

ISLAND COUNTY MARINE RESOURCES COMMITTEE

2025 Annual Report



Photo by Florian Graner

About the MRC

The Island County Marine Resources Committee (MRC), established in 1999, is a volunteer advisory group appointed by the Island County Commissioners. Its members come from diverse backgrounds within the local community, sharing a common goal: to protect and restore the local marine environment.

The MRC's mission is to study, research, and identify local marine resources and habitat issues, recommend solutions to Island County agencies, and implement approved actions. Additionally, the MRC works to raise awareness and build community support for addressing marine challenges. In its role, the MRC conducts monitoring, restoration, and outreach projects while serving as an advisor to the County Commissioners.

Island County's MRC is one of seven Marine Resources Committees supported by the Northwest Straits Commission which aims to protect and restore marine waters. The MRC collaborates with the Northwest Straits Commission, Northwest Straits Foundation, and other MRCs, as well as numerous local and regional partners, including Sound Water Stewards, Whidbey Island Conservation District, Snohomish Conservation District, Whidbey Camano Land Trust, Washington State University Extension – Island County, Washington State Parks, the Swinomish Tribe, and more. These partnerships play a crucial role in the collective effort to protect and restore the marine species and habitats surrounding Island County.



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Membership

The MRC consists of up to 13 voting members, appointed by the Island County Board of Commissioners, along with non-voting ex-officio members and technical advisors. The committee relies on the dedication and hard work of its members and volunteers to carry out monitoring, restoration, and outreach efforts. In the 2024-2025 year, the MRC recorded an impressive 1,296.8 volunteer hours! A heartfelt thank you to all our members and volunteers for your commitment to protecting and restoring the marine resources of Island County!



Member	MRC Projects, Sub-Committees, and Group Representation
2024-2025 Members	
Jill Lipoti - Chair	Executive committee, Restoration and Stewardship, Education & Outreach, Comprehensive plan
Kelly Webb – Vice Chair	Executive committee, Abandoned & Derelict vessels
Barbara Bennett	Comprehensive plan, Education & Outreach, Island Local Integrating Organization representative
Joshua Berkowitz	Salmon Recovery Technical Citizens Committee representative, Policy & Outreach
Scott Chase	Sound Water Stewards, Education & Outreach, DEI
Ken Collins	Executive committee, Bull kelp monitoring, Northwest Straits Commission representative
Greg Easton	Port of South Whidbey, Comprehensive plan
Patrick Havel	Executive committee, Education & Outreach
Andi Kopit	Education & Outreach, DEI, Shoreline workshops
Kirk Larsen	Forage fish monitoring
PaulBen McElwain	Sound Water Stewards, Comprehensive plan
Jeff Wheeler	Derelict Crab Pot Removal and Prevention
Ex-Officio Members (non-voting)	
Jennifer Schmitz	Island County Department of Natural Resources
Heather Vitiaz	WSU Extension – Island County
Melanie Bacon	Board of Island County Commissioners
Technical Advisors (non-voting)	
Florian Graner	Executive Director Sound Water Stewards
Linda Rhodes	Science, Bull kelp, Smith & Minor Islands Aquatic Reserve

Operations

The MRC meets on the first Tuesday of every month. Meetings are held from 3:00pm to 5:00pm at the Washington State University Extension – Island County building and often include participation from MRC partners and Island County staff.

Meetings are open to the public and often feature an educational speaker focusing on current marine research or policy, as well as discussion on Island County topics and project updates.

The MRC has one fulltime staff member; staff support to the MRC is equivalent to approximately 1 FTE.

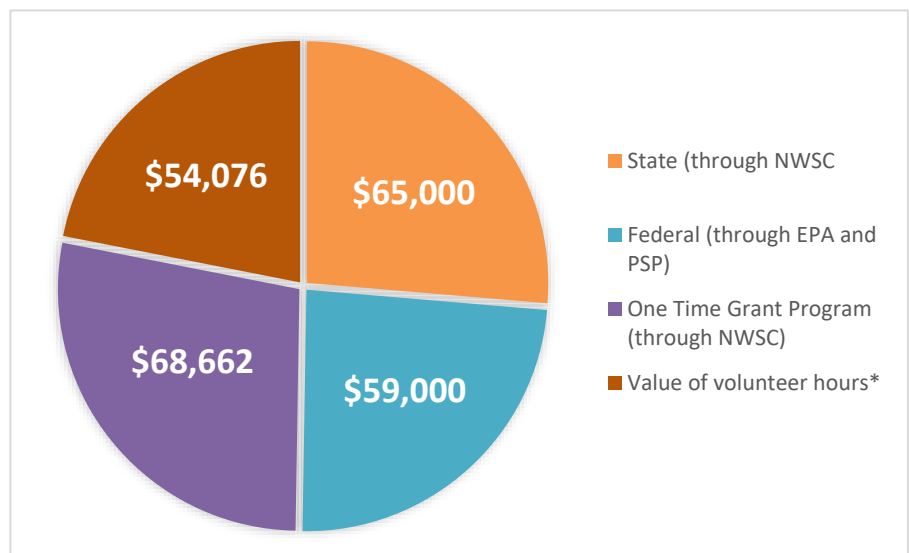
The MRC brings important environmental and economic value to Island County and engages the local community to preserve and protect our beautiful Island home.

