

The San Juan Initiative's Key Steps

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Draft

This report summarizes the process of the San Juan Initiative, a pilot project to assess and improve ecosystem protection in Puget Sound, and what we can learn from that process.

This report is intended to help other resource protection practitioners in Puget Sound who are interested in conducting a similar assessment of protection efforts in nearshore, freshwater or terrestrial habitats. It is also intended to be useful to the Puget Sound Partnership and other State and Federal agencies as they consider funding similar assessments throughout the region.

1. Initiation Phase

The San Juan Initiative is a pilot effort whose goal is to improve ecosystem protection in a way that supports community values, respects property owner rights and builds local capacity to ensure vital ecosystem processes and habitats are protected.

In 2006, the Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Plan identified the need to assess the results of our current efforts to protect the Puget Sound ecosystem. The Salmon Plan found that:

- The Puget Sound population is expected to increase by 1.5 million people over the next 17 years. This increase over our current population of 3.8 million will cause additional stresses on our natural resources.
- There are many efforts (such as laws, incentive, and education programs) to protect the Puget Sound ecosystem, but few attempts have been made to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts.
- Previously there was no organization responsible for ecological stewardship in the Puget Sound, and no coordinating structure to ensure that the combined efforts of government, non-profits, and private groups were efficient and effective. The new Puget Sound Partnership was created to meet this need.

Following the completion of the Plan, the nonprofit organization that created it, Shared Strategy for Puget Sound, was charged with starting implementation while the Legislature and Governor were creating the Puget Sound Partnership. At the same time, San Juan County Commissioner Kevin Ranker was working with various governmental officials and private foundations nationally and on the West Coast to create a pilot project in the San Juans. This pilot is also an effort to implement an on the ground ecosystem based management approach

recommended by the Joint Ocean Commission. Initially, Commissioner Ranker and staff from the Shared Strategy discussed how their interests could be combined for such a pilot effort in the San Juans. From their discussions they developed a general statement of intent for the Initiative and a framework for how the Initiative could be locally managed. They intentionally kept the proposal general to allow local leaders and regional organizations to craft the specifics during the first phase of the Initiative. During these initial stages, the Initiative received critical support from the County Council. Also, a number of previous studies were available that provided a good background and starting point to assess relevant issues.

An agreement and commitment to move the project forward was formalized in 2006. Shared Strategy and San Juan County agreed through a memorandum of understanding to manage the Initiative jointly. Subsequently, the Puget Sound Partnership assumed Shared Strategy's role and the San Juan Initiative became a pilot project for improved accountability at the local level. Because the County was financially constrained they agreed to partner only if the Initiative received funding from sources outside the County, though they did agree to allow their staff to be involved in the Initiative. One of the reasons the County was willing to get involved is that they saw an opportunity to craft a new approach that differed from the current state of environmental protection in the County, which is largely regulatory, reactionary and litigious. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation also recognized the importance of the Initiative to the region and provided the majority of funding to carry out the Initiative. These developments established official commitment to the project, financial assistance, and resource support.

The Partnership supported the San Juan Islands as a case study area for the pilot project because the San Juans were identified as the most intact ecosystem in the Puget Sound region and the Initiative was already in process with the necessary local support to be an effective pilot.

Once the Initiative was set up and funded, the San Juan County Council appointed a "Policy Group" to guide the Initiative. The membership of the Policy Group was comprised of local leaders and high-level representatives from tribes, state and federal agencies with management responsibilities in the San Juan Islands. To ensure a strong local perspective and direction, a majority of the Policy Group was composed of island residents. They were chosen to be representative of the Islands many perspectives but were not inherently positional. A science committee was also created to provide local and regional credibility that the assessment would be based on best available science.

Analysis: Influential Factors in the Initiation Phase

Several elements were critical to the successful formation of the San Juan Initiative.

1. Strong Local Leadership: The leadership and support of a local County Councilmember, Kevin Ranker, was critical to the creation of the San Juan Initiative. Ranker inspired his colleagues on the Council to participate in the Initiative and his local credibility as a consensus builder was useful in recruiting diverse community leaders for the Policy Group. Ranker's vision for the Initiative excited local leaders and kept them engaged, which was especially important in the early stages of the effort when the outcomes were vague.

