



Island County Marine Resources Committee

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

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Communications Plan

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BACKGROUND

The Island County Marine Resources Committee (IC MRC) was established in 1999 by the Board of Island County Commissioners to protect the local marine environment through education, research, and voluntary action. The stated purpose of the MRC is to investigate, research, and identify local marine resources, and marine resource and habitat issues; recommend remedial actions to Island County agencies and authorities; carry out such recommendations where so approved; and build local awareness of the issues and broad-based community support for the remedies.

The roles of outreach and communication have been important elements of the work of IC MRC since its inception. The background information that has supported the development of this plan focuses primarily on outreach work completed since 2017. In recent years, outreach has become a steadily expanding element of the IC MRC annual work plan.

In 2019, IC MRC recognized the need to provide more structure to communications efforts, and decided to prepare a communications plan. The goal was to develop a plan to optimize communications and engagement with Island County government, Island County citizens, and partner organizations in marine resource sustainability.

To facilitate the plan development, IC MRC formed a communications subcommittee. The subcommittee focused on positioning the IC MRC to communicate prioritized and timely messages to targeted audiences to generate awareness, understanding, endorsement, and actions consistent with the mission of IC MRC.

The subcommittee considers outreach and communication as tools to generate change in attitudes, behavior, and policy, able to be evaluated based on outcomes and impacts in these domains. While “outreach” connotes strategic involvement on multiple levels and “communication” connotes a tactic to impart information, including marketing and PR objectives, they are used almost interchangeably in this plan.

Recognizing the broad reach of this goal and the practical limitations of volunteer and staff capacity, this plan also addresses ways to scale and schedule communications activities in line with IC MRC’s communication capacity.

To support the development of this plan, IC MRC has:

- **Consulted** with two communications/public relations specialists:

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- Thomas Mills, Public Affairs Deputy with Naval Air Station Whidbey Island; and
- Melanie del Rosario, Nearshore Program Assistant with Northwest Straits Foundation.
- **Inventoried** MRC Outreach and Communication activities from 2017 to date.
- **Considered plan elements** that include:
 - current prioritized messages and themes;
 - current target audiences;
 - 12-month timeline for communication tasks;
 - periodic evaluation of communication outcomes; and
 - periodic strategic review, including:
 - target audiences and prioritized messages; and
 - MRC communication capacity for each coming 12 months.

This communications plan was developed by the IC MRC communications subcommittee: Barbara Bennett (Lead), Randy Berthold, Mike Bianchi, Scott Chase, Linda Rhodes, Elsa Schwartz, and Kelly Zupich, with support from IC MRC staff Anna Toledo.

OVERVIEW

Striving to make IC MRC increasingly effective, professional, and efficient, this plan presents recommendations to:

- **develop and use concise themes** regarding IC MRC's core mission and goals as they relate to each communication and each activity;
- **schedule outreach activities on a yearly cycle** to make the most of seasonal opportunities and volunteer/staff capacity;
- **evaluate outreach and communications annually** against pre-articulated outcomes and desired impact;
- **plan strategically** to focus outreach and communications on current and emerging issues and set goals to evaluate impact and outcomes;
- **conduct a needs assessment** on a three to four-year cycle; and
- **engage professional guidance** to critique and recommend communication approaches.

Specifics on the content of these individual elements and summaries of the outreach and communications work done to date can be found in the appendices to this plan.

MISSION-FOCUSED MESSAGES AND THEMES

In strategic planning and in public relations, it is important to consistently affirm who we are, what we do, and why we do it. To help IC MRC stay mission-focused, Appendix B parses out five themes and messages about roles and work integral to the IC MRC mission. This working document suggests a mission-focused foundation for each outreach decision and mission-focused language to be included in communications.

TIMELINE

Each season of the year lends itself to different communication tasks. The fall/winter tends to be suited to updating and refreshing written materials, video messages, etc. The spring/summer is the right time for face-to-face activities. Social media messaging is best suited to time-sensitive updates and should be shared year-round, and letters to the editor, newsletters, and white papers are suited to target emerging or “hot” topics.

Many communication tasks can be anticipated and prepped prior to the season when they are deployed. Tasks that can be done ahead of time include:

- updating informational signage;
- assembling materials to stage on-site interactive education;
- planning event activities for annual festivals;
- updating brochures, posters, and other written materials; and
- anticipating newsletter themes, forum themes, and related materials.

Major communications projects such as the “Discover Our Island Shores” addition to school curriculum across the county require a small dedicated team and need to be staged in collaboration with other partner organizations. These too can be inserted into a schedule with recognition that they require significant attention and effort.

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This sets the stage for inclusion in each year's MRC work plan, an annual, tailored schedule of communication projects reflecting each year's pressing issues and the unique interests and capacity of the members and staff. A work plan schedule, like a budget, is a planning tool and can always be adapted and refined as it suits. A draft communications timeline is included in Appendix C.