Through grants and volunteer hours, the MRC has brought a total value of \$246,738 to Island County in 2024-2025.

Accomplishments

- Scheduled, organized, and held ten MRC meetings which invited community participation and discussion.
- Held the annual MRC Retreat at the Cornet Bay Retreat Center.
- Attended monthly Northwest Straits Commission meetings and seasonal MRC staff meetings.
- Participated in monthly Island Local Integrating Organization Technical Committee meetings and Salmon Recovery Technical and Citizen Committee meetings.
- Regularly updated the website with meeting agendas and minutes, project updates, and announcements.
- Submitted comments on all the Island County Comprehensive Plan elements.
- Attended the NWSC Annual MRC Conference.

Funding Sources



**The value of volunteer hours is calculated using the most current [Value of Volunteer Time](#) from the Independent Sector.*

Advisory

The MRC is uniquely positioned as an advisory body to the Island County Commissioners, made up of community members who understand and represent local issues and perspectives. Additionally, the MRC engages with broader regional marine concerns through its participation in the Northwest Straits Commission, the Island Local Integrating Organization, and the Salmon Recovery Technical and Citizen Committee.

In 2025, the MRC continued their work in providing input on the Island County Comprehensive Plan. Through multiple drafts, presentations, and discussions, the MRC policy sub-committee organized and crafted comment and questions to ensure the Island County Comprehensive Plan effectively considered shoreline, climate, and general marine themed issues and concern.

Throughout 2025, Island County's Commissioners continued to reach out to Island MRC on a variety of issues or questions to provide our support, best available science, and guidance. These working relationships with Island Commissioners continue to be critical as the MRC continues its advisory role.

Accomplishments

- Continued work with the Island County Planning Department on the Island County Comprehensive Plan Update.
- Provided comment on all drafts of the Comprehensive plan elements.
- Attended Board of County Commissioner (BOCC) and Planning Commission meetings.
- Gave verbal comments at multiple BOCC and Planning Commission meetings.
- Wrote multiple letters of support for community partners and state policy issues.



Kirk Larsen leads a tour to Representative Rick Larsen at Keystone Farm.

Photo by Kelly Zupich

Monitoring: Forage Fish

Forage fish are small schooling fish that play a crucial role in the marine food web, serving as a primary food source for salmon, seabirds, and marine mammals. Two key species, surf smelt and Pacific sand lance, lay their eggs on sandy-gravel beaches around Puget Sound. 2025 Sampling efforts also saw Pacific herring eggs at new index site, Cavalero Beach.

The MRC works with Sound Water Steward volunteers to conduct forage fish spawn surveys at selected beaches, often in connection with completed, planned, or proposed shoreline restoration projects. Additionally, the MRC partners with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to assist with surveys at index sites—publicly accessible locations with a known history of spawning activity. Volunteers collect and process beach sediment samples, which are then sent to WDFW for further analysis.

Accomplishments

- Conducted surveys at four restoration sites: Hoypus Point (post-restoration), Cornet Bay (post-restoration), Keystone Farm (pre- and post-restoration), Seahorse Siesta (post-restoration).
- Conducted surveys at three index sites: Cavalero Beach, Glendale and Maple Grove.
- Volunteers reported over 200 hours of service.
- Pacific herring eggs observed at Cavalero Beach for the first time in 15 years.



*Forage fish team processing samples at Keystone Farm.
Photo by Elise Adams*



*Volunteers collecting sediment on a sunny winter day
at Keystone Farm. Photo by Elise Adams*

Monitoring: Bull Kelp

Bull kelp forests provide essential habitat and food for a wide range of marine species, playing a critical role in supporting the marine food web. In response to documented declines of bull kelp in South Puget Sound, the MRC launched boat-based kelp surveys in 2015 in collaboration with NWSC and other MRCs. Working in collaboration with Sound Water Stewards volunteers, monitoring volunteers paddle kayaks around the perimeter of known and encountered bull kelp beds, using GPS units to monitor the size and extent.

During the summer months, kelp bed perimeters were tracked at five locations in Island County: Hoypus Point, Polnell Point, Ebey's Landing, Possession Point, and Lowell Point. Volunteers also gathered temperature data at different depths using temperature loggers. In 2025, monitoring volunteers worked to develop protocols for the deployment of Ecosense YSI and Striker GPS to incorporate into historical datasets.

August 2025 surveys show that kelp beds around Island County reached their largest recorded sea surface expression to date, with a peak of ~202 acres across all five sites, an increase from ~170 acres observed in 2024.



Accomplishments

- Conducted kayak surveys at five key beds around Island County during the summer growing season.
- 20 volunteers reported approximately 122.5 hours for this project.
- Deployed temperature loggers to measure temperatures across multiple depths.
- Learned about and incorporated new Ecosense YSI and Striker GPS methods into monthly surveys.
- Volunteers and staff attended a kayak safety training provided by the NWSC.