2. Regional Connections: The involvement of a regional organization, Shared Strategy, helped highlight the regional significance of the project and gave local people a sense that their input could matter to the rest of Puget Sound, as well as at home. The inclusion of the San Juan Initiative in the new state agency, the Puget Sound Partnership, strengthened the local/regional connection that began with the Shared Strategy. The engagement of high-level staff from tribal, state and federal agencies also provided a strong regional connection and the opportunity to address regional concerns through local effort. Agency and tribal directors also committed to attending three meetings over the course of two years, providing additional strength to local/regional connections.

3. Outside Funding: The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation was an early and significant financial supporter, giving the County and others confidence that the Initiative would not be a financial drain on their strained budgets. In addition, contributions of staff time came from State agencies and outside environmental groups. At the same time, the outside funding brought challenges. With the exception of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, outside entities were primarily interested in the project for what they could learn from the detailed audit of protection efforts. Not surprisingly, local groups and citizens also were wary of being audited without the resources to make improvements.

4. Concerns about Local Control: One issue that was not successfully addressed in the beginning stages was the criticism that people outside the community generated the Initiative. Several community groups and local leaders also saw the Initiative as duplicating existing work, reducing local control, and limiting funding available to local groups already working on issues of resource protection. However, the credibility of local leaders and the fact that they made up the majority of the Policy Group demonstrated the commitment to a local process. The San Juan Initiative was committed from the start to increasing local capacity for ecosystem protection, and this has helped diffuse these concerns over time.

2. Choosing a Focus for the Initiative (Phase 1)

The intent of the first phase of the Initiative was to establish a clear focus for improving ecosystem protection. It was important to provide this focus because the Initiative was set up to be a pilot project lasting just two years and having a limited budget. Covering all of the issues affecting the San Juan ecosystem would require much more time and budget than was available.

In order to establish an appropriate scope, the Policy Group examined potential areas of focus for ecosystem management and assessment of protection. First it identified potential ecological and community changes that would impact the ability of the Islands to retain a thriving community into the future. These changes were organized into nine overarching possible focus areas. In addition, there were three demographic shifts that were seen as exacerbating changes to the community: increasing real estate prices, loss of affordability and loss of farmland.

Concern for these demographic shifts and their threat to the overall fabric of the community created a tension in opposition to the focus on environmental protection. Community members saw these as the most important issues and did not want to be constrained by the original intent of the Initiative and the grant funds to focus more on environmental protection issues. This tension was frustrating for Policy Group members but their insistence to address the needs of the human community ultimately provided a context that substantively informed the assessment and solution phases of the Initiative.

Following much discussion the Policy Group agreed to maintain the overall objective to assess protection and developed a set of criteria to determine on which part of the ecosystem to focus. The focus area should have:

- Significant limitations with current protection.
- Significant opportunities to improve protection.
- Ecologically significant to the San Juan Islands.
- Significance to the community.

In support of the Policy Group direction, local and regional environmental managers and scientists reviewed 9 potential focus areas and ranked them using the criteria. The scientists and managers gave the highest priority to improving protection of nearshore and terrestrial habitats. In response, the Policy Group decided to focus on improving the protection of near shore and terrestrial ecosystem processes and habitats.

The nearshore marine habitat was selected as the first priority for detailed assessment of ecosystem protection because there is more information available on current status and threats to marine habitat than to nearshore habitat. This is due to the recent completion of the Marine Stewardship Area Plan. Terrestrial habitat was the second option, not because it was less important, but because

there is less available information on it than there is for nearshore habitat. However, community members were strongly interested in evaluating terrestrial habitat because of its direct influence on human activities.

Analysis: Influential Factors in Phase 1

There were many challenges to overcome in this phase of the process, as well as key factors that contributed to its success. Listed below are some of the most important challenges and how they were addressed as well as they key factors for success.