NEEDS ASSESMENT

IC MRC work also follows a multi-year cycle driven by interaction with target audiences. The committee recommends the MRC conduct a needs assessment cyclically (every 3-4 years) to engage target audiences in looking ahead to new and emerging priorities and looking back to consider the impact of MRC's work overall and specifically outreach and communications.

Feedback from cyclical needs assessments would help inform the agenda of the MRC overall as well as outreach and communication strategies specifically. In the past three years, the IC MRC has had good success addressing themes identified through a needs assessment conducted in 2017.

A periodic needs assessment would include one-on-one interviews with representatives of various audiences, evaluation of outreach and communication activities, and responses from participants in different MRC focus areas and activities. The 2017 needs assessment now provides a baseline and template to support and streamline a periodic updated assessment.

The inclusion of a needs assessment in the IC MRC work plan will require a dedicated effort by members and staff and should be considered accordingly in IC MRC's project planning process.

PERIODIC STRATEGIC REVIEW

IC MRC's annual strategic planning retreats present an ideal time for the communications sub-committee to present a review of accomplishments, proposals for themes, and a schedule for each coming year. As needs assessments are completed, the assessment outcomes could be presented at or prior to a retreat to facilitate project planning discussions.

Outreach questions to be considered each year:

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- Reviewing current year:
 - What have we learned from experiences and evaluations this year?
 - What are emerging issues?
 - What are emerging opportunities?
 - What are emerging strategies for communications?
- Looking ahead:
 - Are the right audiences being targeted?
 - Are the right messages being conveyed?
 - Are there any new special projects that need time and attention? (A needs assessment counts as a special project)
 - What maintenance is needed on continuing projects?
 - Who will focus on communications for the next 12 months?
 - Is the plan for the coming year suited to MRC capacity? (i.e., Do we have enough people, money, and time?)
 - Are there new approaches to pilot?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Assess Communications Strategies Annually

The annual strategic planning retreat would be an ideal time, as the agenda allows, for MRC communications subcommittee members to propose themes and strategies for the upcoming 12 months. Once adopted, this discussion could be used to make communications work more predictable.

Conduct Periodic Needs Assessment (at least every 3-4 years)

A needs assessment conducted every 3-4 years, as capacity allows, will help IC MRC understand how its communications efforts have been working, and assist in big-picture planning for target audiences, topics, and strategies for the upcoming years.

Engage Professional Guidance

Local public relations professionals on Camano and Whidbey Islands could provide valuable expertise in refining messaging. Current IC MRC communications reach many different audiences on two distinct island communities. As new strategies and messages are

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developed, IC MRC can seek assistance from the Northwest Straits Commission and Foundation for comments and expertise on content and audiences. In addition, IC MRC can consider securing the services of local professionals with knowledge of marketing to Camano and Whidbey Island communities to critique communication strategies and messages.

Anticipate and Use New Communication Strategies

The emergence of social distancing guidelines due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic occurring at the time this plan was written provides both a challenge to engaging in outreach work, as well as a unique opportunity for IC MRC to plan and respond in creative ways to new communications strategies. IC MRC can embrace new technologies and social media, consider ways to share resources and work with other MRC's to expand the portfolio of materials and products available, and record and post live presentations.

Develop Meaningful and Concise Tag Lines and “Elevator Speeches”

A tagline helps distill an organization's priorities into a quickly understandable, recognizable, and memorable phrase. IC MRC should consider developing a 3-4-word tagline that summarizes its primary goals.

Adaptively Update and Manage Outreach and Communications

Seize annual and cyclical opportunities to refresh and update MRC activities and goals in line with current and emerging issues, and look for ways to use and describe IC MRC work that has been completed or is in process.

Recognize Volunteer Efforts

Communications are one way to preserve and share the work of long-term projects, and acknowledge the immense volunteer effort that these projects entail. IC MRC should consider utilizing tools such as digital storyboards to help tell the story of long-term monitoring projects, like eelgrass, bull kelp, and forage fish.

Leverage Partnerships and Consider Internships

IC MRC often generates creative and timely outreach ideas, though member and staff capacity is not always sufficient to complete all of them. Consider leveraging partnerships with other community organizations and engaging local student interns to develop and implement some of these concepts.

IC MRC also has the potential to add expertise and volunteer skills to strengthen work of other community entities. Collaboration presents the potential to leverage increased impact for activities consistent with IC MRC goals.

APPENDIX A: GENERAL INVENTORY OF IC MRC OUTREACH SINCE 2017

The items listed below are highlights of outreach work conducted by IC MRC since 2017. Detailed summaries of IC MRC outreach can be read in the annual outreach reports, available on the [IC MRC website](#).

