

Directors Report



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Conservation Partnership: Olympia Oyster Restoration

Native oyster restoration in Puget Sound has been a collaborative partnership effort facilitated by the non-profit Puget Sound Restoration Fund involving government agencies, treaty tribes, shellfish growers, other non-profit organizations (including the Northwest Straits Initiative and its Marine Resource Committees, and the Coastal Conservation Association), private tideland owners, and volunteers.

Background

The Olympia oyster is Washington's only native oyster. This species historically occurred widely in the intertidal zone of Puget Sound. Commercial exploitation from 1850 to the early 1900s resulted in near extirpation of large native oyster beds, both from direct harvest and conversion of tidelands to cultivation.

Ecological functions

Olympia oysters, and the beds they traditionally form, provide a suite of ecosystem services. For example, oyster

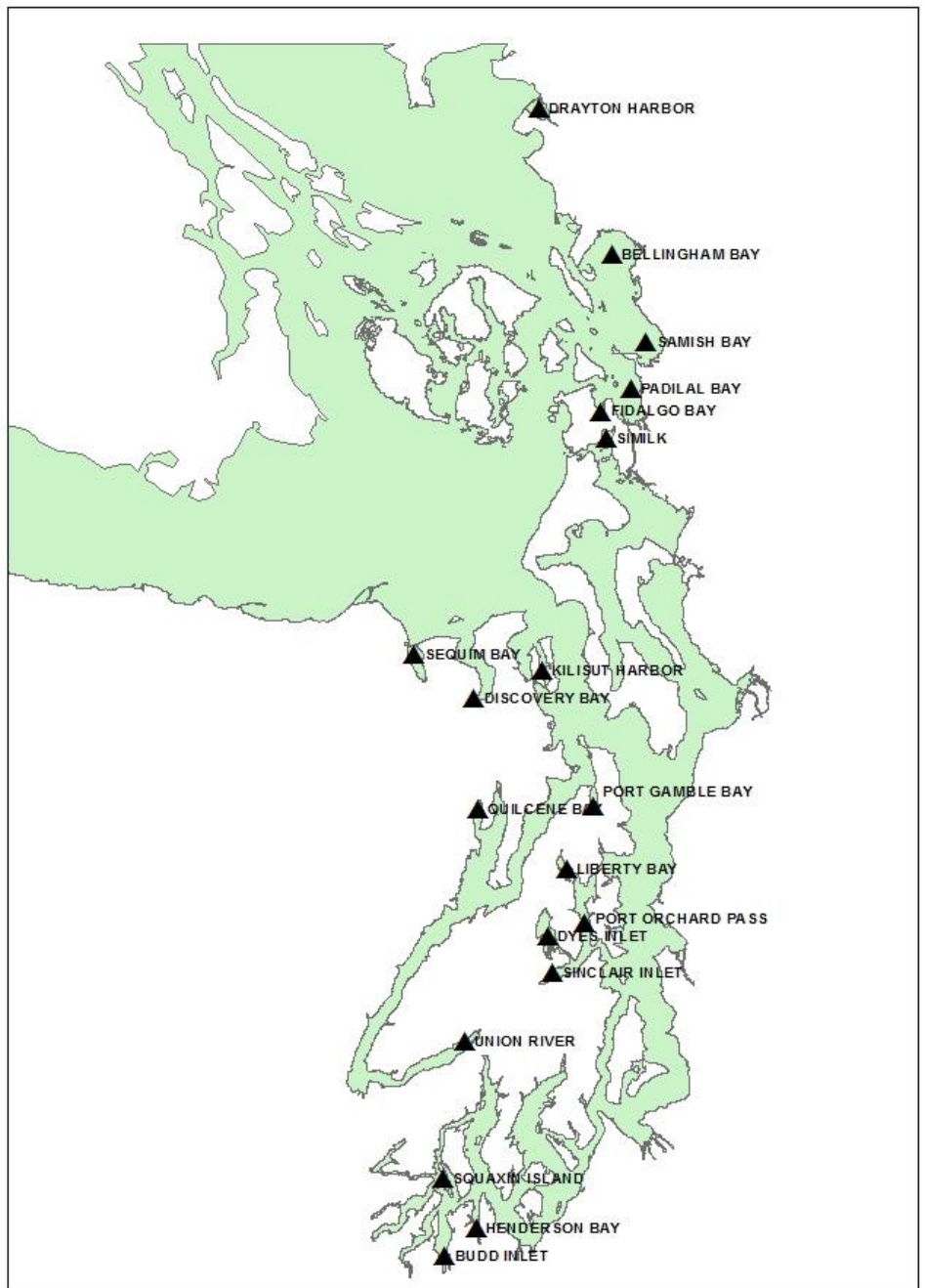
beds provide habitat for resident anemones, crabs, and wide diversity of small marine life—some are prey for other, larger species that also use oyster habitat for foraging and shelter. Olympia oysters can filter between 9 and 12 quarts of water daily, though the rate of filtration is highly dependent on environmental conditions. Because of their abundance, benthic suspension feeders have been shown to have a major impact in marine ecosystems. They capture large quantities of particles and might directly regulate primary production and indirectly regulate secondary production in littoral food chains. There are many suspension feeders in Puget Sound, including subtidal and intertidal clams and oysters.