1. Defining the project: One of the Policy Group's first challenges was to develop an understanding of ecosystem-based management, which focuses on protecting the interconnected processes and functions that naturally weave together to support life. This is a relatively new concept in natural resource management, and it has not had much direct application at the local community level. Additionally, ecosystem-based management by definition includes the entire ecosystem, but the Initiative was limited by scope, time and budget to address only part of the protection system. It took several meetings for the Policy Group to gain a clear understanding of the project's intent, and for the Group members to develop their own ideas for how to focus the Initiative's work.

2. Lack of baseline data: Another concern raised by the Policy Group was whether existing data could present a clear picture of the current status of key ecosystem functions, or provide any evidence that these functions were improving or declining. Because of the short timeframe and limited budget, the Initiative was not able to do new research on current status or trends. Instead, existing information was used and assumptions on potential impacts from human activity were made from the scientific literature.

3. Building on Past Work: The Marine Resource Committee conducted a study of the status and trends of threats to the marine ecosystem in the San Juans. From this study, they developed a Marine Resource Area Plan that prioritized threats and highlighted the next steps for protecting the San Juans. This work provided a critical starting point for focusing the Initiative.

4. Narrowing the scope: One of the main frustrations in Phase 1 was a resistance to reducing the scope of the project. Policy Group members were concerned that if the Initiative was to understand the ecosystem, then they would need to assess every part of it. However, the intent of the project was to use an ecosystem approach to understand the effectiveness of current protection. An ecosystem approach can occur at

any scale so long as the processes, functions, and values of the ecosystem are addressed in a systematic way.

5. Getting focused: Because the intent of the project was to be community driven, the San Juan Initiative was designed to be directed by community concerns and issues around resource protection. In hindsight, more work should have been done prior to the first Policy Group meeting to outline these existing resource concerns, information and priorities. By providing a better understanding of current concerns, the Policy Group would have been able to decide more quickly on a focus area.

6. Strong leadership within the Policy Group: Co-Chair Jonathan White played a major role in keeping the group together and committed to its goals. Jonathan took his chairmanship seriously and continually pushed staff to be clear and focused in their written products, meeting agendas, and in the direction of the Initiative. Jonathan also served as a critical link and communicator between staff and the Policy Group about the conflict between the staff's drive to focus and the community leaders' concerns for the broader issues of the community and the ecosystem.

3. Ecosystem-based assessment of protection programs. (Phase 2)

The intent of Phase 2 was to evaluate educational, regulatory, and voluntary programs to determine which elements of nearshore ecosystem protection were working and which were not.

The assessment was designed to bring together three perspectives: science community and managers. The scientific perspective was gathered through a scientific analysis of shoreline structures and where they are relative to important habitats. The community's perspective on the effectiveness of protection was gathered through interviews, workshops, and a mail in survey. The management perspective was gathered from a permit analysis and a policy review to gather information on how effectively resource managers meet their statutory obligations. These three perspectives influenced and shaped each other; they were continuously woven together to bring a deeper understanding than would have been possible if each were looked at in isolation.

Development of a Scientific Analysis: To assist in developing the scientific analysis, a science advisory committee was created. A policy technical committee was also created, but it played a limited role and in the end was not as useful as staff had hoped.

The Science Committee consisted of local and regional scientists, whose involvement in the overall design of protection assessment was critical to its

success. The Committee evaluated existing scientific information on impacts to the nearshore ecosystem. This evaluation produced scientific consensus on the ecological threats posed to nearshore areas in the San Juan Islands, as well as on the current conditions in those areas. The Committee also identified potentially high impact human modifications of the shoreline and described key improvements to those structures that would reduce their impact on the ecosystem.

Selection of Case Study Areas: There are over 400 miles of marine shoreline in San Juan County and the Initiative did not have the time or resources to conduct a detailed assessment of the whole shoreline. The Science Committee recommended using case study areas to get detailed information that could be used as examples and to get a sense of the ecosystem county-wide. In order to select case study areas, the Initiative identified issues pertaining to shoreline health throughout the County by interviewing landowners, scientists, community members, and land managers. With the assistance of the Science Advisory Committee, the Policy Group reviewed these County-wide issues and identified four case study areas that contained within them all relevant shoreline habitats, shore forms, and human activity.