Restoration Stewardship: Hoypus Point

The Hoypus Point Restoration project is a continuation of work from 2022 that comprised of ~350 feet of shoreline armor removal, the shoreline restored to a more natural slope, and a variety of native vegetation planted throughout the site. This project restored a bluff-backed beach and reconnected the marine riparian zone while restoring ecosystem elements and nearshore processes that are expected to continue enhancing habitat for salmon and improve spawning areas for forage fish.

In 2025, the MRC in partnership with the NW Straits Foundation (the project sponsor) and Washington State Parks, has continued providing ongoing care for the restoration plantings to encourage and promote vegetation establishment. Through the organization of multiple volunteer stewardship events at the project site, the site has thrived over the summer months thanks to regular weeding and watering.



Volunteer stewards mulch the native plants at Hoypus Point. Photo by Kelly Zupich

Accomplishments

- Co-hosted the maintenance and four stewardship events, including an Orca Recovery Day planting event, with the Northwest Straits Foundation.
- Site watering took place every week, June-September 2025.
- Helped create Island County community volunteers' "Sense of Place" and stewarding for their shorelines.



Volunteers plant native vegetation in celebration of Orca Recovery Day 2025. Photo by Elise Adams

Restoration Stewardship: Cornet Bay

The MRC has continued partnering with the Northwest Straits Foundation, Washington State Parks, and other partners to restore shoreline habitat at Cornet Bay in Deception Pass State Park.

The first phase of restoration occurred in October 2012, and included removing a creosote-treated bulkhead, re-grading the beach to a natural slope, and planting native vegetation.

The next phase of restoration occurred in November 2015 and included removing fill along the shoreline, re-grading the slope, expanding the salt marsh area, and planting native vegetation.

The native vegetation has been maintained through regular weeding and watering. Additionally, staff carefully spot sprayed the Canada Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) with herbicide to keep the thistle from continuing to spread. Between the Cornet Bay and Hoypus Point (above) Restoration sites, ~280 native plants were planted in 2025.

Thanks to dedicated volunteers, this site continues to become more established and provides much-needed habitat for nearshore life.



Volunteers holding up bags of their weeded plants. Photo by Elise Adams

Accomplishments

- Site watering took place weekly June-September 2025.
- Volunteers worked to weed Canada Thistle, stopping the plant from seeding and spreading.
- Due to effective vegetation maintenance, existing native plants survived through the summer months.
- Co-hosted the maintenance and four stewardship events, including an Orca Recovery Day planting event, with the Northwest Straits Foundation.



Volunteers plant native vegetation in celebration of Orca Recovery Day 2025. Photo by Elise Adams

Abandoned and Derelict Vessels (ADV)

The MRC has been partnering with the Northwest Straits Commission to work to get abandoned and derelict vessels off our shorelines and out of our waters.

In 2025, the Abandoned and Derelict Vessel (ADV) program continued the transition from solely response, to response, prevention, and collaboration. In 2025, Island MRC utilized and championed partnerships with State agencies, local homeowners' association (HOAs), and Northwest Straits Commission to successfully remove two problematic vessels from Island County shorelines. This collaboration resulted in the boats being removed before further marine ecosystem or property damage – a success for protecting Island County's shorelines.

Throughout the year, the program continued to grow as we partook in growing our community partnerships and educational tools for future work. This focus will enable the ADV program to collaborate with State, County, and community partners to create a more effective network of engaged community members aware of ADV hazards and means of action.

Accomplishments

- Island MRC identified three abandoned and derelict vessels for removal in 2025.
- MRC facilitated the removal of two abandoned and derelict vessels in 2025.
- Developed and strengthened relationships with new partners.



Derelict Vessel Removal at Possession Point. Photo by Laurel Schoenbohm



Derelict Vessel. Photo by Kelly Webb

Education and Outreach: Meetings, Events, and Presentations

The MRC engaged in several outreach efforts throughout the year. Outreach is an integral part of each MRC project. By helping the community understand what the MRC does, and why, the MRC strives to increase public interest in learning about and caring for the local marine environment.



Jan Holmes Volunteer of the Year Winners. Photo by Kelly Zupich



Island County Sea Level Rise workshop. Photo by Kelly Zupich

Accomplishments

- In coordination with Sound Water Stewards and WSU – Island County Extension, Island MRC honored volunteers Barbara Bennett, Lee Badovinus, and Paul Ben and Jeanie McElwain as the 2025 Jan Holmes Island County Coastal Volunteer of the Year.
- Made educational presentations to the NWSC and the South Whidbey School District.
- Distributed crab gauges, rot cord, and educational handouts to recreational crabbers and to local businesses.
- Participated in Orca Recovery Day at Keystone Farm and Sound Waters University.
- Contributed to Whidbey Weekly’s “Make a Difference” column.
- Hosted a table at the Penn Cove Water Festival and Family Discovery Day.
- Led two beach field trips for students.
- Held a workshop for Shoreline homeowners educating attendees about shoreline processes and sea level rise.
- Hosted site visits to Cornet Bay and Hoypus Point for local graduate students.



A peaceful moment at Hoypus Point. Photo by Kelly Zupich