

# Washington creates sea grass, kelp sanctuary

By **LYNDA V. MAPES**  
*Seattle Times*



Steve Ringman/Seattle Times

Portions of the Snohomish River estuary are now being protected under a new tideland reserve.

A first-of-its-kind sanctuary has been created offshore of Everett, Washington, where 2,300 acres of state tidelands have been put off-limits to development for 50 years.

Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz created the protection zone with the stroke of a pen, withdrawing the tidelands from potential development. Protected are kelp forests and eelgrass meadows near Hat Island and in the Snohomish River estuary.

“We are just getting started,” said Franz, who added that the protection zones will be only part of a new state effort under a measure, Senate Bill 5619, just passed by the Legislature to conserve and restore 10,000 acres of kelp and eelgrass by 2040.

Kelp and eelgrass are the undersea forests and meadows that shelter and nurture aquatic life, just as grasslands and forests are havens on land. Sea grass meadows and kelp are the redoubt of myriad, tiny unsung lives that nourish and shelter the glamour species such including sea otters, salmon and orcas. Kelp forests also provide migratory corridors for baby salmon headed to sea and for adults headed back to their home river.

“It’s part of the circle of life, one of the links in the chain, and without it the whole thing breaks down,” Tom Wooten, chairman of the Samish Indian Nation, said of eelgrass and kelp.

But there is trouble in this blue-green paradise.

“I’ve lived here in our traditional territory in Anacortes my entire life, and I have seen what is happening with all the natural resources, but with kelp and eelgrass in particular,” Wooten said.

Monitoring by the tribe has mapped a 36% loss in

kelp in their traditional territory in and around the San Juan Islands from 2006 to 2016, said Todd Woodard, director of natural resources for the tribe. Losses at some of the more northern islands in their territory are even higher, at about 70%, Woodard said. “It’s raising alarm bells.”

Warming water, especially in recent marine heat waves, is believed to be a culprit, especially where water temperatures can climb in areas of low energy waves and currents.

Kelp is a keystone not only for the environment, but for tribal culture, Woodard said.

Declines were first noted by Samish elders who were having trouble getting big blades of bull kelp to wrap salmon for cooking, Woodard said.

Traditionally, the first rattles for Samish babies are dried kelp bulbs with pebbles inside. Eulachon oil burned

for light was also carried in the bulbs. And eelgrass and kelp are home to the pearlescent eggs of herring, savored in feasts.

Even their extended family needs kelp, said Woodard. Southern resident orcas, especially J pod, whom the Samish regard as relatives, play in kelp, winding it around their flukes and flipping it with their tail. “We don’t know why it is important to them, but it is,” Woodard said.

Eelgrass beds are coincident with so many of the traditional foods cherished by the tribe, Woodard said. “When the tide goes out, the table is set — and when it’s low enough, you can walk out and get your crab.”

The overall area of eelgrass in Puget Sound is regarded as relatively stable, at about 57,000 acres, based on 18 years of monitoring by the Department of Natural Resources.

But those statistics hide

big losses in local areas. Some San Juan Island coves and bays once home to lush eelgrass meadows have been totally denuded, said Drew Harvell, professor emeritus of Cornell University. She is a senior scientist at the University of Washington’s Friday Harbor Labs, studying a wasting disease that kills eelgrass.

The disease is stoked by warmer water brought by the changing climate, Harvell noted. The wasting disease spreads both by water and by contact of infected blades with healthy patches.

The combined threats of urbanization and warming make preserving healthy eelgrass pastures all the more important, Harvell said.

Eelgrass is an ecosystem with superpowers, she said, from providing biodiversity hot spots to cleaning the water and even helping to absorb carbon dioxide, by the process of photosynthesis.

In that way, protecting

kelp and eelgrass also helps build climate resilience, Harvell said. “What’s good for the environment is also good for people too.”

Preservation now can protect strongholds that can reseed other areas, Harvell noted. “It is so much faster and less expensive, if we can preserve sites rather than try to restore something that is

completely damaged.”

The new protection zone is part of a watershed-wide Snohomish River action plan announced by Franz last month in Everett. She calls it a “Tree to Sea” effort, to collaborate with other partners including tribal, federal and local governments to help recover salmon populations, working at the watershed scale.

Salmon are in decline because of 1,000 cuts and it will take a multi-prong strategy by many partners to rebuild their numbers, Franz said.

The Snohomish is the pilot project, which for the Department of Natural Resources will include a range of work from stepping up efforts to remove derelict vessels and creosoted pilings, to planting trees and placing large woody debris in streams to help bring back the complex habitat salmon need in their fresh water phase of life.

Bart Christiaen, a Department of Natural Resources eelgrass specialist, said the Snohomish was targeted for the first preservation zone in part because there is a large eelgrass area near the river delta. “It is very important for our out-migrating chum and Chinook salmon; it is the first eelgrass bed they encounter in their out migration.”

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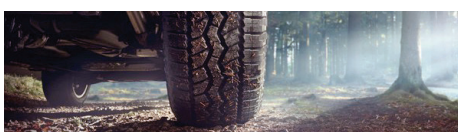
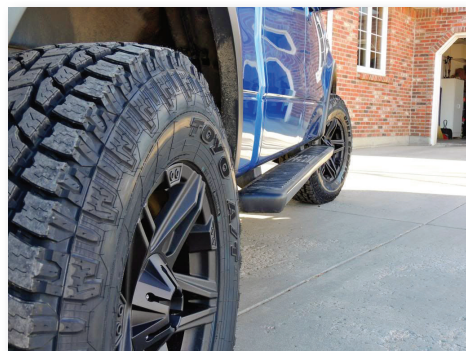


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