



As a nonprofit scientific organization, KWIAHT does not ordinarily comment on public policy except to the extent of correcting misleading assertions of biological knowledge. Disagreement over improving public beach access through the Clure property near Shark Reef has raised issues of fact that we cannot ignore. Claims have been made that are not only inaccurate, but undermine the rationale for public protection of endangered species, sensitive habitats, and relatively undisturbed “natural” areas throughout San Juan County.

Claims have been made that public access to beaches has no adverse impacts, or that impacts can be avoided by not publicizing or promoting access points. Our recent experience with the National Monument contradicts these claims.

Human activity leaves more than trash on shorelines. Our feet compress gravels and cobbles beneath which inter-tidal invertebrates and fish are taking shelter from the sun. People appear to find turning over rocks irresistible, and this exposes inter-tidal animals to heat, desiccation, and predators such as gulls and crows. The “crunch” when people climb on inter-tidal rocks is the sound of barnacles, mussels, limpets and other small animals being crushed underfoot. Dogs chase off feeding shorebirds, and if unleashed, can also frighten wading birds and dabbling ducks.

Of course, this is all a function of numbers. The more people visit a stretch of shoreline during the year, the greater the impact, and the less likely it becomes that animals can reproduce fast enough to replace the loss. In ecological terms, this is a “density dependent” phenomenon. Shoreline habitats can recover yearly from a small level of casual human disturbance, but if the number of visitors grows from hundreds to thousands annually, the loss of diversity and abundance of species is inevitable, and sometimes irreversible.

We are beginning with baseline conditions, over most Lopez shorelines, that already reflect low but persistent levels of disturbance. I had the opportunity, a dozen years ago, of visiting Indian Island in Jefferson County, where restrictions on beach activity have been strictly enforced by the Navy for over a century. Inter-tidal organisms were conspicuously larger and covered every available hard surface to an extent that I have never observed above the tides in San Juan County. The fact that our inter-tidal areas on Lopez have been relatively depleted by existing levels of human use should make us more cautious in protecting our best shoreline habitat patches from increased disturbance.

Nearly 20 years ago, I worked with State Parks on a recovery plan for the tide pools near Rosario Beach (Deception Pass, Skagit County) where an unexpected increase in visitors resulted in stripping the living crust of barnacles, mussels and sponges of inter-tidal rocks, and extirpating animals such as starfish and tide-pool crabs. We devised a plan for a tide-pool trail, with handrails made of metal posts and cables to keep visitors off most of the rocks. It was expensive and not very pretty, but what was worse was that the marine organisms never fully recovered.

KWIAHT is currently consulting with the Eastsound community and the National Monument over the protection of inter-tidal wildlife at Indian Island (Orcas Island). Our recent annual report to the Orcas

community, drawing on eight years of data gathering, concluded that wear and tear of the beach from a rapidly growing wave of visitors has resulted in a decrease in eelgrass and inter-tidal animals since 2009. And Indian Island is relatively well protected: on roughly 50 days per year when there are day-time low tides, we have local volunteers on the beach that speak to most visitors about reducing their impact.

It was only a year ago that the National Monument convened a series of consultations with our community over managing adverse impacts of increasing visitors on the meadows at Iceberg Point. The existing footpaths were widening, more paths were appearing crisscrossing the meadows, and a number of wildflower occurrences were shrinking. The Monument has taken steps to restrict hikers to well-trod paths and to raise awareness of sensitive plants and lichens in that landscape, but some rocks that were trampled bare of lichens are going to stay that way for the rest of our lives.

Shark Reef is already heavily utilized as well, and is scheduled for further access improvements. We estimate that native wildflowers there have declined by at least 50 percent since we began looking. Inter-tidal rocks are bare wherever they are easily accessible; the relationship between accessibility and biodiversity is conspicuous.

Beaches are more difficult to manage at the destination end. You cannot build trails, and ramps or boardwalks over sea-swept rocks are costly and potentially dangerous. Controlling access is the least costly and most effective measure for protecting inter-tidal areas from being “loved to death”. This must be a physical restriction. Recent experience with Watmough Bight should disabuse anyone on this island of the idea that we can keep a publicly managed, easily accessible beach secret.

All this means that it is essential to identify at least some relatively undisturbed shorelines, with significant biodiversity value to our island, for conservation rather than recreation. Improving access to all publicly owned beaches irrespective of habitat quality or rare species may be a crowd-pleaser but it is not prudent conservation of our remaining biological resources.

Likewise, we suggest that more should be done to reduce visitor impacts on Lopez beaches that are already accessible, before we spend money on making more beaches accessible. Let’s focus impacts where damage has already been done, rather than proceed under the illusion that adding more public access beaches will dilute visitor impacts, and somehow save our remaining low-disturbance shorelines, rather than attract more visitor use.

You can agree with this criticism and still support the proposed acquisition and trail on the west side. Everything in life is a matter of balancing risks and benefits. However, let us not pretend that there will be no adverse impacts.

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