The contribution of Olympia oysters, compared to the overall biomass of suspension feeders in Puget Sound, is unknown, though the relatively small biomass, limited vertical distribution, and lack of historically large oyster beds will limit the ecological contribution to

Figure 1. Nineteen proposed Olympia restoration sites in Puget Sound (from 2012 Olympia Oyster restoration plan).

localized areas. At their present abundance, the provision of ecosystem services by Olympia oysters is diminished, and the department and other partners have been engaged in a range of restoration work around Puget Sound.

In 2019, the department engaged with the Puget Sound Restoration Fund and their conservation hatchery to ensure adherence to genetic and disease risk management strategies, aided in identifying potential locations for restoration, and supported discussions on genetic risk management and restoration strategies at an Olympia Oyster Core Team summit held annually. In 2020, the department will continue to serve as an important guiding partner in ongoing and new efforts in Olympia oyster restoration—including plans for a genetic workshop, updates to the statewide restoration plan, supporting permitting for expansion of two successful restoration sites and one new site, and developing ideas for new potential restoration sites.



Commercial Marketing Effort

This fall, Director Susewind created an internal team consisting of members from Public Affairs, Licensing, Enforcement, Fish Program, and Region 5 and 6 staff to brainstorm ways to increase our outreach and communication around commercial fisheries. The team is developing a draft marketing strategy that will identify best times of year for promotion of specific commercial fisheries. The goal is to re-instill a sense of pride in local commercial fisheries and provide information to consumers about where and when they can get sustainably harvested local seafood. The team developed an external group of industry and non-governmental organization representatives to help provide feedback on the strategy and specific communication products. The group will meet again January 9.

Solar Farm Wildlife Impacts

Increased energy production in Washington State and growing public interest in renewables is resulting in numerous new Solar Power Production Facilities (SPPF). The Department is aware of over a dozen commercial SPPFs in various stages of design and development statewide (primarily in central and eastern Washington). The department is working to provide a consistent approach for reviewing and commenting on siting, facility design, and development of solar energy projects in accordance with Policy M5002 to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts to fish and wildlife habitats in the state. Procedures for habitat characterization for solar projects are similar to those published in the 2009 WDFW Wind Power Guidelines, but the level of permanent impacts is greater at SPPF due to fencing and the land-intensive nature of the facilities. The new impacts may result in loss of habitat and habitat functions, and displacement of wildlife.

In Washington State, commercial solar project developers have the option of pursuing a permit through either the local jurisdiction or the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC). Compliance with the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) is required for solar energy proposals, regardless of which permitting path the developer chooses. Solar project developers and permitting agencies are encouraged to consult with the department as early in the process as possible. This will result in a more efficient review of the proposal with upfront discussion of potential impacts and mitigation options, balancing natural resource protection with the broad interests of the public.

Regional and division staff from the Habitat and Wildlife programs are working with county governments to provide timely information to help minimize impacts of solar projects. The department is also developing standard operating procedures to provide project proponents with measures that will help reduce impacts to the landscape and the wildlife that use it.

A full briefing to the Commission is scheduled for the March meeting.



New Digital Conversations Expand Public Communications Options

The director hosted online digital open houses from seven locations throughout the state of Washington in 2019. The events, using live-streaming technology and social media, provided another opportunity for the public to ask questions and gain information about department policies and direction.

Online webinars took place in the early evening. Participants were encouraged to send in questions for the department panel. In total, nearly 1,200 people viewed the events this past year getting up to 40 questions answered per event.

The digital open houses provided a chance to hear from those who aren't always able to attend our in-person events and meetings. Getting this feedback is incredibly helpful. We learn about what is on people's minds and how we can enhance their lives through our work while participants get answers to the things that matter to them.

Wildlife, fish, law enforcement, and habitat leadership joined in regionally oriented events, online and further promoted via the department's social media. Topics included briefings on the legislative session and department budget challenges, current conservation efforts, partner collaborations, efforts to enhance public service, and the department's work to develop a strategic plan.

Event	Live Views	Recorded Views
5/13: Director's Digital Open House	286	156
6/20: Region 2 Digital Open House	25	43
7/8: Region 1 Digital Open House	64	26
7/17: Region 5 Digital Open House	33	43
11/21: Region 6 Digital Open House	81	37
12/4: Region 3 Digital Open House	80	19
12/16: A Conversation w/WDFW	212	84