

Chuckanut Village Marsh Restoration Project



Chuckanut Bay is a unique place! It contains a rare marsh with a mixture of fresh and salt water wildlife communities. It provides habitat for heron, eagles, osprey, red-legged frog, red fox, deer, western tanager, kingfisher, chum, coho, steelhead, cutthroat and salamanders, duck, and clams. According to a recent study, Chuckanut Bay pocket estuary provides the highest level of function out of the seven pocket estuaries in Bellingham Bay (NES 2006). All of the nearshore marine shorelines within Bellingham City limits (including Chuckanut Bay) are listed as critical marine habitat for both Puget Sound Chinook (50 CFR 226) and bull trout (50 CFR 17), as well as providing habitat for the recently listed Puget Sound steelhead trout.

However, the health of the ecosystem is in jeopardy. Symptoms of ecosystem stress include declining stocks of salmon, closures of recreational shellfish beds, and degradation and losses of eelgrass beds and other marine habitats. Habitat degradation is considered the leading cause of the decline of salmonid populations in our Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA 1). Bellingham Bay, including Chuckanut Bay, is currently on the Washington State 303(d) list as At Risk for exceeding acceptable levels of fecal coliform bacteria and pH, as well as a number of other constituents. Chuckanut Bay is currently closed to shellfish harvesting because of high levels of marine biotoxins.

Near-shore habitat, including estuaries associated with small non-natal tributary streams, has emerged in recent years as a priority for restoration and recovery of ESA listed Chinook salmon and bull trout (Beamer et al. 2003; Goetz et al. 2007).

The WRIA 1 Salmon Recovery Plan and Whatcom County Marine Resource Committee (MRC) state that the focus of nearshore restoration projects should be placed on projects that improve the quantity and diversity of habitat in pocket estuaries such as Chuckanut Bay (MRC 2006; Nooksack Natural Resources et al. 2005). As a result of the recent focus on nearshore marine habitats, the Whatcom County Marine Resources Committee commissioned an assessment and prioritization of nearshore restoration opportunities within three target regions of Whatcom County, including Chuckanut Bay. That study listed restoration of hydrologic connectivity at the Chuckanut Village Marsh as the top restoration priority within the target area.

Restoration of the Chuckanut Village Marsh would enhance the area's ability to provide pocket estuary functions including improving water quality and providing rearing, foraging and osmo-regulation for juvenile salmonids migrating into the area from nearby Chuckanut Creek (CGS 2007).

The goals of the project are to:

- 1) Improve water quality by protecting and preserving existing marine resources
- 2) Restore impaired areas while enhancing public access
- 3) Educate the public about the importance of marine water quality while changing behaviors that contribute to water quality impairments.