2017

- Needs assessment, including presentation to Northwest Straits Commission
- Displays and presentations at conferences and events
- Sandwich board portable displays developed

2018

- Sandwich board portable displays launched
- IC MRC official hats selected and distributed to members
- Catch More Crab outreach
- Kiosk at Smith and Minor Islands Aquatic Reserve
- Forums on derelict shoreline structures
- Partnerships with NWSF and IC on Shore Friendly workshops
- Displays and presentations at conferences and events

2019

- Developed and distributed IC MRC video (social media, website, IC kiosk)
- “Discover Our Island Shores” film, classroom activity, and art contest distributed to IC schools
- Newsletter launched
- Catch More Crab outreach
- Forums on sea level rise
- Workshop on creosote identification and reporting
- Partnerships with NWSF and IC on Shore Friendly workshops
- Displays and presentations at conferences and events

On-going

- Presence at events, such as Sound Waters, Camano 101, Family Outdoor Discovery Day
- Biannual briefing on Commissioners’ work session
- IC MRC website
- Announcements in IC DNR e-newsletter
- Social media through IC DNR Facebook page

Proposed projects

- Publicity packet
- Update sandwich board displays annually
- Schedule next needs assessment
- Periodic white papers to Commissioners on emerging and policy issues
- Expansion of social media
- Digital storyboard about eelgrass project
- Team of PR specialists from Camano and Whidbey Islands to critique IC MRC projects/products

APPENDIX B: IC MRC MESSAGES AND THEMES

Island County Marine Resources Committee (IC MRC): Mission-focused Themes and Messages

The MRC's purpose is to investigate, research, and identify local marine resources, and marine resource and habitat issues; recommend remedial actions to Island County agencies and authorities; carry out such recommendations where so approved; and build local awareness of the issues and broad-based community support for the remedies.

Advises County Decision Makers

Island County Marine Resources Committee (MRC) is an advisory body to Island County Government established in 1999, made up of community volunteers appointed by the County Commissioners. Members of the MRC represent diverse backgrounds, expertise, and interests and share the common goal to protect and restore marine resources in Island County.

The MRC has reported to County Commissioners on policy issues regarding fin-fish net pens, priorities for shoreline restoration, activities that support orca recovery, monitoring results at shoreline restoration sites, and more. The MRC has conducted a needs assessment to collect input from department directors and staff on issues for public education and other MRC action.

Works Regionally with Other Marine Resources Committees

Island County MRC is a part of the Northwest Straits Commission and through the Commission works collaboratively with seven other MRCs in neighboring counties focusing on marine issues of regional importance.

Regional projects include: the Shore Friendly Program, educating school children about a sense of place, sampling for forage fish eggs, seining for juvenile salmon, monitoring the size of eelgrass beds, and tracking seasonal growth of bull kelp beds by kayak and aerial imaging.

Supports Finding, Funding and Monitoring Shoreline Restoration

The MRC sends representatives to the Island County Local Integrating Organization and Salmon Recovery Technical and Citizen Committee. MRC citizen science projects monitor nearshore restoration sites before and after changes.

Researches and Organizes Public Education

Public forums sponsored by the MRC since 2018 have hosted 200 attendees in discussions about shoreline structures, sea level rise, proactive choices for marine stewardship and MyCoast, an app for reporting shoreline impacts. Programs in local schools focus on connecting students with the local marine ecosystem, events at local festivals reach out to all ages, and displays and materials provide information about MRC projects and priorities.

Collaborates with Other Organizations to Conduct Citizen Science and Educational Outreach

The MRC draws volunteers from and partners on projects with Sound Water Stewards of Island County, Whidbey Camano Land Trust, Whidbey Island Conservation District, Washington State University Extension – Island County, Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, Washington State Parks, and others. These partnerships are key to the collaborative effort of protecting and restoring the marine species and habitats that surround our island home.

APPENDIX C: DRAFT ANNUAL COMMUNICATIONS TIMELINE

Communication Tasks	Interval	<i>Winter – assess, plan and prepare</i>	<i>Spring – launch busy season</i>	<i>Summer – sustain busy season</i>	<i>Fall – wrap up, evaluate, prepare</i>
Strategic review and planning	Annually	Plan for upcoming projects at and around IC MRC Retreat. Develop calendar of tasks incorporating each communications project	Check in with plan and calendar	Check in with plan and calendar	Check in with plan and calendar
Communication with Commissioners	Ongoing	Biannual meetings, monthly DNR newsletter, white papers as needed	Same as winter	Same as winter	Same as winter
Develop/update materials and messages per target audiences	Annually	Complete, update, polish and prepare for next active season	As possible/needed	As possible/needed	Same as winter
Use materials and messages	Ongoing	Use at planned and spontaneous opportunities as capacity allows	Same as winter	Same as winter	Same as winter
Ongoing intensive communication projects	Ongoing	Sustain, celebrate and evaluate per specifics of project	Same as winter	Same as winter	Same as winter plus Evaluate and prepare a report for retreat
New intensive communication projects	Annually	Anticipate at retreat in plans for coming year	Work in balance with active season	Work in balance with active season	Time for focused attention to complete and evaluate and/or to make good use of retreat as needed
Renewed needs assessment	Every 3-4 years	Anticipate at retreat in plans for coming year	Collect evaluations and prep questions	Line up interviews	Conduct interviews, assess findings, prepare report for retreat