

ECOSYSTEM-BASED MANAGEMENT

**The San Juan County Marine Stewardship Area
A bottom-up approach to Ecosystem-based Management.
By Jody Kennedy**

In San Juan County, a local group of volunteers called the Marine Resources Committee (MRC), which includes a live-a-board boater/ Geographic Information System (GIS) junkie, fisherman, contractor, port commissioner, conservationist, shuttle boat operator, small business owner and land use planner, plus a couple of scientists, are working together to implement one of Washington State's leading models of Ecosystem-based Management. To those who know the jargon, this type of management is commonly called "EBM" and was defined in our last issue of *Making Waves* to essentially mean that when making management decisions, you need to account for the entire ecosystem, including humans. In the San Juans, not everyone involved in this initiative agrees on what EBM is, but they all agree that they are working to protect the entire local marine system, including all species, processes, human activities and the connections between them.

What brought this diverse group together was a love of the ocean combined with the knowledge that their local marine waters and adjacent shorelines were threatened and that, as a result, so was their quality of life. The San Juans are a cluster of about 200 islands that lie on the border between British Columbia's Georgia Basin and Washington State's Puget Sound. Located in a rich mixing zone of some of the Pacific Northwest's greatest rivers and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, which connects Puget Sound to the Pacific Ocean, the San Juans collect and draw a magnificent array of sea life. Orcas, seals, porpoises, otters, and marine birds poke-a-dot the ocean's surface, while countless species of fish, invertebrates, algae and sea grass decorate the world below. Divers claim that the islands offer some of the best cold water diving in North America.

Like so many beautiful coastal places, the San Juans are developing at a rapid pace, natural habitats are being altered and the marine environment is showing signs of stress. Within the County, there are now over 40 listed species of concern. The local orca population, viewed as an indicator of marine health, is believed to carry the highest concentrations of toxins of any population in the world. Their numbers have dropped low enough that they are now listed under the Endangered Species Act. At the same time, opportunities for quality recreation, such as fishing, wildlife viewing and finding a quiet

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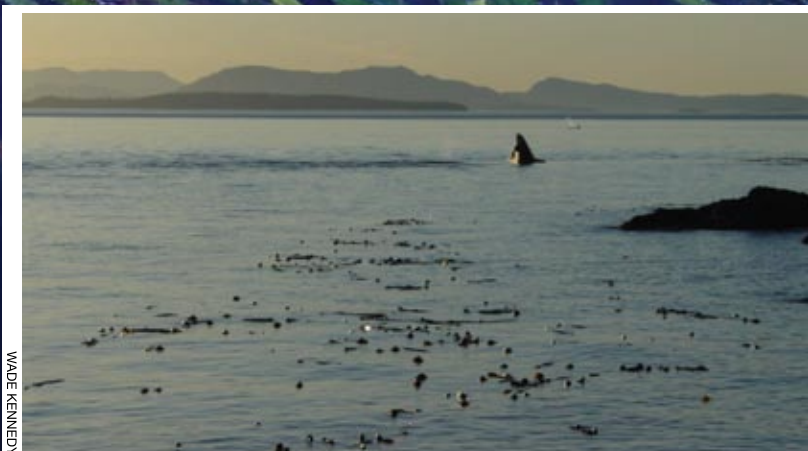
harbor to anchor a boat are diminishing and the once-pristine shorelines and hillsides are rapidly being covered with houses. Access is also a problem. As private residences cover the coastline, finding a friendly beach to launch or land a kayak has become a challenge.

Recognizing the threats to the islands' unique and rich marine environment, the County formed the MRC as a citizens advisory group to help protect the natural resources and character of the San Juans. At about the time the PEW Oceans Commission released a report that made ocean conservation recommendations calling for an ecosystem-based approach to replace historical methods that typically managed for particular species or habitat type, the MRC launched an EBM initiative from the bottom-up. To do this, they first approached the county government and requested that the entire County be designated a Marine Stewardship Area, which was officially adopted in January 2004. The designation set a course for the MRC to identify the key action steps toward a healthier and more sustainable island marine ecosystem for the natural resources and the benefit of the people who live, work and recreate there. Next, the MRC brought in partners from the Northwest Straits Initiative, The Nature Conservancy and SeaDoc Society to develop and implement a planning process that would identify conservation strategies that incorporated scientific knowledge and human-based priorities.

For the next two years, the MRC and partners worked to implement an adapted version of The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Action Plan. The process involved an assessment of the health of the ecosystem, identification and ranking of threats to the ecosystem and development of a prioritized list of strategies to address these threats. Interim steps established ecosystem indicators and measurable goals and, throughout the whole process, the team collected extensive input from the greater community. The process wrapped up with a final workshop with marine managers, interviews with local tribes and public meetings on the most populated islands. The outcome was an action plan for protecting and restoring the San

Juan marine ecosystem. On July 17th, 2007, the San Juan County Council formally adopted the plan in front of a full chamber. Since the plan passed, the first true, no-fishing reserve was established around the Nature Conservancy's Yellow Island Preserve, the MRC received significant funds to engage community members and local businesses in minimizing impacts to the marine environment, and the Washington Department of Natural Resources committed to evaluating the County for an Aquatic Reserve designation, which will add new protections for bedlands and tidelands. In addition, the County launched the San Juan Initiative, a unique partnership, involving local, state, federal, and tribal representatives, working together to evaluate existing conservation programs (voluntary, regulatory and incentive-based) to identify protection gaps and develop strategies for improvement.

To learn more about the San Juan Marine Stewardship Area, visit: www.sjcmrc.org/programs/msaplan.htm
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