2012 as a proactive approach to identifying and removing vessels of concern before they become a hazard to the environment and/or navigation. Throughout 2024, the MRC performed routine vessel patrols to identify Vessels of Concern (VOC), contacted vessel owners to address those concerns, promoted the DNR Vessel Turn-In Program (VTiP), and piloted a free vessel recycling turn-in event with regional and local partners. They also promoted vessel maintenance, how to identify and report derelict vessels, engaged the community through social and news media, and provided education to other MRCs at the Northwest Straits Conference and the NOAA Washington Marine Debris Workgroup.



In partnership with Department of Natural Resources, the Northwest Straits Commission and the Port of Friday Harbor, the MRC co-planned and piloted a free Vessel Turn-in & Recycling Event. It was a great success with 14 vessels surrendered. The dismantled vessels generated nearly 50 tons of debris; however, 47.81 tons of wood, metal and plastic were kept out of the landfill by recycling. Additionally, over 240 gallons of mixed fuels and other hazardous liquids, 22 fire extinguishers, 1 propane tank and 443 pounds of marine batteries were removed, helping to keep vessel debris and toxic materials out of the marine environment and out of landfills.



Boater outreach occurred during summer dock talks, yet the most successful education piece occurred during the County Fair. The notorious derelict vessel, “OH NO!” crash landed events daily, causing a ruckus just like real derelict vessels. Through these interactive interruptions, the MRC was able to raise awareness about how to report derelict vessels and familiarize fair goers with the prevention program.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- 27 Vessels removed from county waters –including 14 through the collaborative Turn-in Event; 6 removals with County’s Derelict Vessel Removal Program; 5 county residents using the VTiP outside of the turn-in event, and 2 large DNR removal projects- the raising and removal of the Chief Joseph and the El Capitan. Plus- 1 car removed from False Bay!
- Successfully piloted a Vessel Turn-in & Recycling Event in conjunction with the NWSC, DNR, and the Port, diverting 47.81 tons from landfills
- Widespread community outreach by steering the derelict vessel, “OH NO!” through the County Fair and promoting derelict vessel prevention in a fun and engaging way
- Performed 11 on-water patrols and 12 land-based patrols
- Resolved 12 vessels of concern by owners taking responsibility for thier boats.

RESEARCH & MONITORING

Research and monitoring studies are essential to provide the scientific foundation needed to protect and restore local marine ecosystems. Data collected through local monitoring efforts empowers the MRC to make strategic, evidence-based recommendations that protect critical habitat and strengthen the long-term resilience of marine environments.

EELGRASS PROTECTION

To better protect the important and dwindling marine vegetation in San Juan County, the MRC participates in monitoring efforts at known eelgrass zones. MRC members visited their respective sites multiple times throughout the summer, ensuring inclusion of busy holiday weekends, regular summer weekends, and weekdays. Each survey consisted of counting the total number of boats anchored or moored, as well as other relevant data (date, time, tide height, weather conditions, and photos if possible). During the 2024 boating season over 80 shore-based vessel surveys were conducted at 7 different sites throughout the San Juan Islands including Bell Point, Buck Bay, Crescent Beach, Eastsound, Mud/Hunter Bay, Odlin County Park and Watmough Bay.



One strategy to protect sensitive eelgrass habitat, is to install and monitor anchor out buoys. Odlin County Park is home to the only buoy designated anchor out zone installed in the San Juans.

Throughout the monitoring season zero boats were spotted anchoring in this zone, proving the buoy's effectiveness. However, installation of buoys can be damaging to sensitive eelgrass habitats. To be less invasive, there has been a push to create virtual no-anchor zones through educational outreach and public engagement via social media and navigation apps.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