The case study areas are not “representative” nor were they chosen randomly. This was a choice made by the Science Committee in full recognition of the constraints posed by not having random samples. It was felt that given the specific questions being asked about protection effectiveness, we needed areas that had within them both habitats important to the ecosystem and human uses that typically impact those habitats.

The case study areas represent about 10% of the San Juan County shoreline, and were the focal point for most of the data gathering. Within these study areas, we documented all shoreline structures, vegetation changes over time, interviewed and surveyed shoreline property owners, held public workshops, and reviewed permits.

Education & Outreach Programs: The Initiative researched the effectiveness of current educational & outreach resources. We identified organizations involved in providing the public with information about protecting shoreline habitat and interviewed them about their programs and the public’s response to those programs. We evaluated the effectiveness of the educational information by determining whether or not it would prevent or reduce the impact of shoreline structures on the ecosystem, and we identified gaps in information and information delivery strategies and analyzed whether or not the information was targeted to the right audiences.

Community Input: Focus groups made up of community members were an important part of our combined outreach and information-gathering strategy. To incorporate a range of perspectives, we gathered information from three groups:

trade groups (such as builders), shoreline property owners within the case study areas, and the general public.

Multiple workshops were held with each focus group to gather their perspectives on what is working and what is not and what ecosystem changes most concerned them. Our goal was to involve as many people as possible so we could develop a more accurate understanding of people's concerns.

After the meetings, staff consolidated and summarized the content from meetings in a clear, readable fashion. Then staff interviewed a subset of shoreline property owners who had retained a high percent of vegetation, had homes set back at least 125 feet, and did not have any shoreline structures. This was designed to identify factors that result in good shoreline stewardship. We also sent a mail-in survey to shoreline property owners to gather perspectives from people unable or unwilling to attend workshops.

Permit Review: Staff examined regulations & permits for changes to the shoreline, including docks, setbacks, armoring and shoreline vegetation. Staff also reviewed County, State and Federal regulations for shoreline structures, including the San Juan County Unified Development Code, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Hydraulic Permit Approval process, and Department of Natural Resources permits.

Following this research, staff reviewed a sub-sample of permits for the construction of docks, homes, and shoreline armoring. Information from the permit review was useful in providing specific information and examples about how individual permit decisions are impacting long term protection. A larger sample size would have provided even better information about trends in permitting and its impact on protection.

Using the findings of the Science Advisory Committee on specific high impact human activities, regulations were evaluated for how effectively they could reduce high impact structures and require design changes that would reduce impacts.

Following the review work we summarized the strengths and opportunities for improvement in regulations & permits, and asked for feedback on our findings from related agency staff.

Creation of Phase 3 Action Plan: At the end of Phase 2 we summarized our findings from Phase 2 and created an action plan for Phase 3 with consensus on which areas of protection to explore further.

The Policy Group held two meetings to decide where to focus the Initiative's efforts in Phase 3. The first meeting was with the local members of the Policy Group only. Staff then met individually with agency Policy Group members to

brief them and their agency heads about the findings and initial prioritization of issues by local Policy Group members. Each agency was asked to come to the second meeting prepared to commit resources to resolve the protection problems identified in the report.

The report included a summary of findings describing what works and what doesn't for protecting the nearshore ecosystem and identifying potential focus areas for future solutions.

Analysis: Critical Elements in Phase 2

1. Weaving the three perspectives: One of the key issues throughout this phase was uncovering and capturing the knowledge, interests and sensitivities of scientists, program managers, and property owners. Each wanted to make sure their work would be used appropriately and that the intent of the Initiative was to help rather than to criticize. To address this concern, staff continually informed the agency staff for the reasons behind the Initiative and involved them in the evaluation of their programs. Insights from scientists, property owners and program managers were used to form the picture of what's working and what's not. Most importantly, we were not just informing property owners about our findings but asking them to inform our understanding about ecosystem changes from their long term observations. We also maintained an open dialogue with managers by consistently asking for their feedback and checking to see how the information we gathered could help them fulfill their responsibilities

