SOUND FACTS

Puget Sound's Nearshore Habitat

What is the nearshore?

Nearshore habitat comprises the beach, the upland adjacent to it and the intertidal area. This habitat forms an essential link in the food web of Puget Sound and is an important fish and wildlife corridor. Shallow marine waters are home to sensitive young fish and shellfish and provide an important feeding area for fish, birds and even mammals.

Muddy shores are best known as habitat for commercial and recreational shellfish such as oysters, geoducks and crabs. Eelgrass beds are among the most important sites where herring schools lay their roe. Small worms, mollusks, crustaceans and forage fish inhabiting muddy shores are prey for young salmon, sole and flounder, as well as resident and migrating shorebirds.

The most common type of shoreline along the inland sea contains a mixture of mud and sand along with coarser gravel and cobbles. This variety of bottom materials supports a great diversity of living creatures: seaweeds clinging to rocks; crab and shrimp scavenging the mud for food; clams burrowed between cobbles; and fish, birds and seals prowling for prey.

What is happening?

Human development has already taken a heavy toll on Puget Sound nearshore habitats. An estimated 58 percent of the original coastal wetlands are gone. Dikes, port development, and commercial and residential building have all impacted these critical areas. Many sand, gravel and cobble shorelines have been dredged, paved or altered by bulkheads. In Seattle and Tacoma, areas which were once expansive intertidal marsh, the losses are almost 100 percent. Despite our heightened awareness, there is a continuing alteration and loss of nearshore habitat, incrementally from one residence to the next.

What should be done?

The Puget Sound Water Quality Action Team is currently working to identify the most significant threats to nearshore habitat. We recognize that the current regulatory system is not working as it should to protect the nearshore. We need better inventory information on the types of nearshore habitats in Puget Sound and the functions they provide. Restoration efforts are needed, particularly in areas that have experienced huge losses of critical habitat.

Photography courtesy of Brian Walsh

What can you do?

Whether you live on the shoreline or are an occasional visitor, you can be a steward of Puget Sound's nearshore environment. Volunteer with a monitoring group, pick up litter, help with a revegetation project or just take the time to sit back and watch the critters that live along this glorious Sound.

State and Local Partners

As part of the Action Team, the following state agencies and other partners are involved in habitat protection activities:

- Department of Natural Resources (inventories nearshore habitat, owns and manages tidelands)
- Department of Ecology (provides technical assistance and guidance materials for Shoreline Management Act)
- Department of Fish &Wildlife (administers Hydraulic Approval Permits and provides technical assistance)
- Local governments (develops and administers shoreline master programs and critical areas ordinances)
- Tribal governments (inventories and protects nearshore areas on reserved land)