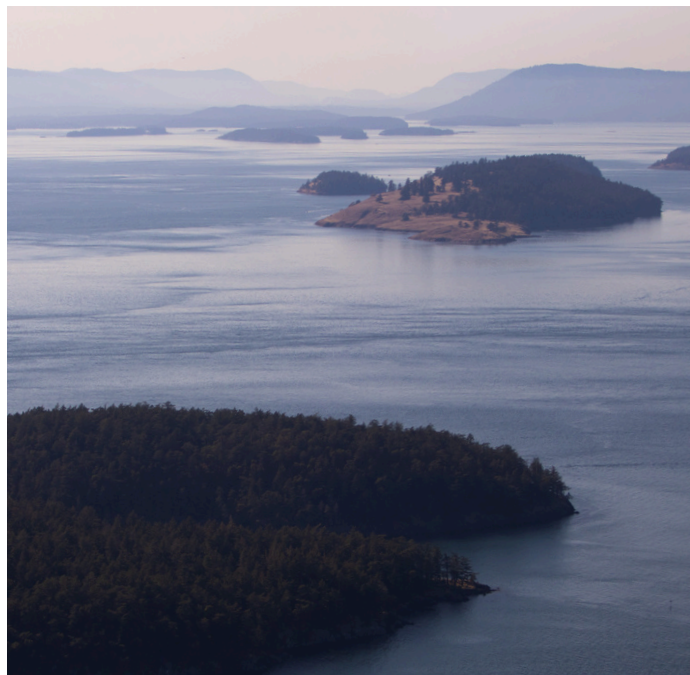
- Vessel compliance monitoring at Odlin Anchor Out Zone
- Maintenance of Odlin Anchor Out buoy
- Completed 80+ shore-based vessel monitoring surveys throughout the busy boating season
- In partnership with Friends of the San Juans, installed Green Boating signs to educate the public about anchoring out of eelgrass zones at specific sites throughout the county.



VESSEL DENSITY SURVEYS

The San Juan Islands have long been a popular destination for boaters, drawn by the region's majestic scenery, abundant wildlife, and pristine waters. The MRC seeks to better understand how vessel activity may impact the marine environment—particularly as boat traffic continues to increase and put pressure on sensitive habitats.

To evaluate these impacts, we need to understand where boats are congregating, especially in relation to ecologically important areas like eelgrass beds and forage fish spawning grounds. In 2024, the MRC conducted systematic aerial surveys from May through September, capturing data during peak boating periods, including Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and additional summer weekends. These line-transect surveys allowed us to document vessel density and identify high-use anchoring areas—or “hot spots.”



By comparing these boating hot spots with the location of sensitive habitats, we can better assess potential environmental impacts. This information is critical for informing education, outreach, and future management strategies that balance environmental protection with continued recreational access.

The goals of this project are to:

1. Identify areas with the highest vessel density and the greatest potential for environmental impact.
2. Prioritize those sites for future habitat protection and/or restoration.
3. Explore management strategies that support both a healthy marine ecosystem and a positive boating experience—while ensuring continued access to usual and accustomed fishing and harvesting areas.

Preliminary data from the 2024 surveys indicates that an estimated 1,200–1,500 vessels were present in San Juan County waters during busy summer weekends, not including those at marinas or private docks. The highest count was recorded on Labor Day, with 2,000 vessels observed. With such high volumes, it's clear that recreational boating has the potential to affect marine flora and fauna, especially in sensitive areas. Continued research and thoughtful management will be essential to preserving the health of our marine ecosystems for generations to come.

