

Misidentifying the Problem Prevents Solution

By Gary Tripp August 2011

The condition of Puget Sound is horrible and it breaks my heart to remember the bounty of years past. The stocks of Salmon, Cod, Kelp, Urchins, Perch, Sea Urchins, Sea Cucumbers, Rock Fish, and Herring have been decimated by overharvesting. We all agree on the goal of restoring the Sound, but if we misidentify the cause of the problem, we will waste time, money, and political focus and the Sound will not be any better for it.

There is a lot of science that says, as one might expect, that if all of the shoreline and uplands which drain into the Sound were just returned to nature that the ecosystem would be healthier. But removing Seattle, Tacoma, Everett and Bremerton and everyone who lives and works around Puget Sound is not a realistic alternative. There must be something that can be done short of removing every house and building. So what is the primary cause of the problem?

Is it more likely to be a few leaky septic tanks or the millions and millions of gallons from city sewage systems and street runoff? Is it more likely to be culverts and dams blocking spawning areas or house on the shoreline? Is it more likely to be government licensing and profiting from overharvesting our natural resources (fish), or is it a few waterfront homes with bulkheads and grass and landscaping down to the shoreline? There are many areas with limited or no residential shoreline development: the west and north Sound areas; Hood Canal; the San Juans; and Canada, but in none of these areas do we find an abundance of fish stocks or productive spawning streams. If residential development was the source of the problem then areas with little or no residential development should be doing better. But we don't find that to be the case and even in areas away from towns and people, the state licensed fishing boats can go and the fish are gone. The cause of the problem must not be houses on the waterfront.

The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission and NOAA all agree that the marine life in Puget Sound is primarily affected by four factors: Habitat (spawning streams), Hatcheries, Harvest, and Hydro (Dams). This is referred to as the All-H Analyzer. To this should be added stormwater runoff from streets, industrial pollution and municipal sewers. You might notice that all the agreed-upon causes of the problem are controlled by governments – not private property owners. There is no science indicating that residential uses are a measurable negative contributing factor in the Sound's demise.

So if our goal is rebuilding the ecology of Puget Sound we should focus our efforts where they will do some good. What can we do? 1) We can be good stewards of our own land by eliminating our use of lawn chemicals and keep our septic systems in good repair. 2) We can insist that our cities and counties manage and treat the stormwater and that they replace small culverts that block spawning streams, now rather than later. and 3) We can demand that our state officials and electeds stop allowing harvesting of any fish stock in or within 100 miles of Puget Sound. Lastly, can we please stop the misdirected crusade against waterfront homes and recreational docks; **we are not the problem!**

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