2. Role of Science Committee: The Science Committee was pivotal in helping design the overall approach of the protection assessment. They advised staff on what data was most important to collect through the nearshore case study characterization, and helped interpret that data. They informed the permit review design. They also provided staff with a necessary understanding of what shoreline changes were most damaging to the ecosystem. They informed staff's simple approach to measuring the effectiveness of protection programs. The mix of regional and local scientists also was useful in framing questions that would be relevant to the larger Puget Sound scientific community. Additionally, the Science Committee provided scientific credibility to the process and shared information useful for public education.

3. The Case Study Approach: In order to understand why protection was working or not, we developed a two tier approach. First, we identified hypotheses about protection based on county-wide issues. Second, we gathered data to test the hypotheses at the case study level. This

approach allowed us to see the big picture and then dive into the details of parcel-level decision making. Although issues like compliance and coordination are recognized as concerns at the county-wide level, there had never been a systematic attempt to understand how those issues play out at smaller scales.

The development of the case study approach was critical to the success of this phase. The case study areas were the basis of our data gathering and allowed for an in-depth understanding of protection. The protection assessment had four sources of data and analysis: scientific characterization of shoreline structures, shore forms, and habitats within the case study areas; community concerns and perspectives on protection effectiveness within the case study areas; a protection program effectiveness analysis which included a permit review of shoreline structures within case study area; and a County-wide review of education, regulatory, and voluntary programs.

4. Limitations of the Multiple Permit Systems: We had not anticipated how poor the permit records would be and the difficulty in analyzing local and State permits. The size of the case study areas was slightly too small to be able to review enough permits to make broad statements about protection. We also underestimated the amount of analysis necessary to determine what the data meant for protection effectiveness.

5. Focus Groups: Focus groups allowed the Initiative to gather stories and individual perspectives as well as overarching themes and priorities. General public meetings were less useful for gathering data.

6. Building Consensus for Solutions Phase: Staff scheduled two meetings back to back to finalize priorities for the Solutions Phase. Though unintentional, only the local component of the Policy Group attended the first meeting. However, this turned out to be very helpful because it gave the community members more time to discuss the protection challenges and come to an initial consensus on the most important findings and next steps in developing solutions. This also allowed staff to brief agency directors on the direction provided by the community members and to develop consensus through individual meetings. During the final meeting of Phase 2, attended by both agency directors and Policy Group members, the group reached consensus quickly because of the previous meeting of community members and the work done by staff to refine the recommendations for next steps.

4. Developing Solutions and Gaining Commitments for Action. (Phase 3 and 4)

The intent of this Phase was to develop solutions to protection challenges and get commitments from responsible agencies and organizations to implement the solutions.

Choosing focus for solutions: Based on resources available, the Policy Group was asked to focus on just a few protection issues. Instead of picking and choosing problems to address, the Policy Group decided to focus on improving the entire suite of protection tools for two ecosystem components. The two ecosystem components were chosen based on lack of protection identified in the case study areas and the amount of community interest in improving regulations around shoreline vegetation and erosion issues.

Developing criteria for improving protection: The Policy Group developed five criteria that staff used to test potential solutions and ensure that they would collectively create an effective protection program to preserve shoreline vegetation and sedimentation processes. These criteria strongly reflect the findings of what is working and what is not. The criteria were:

1. Tailor protection efforts to match the level of ecological function and sensitivity.
2. Increase consistency in requirements and increase certainty in the buying, permitting and building processes.
3. Foster a collaborative approach involving both the public and private sectors to increase communication and effectiveness.
4. Provide information to decision makers, whether County planners or property owners, in a accessible, relevant and timely manner.
5. Reward actions that protect ecosystems and discourage actions that are damaging or not in compliance.

Science Team provided a scientific framework for improving protection:

The Science Team provided the scientific framework to tailor protection by identifying types of shoreline that are more sensitive to damage from loss of shoreline vegetation or natural erosion processes. Using a new report that classified shoreline types (Shipman, 2008), staff was able to develop management approaches applicable to the various types of shoreline. For example, in areas more sensitive to human disturbance, the Policy Group recommends more regulatory oversight, more education and more incentive programs.