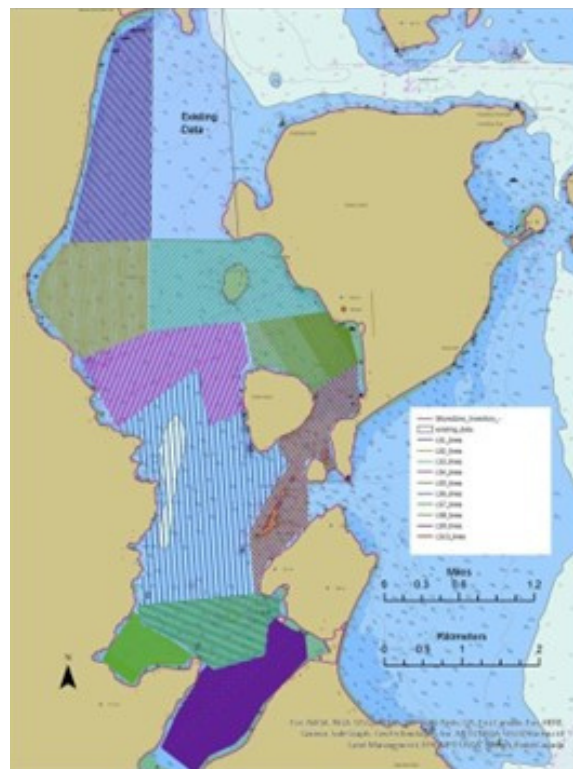


ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

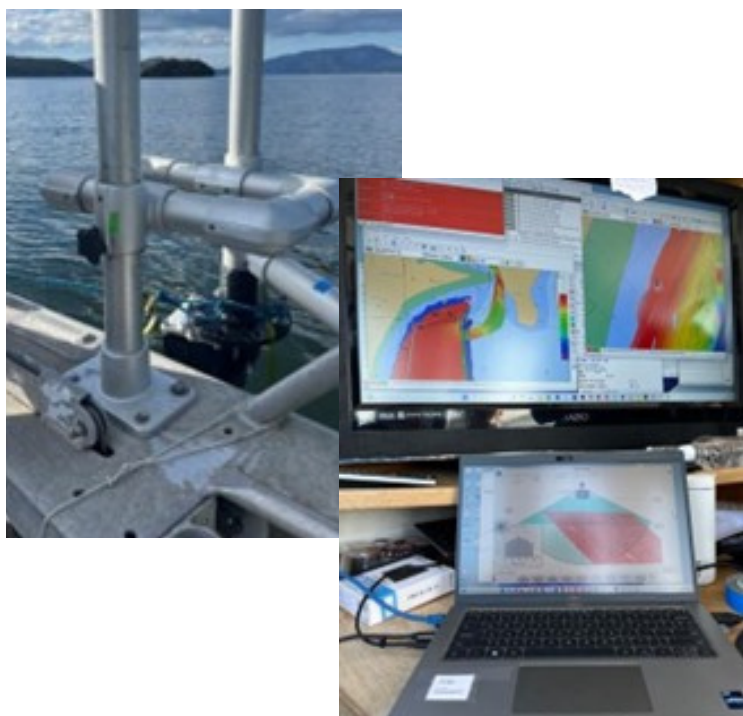
- Flew 8 days of aerial surveys from May through September 2024, with 2-3 county-wide surveys flown during each sampling day
- Counted 15,000+ vessels over the course of the study (*not including those at marinas or private docks*) averaging 1,875 vessels per survey day with a peak count of 2,000 vessels on Labor Day Weekend
- Completed technical reports and mapped density hotspots
- Undertook a preliminary assessment of satellite image technology for monitoring vessel presence.

SEAFLOOR MAPPING STUDY

To better understand the potential impacts of recreational boating in the San Juan Islands, the MRC is conducting seafloor mapping to assess habitat types in key areas. This research will help identify what lies beneath the surface—including depth and seafloor composition—giving us insight into what is happening on the seafloor. While some areas of the San Juans have been surveyed in the past, significant gaps remain, particularly in areas where historic eelgrass beds overlap with heavy boating activity.



The focus area for this study is the shallow, east side of Lopez Island, known as Lopez Sound. Scientists are using a high-resolution multibeam echosounder (MBES) to map the underwater terrain. The collected data will produce detailed bathymetric images showing seafloor features such as anchor drag marks, eelgrass beds, marine debris, and derelict fishing gear—all of which have already appeared in initial findings. Additional surveys will continue into 2025 to build a comprehensive map of the seafloor in this focus area. This data will be crucial in assessing potential damage to eelgrass habitat from anchoring and identify areas where stronger protection methods are needed.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Created Quality Assurance Project Plan for bathymetric mapping study
- MBES survey data collected for roughly two-thirds of Lopez Sound.
- Initial data processing and imaging to construct a comprehensive benthic habitat map.

WHAT'S NEXT?

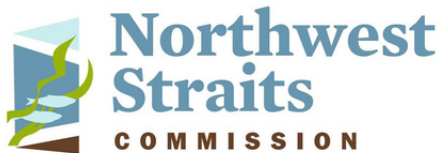
The San Juan MRC will continue expanding upon its core project list in the 2024-2025 grant year. The MRC is excited to embark on new projects in 2025 and expand upon efforts from 2024. Exciting project elements to look forward to include:

- **Marina Operators Roundtable** – To better work with the important operators of key facilities within the county, the MRC is helping to host a roundtable for marina operators to share their experiences. By identifying common challenges, we can begin to address them as a community. Working with IOSA, we will discuss methods for oil spill prevention
- **Increased Southern Resident Killer Whale outreach** for recreational boaters. In 2025, the distance regulations for SRKW will increase to 1,000 yards. This significant change will impact how boaters view whales in a hope to give whales adequate space for foraging and travel as well as reduce vessel sounds and impacts.
- **Phase II of the Vessel Assessment** – After performing the research study and assessing our findings, the MRC will share these findings with the public as well as engage with Tribal authorities. Spreading the news of the study and discussing vessel impacts with partners will be an important step moving forward. We will produce a public map showing vessel density layered with critical natural resource areas, including eelgrass meadows, shellfish beds, and other vital marine habitats.



PARTNERS

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



**San Juan County
Marine Program**



**San Juan County
Solid Waste**



**Friends of the
San Juans**



**MARINE EDUCATION
& RESEARCH SOCIETY**



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.

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