Continued strong community engagement: In order to be sure that the recommendations would be community supported and reflect community values, staff held multiple community workshops, using the same segmentation developed in earlier phases. In fact, workshops in Phase 2 helped us identify people able and willing to help us develop solutions. We further refined our

community engagement strategy by developing five work teams: Trades people, property owners experiencing erosion, property owners with retained vegetation, county planning staff and Department of Fish and Wildlife staff. We met with each of these work teams to help brainstorm ideas, refine staff ideas and gather community concerns. The work teams were very small, 4 – 7 people. We also conducted interviews with property owners and had several community workshops in addition to the work team input.

Recommendations address the entire suite of programs: The Policy Group created recommendations to improve education, regulatory and incentive programs. From the beginning, we assured the public that the San Juan Initiative would address more than regulation. With this commitment, we generated more community buy in and fulfilled our goal of addressing the entire system of protection.

Analysis: Critical Elements in Phase 2

Work teams were critical in creation of recommendations: The Trades Group work team was particularly helpful in providing ideas and real life examples for how to improve protection. Staff, the Science Team and the Trades Group work team spent a day visiting shoreline sites to field test the idea of a tailored approach. The conversations between the scientists and the builders were incredibly useful and productive and shaped the recommendations substantially.

Scientific framework to improve protection: The idea of a tailored approach is not new but the ability to achieve it has been limited by existing information. With the publication of Shipman's paper, the Policy Group was able to advance policy discussions and recommend a way to modify our protection approaches based on existing ecosystem components.

4. Overarching Lessons Learned

1. Gather a variety of perspectives, expertise, and experience to understand what works and what doesn't.

The information gathered through the case study approach came from three different sources allowing staff to constantly shape the questions based on new information. For instance, the shoreline property owners were uniformly concerned about the impact of commercial crabbing and transient anchoring on eelgrass. These were not issues we had identified at the county-wide level but were clearly of concern to the community based on their personal experience.

We then expanded our programmatic review to include mooring buoys and worked with scientists to understand whether there was data to support the concerns of the property owners and to understand how their concerns could be addressed in the solution phase.

2. Significant time is needed to understand the needs, interests and perspectives of agencies, policy makers, land owners, and scientists.

Each group (Policy Group, community members, scientists, managers, building trades members) needed something slightly different to feel comfortable participating. For instance, agency staff needed to know that their chain of command was informed and involved. Agency staff also needed to know that they were not being blamed, and that the process was designed to create solutions, not to bludgeon staff. Scientists needed to know that their input would be reflected in the work and that their time would be well spent. They also needed to have clear boundaries between science and policy. The property owners and building trades members needed to feel that we were not holding them solely responsible for damage that was beyond their control. They also needed to have enough time with staff to trust our process and believe that we would respond to their concerns and reflect them in the work.

3. Information needs to be gathered at multiple scales to answer big questions.

Research was done on two scales: county-wide and case study area. In this way, the broader scale was used to tailor the more in depth investigation. Also, we were able to “roll up” findings from the case study level to inform the county wide level. Merging these two scales of research allowed for a more complete picture and saved time and money.

4. Gather community perspectives with a targeted approach: We divided the community into three groups: trades people, property owners and general public and created specific strategies to engage each group. This allowed us to gather a more comprehensive understanding of community concerns.

By segmenting the community, we were able to meet at times convenient for each group, bring forward questions specific to the group and hear from many more voices than if we had just invited the general public. In fact, the general public meetings were the least helpful in identifying community concerns.

5. Include All Protection Programs: Many in the community felt that regulation was the only protection program worth analyzing and that analyzing voluntary or education programs was a waste of time. In contrast, we found that the overall approach to protection is what needs to be strengthened and that there are serious gaps in the voluntary and education programs that are limiting the community’s ability to protect shoreline. By analyzing all programs, we also were

able to speak more comprehensively to the public about their concerns and possible solutions.