

Identified Issues

Version 3.1.07

1. Land (and water) Protection

Zella M. Schultz Seabird Sanctuary - *Should the Zella Schultz seabird sanctuary be added to the Protection Island National Wildlife Refuge (PI) to more effectively manage the rhinoceros auklet colony and other wildlife on PI?*

Protection Island has the second largest rhinoceros auklet colony in the State and is one of the eight largest in North America. The major rhinoceros auklet colony on Protection Island is bisected by the Zella Schultz Seabird Sanctuary, which is owned by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established between USFWS and WDFW for the cooperative management of Protection Island NWR in October 1990. WDFW is the managing agency for the 48-acre Zella Schultz Sanctuary while the USFWS manages the remaining 316 acres. We have not yet discussed this proposal with WDFW.

Refuge Buffers - *We would like to have a 200 yard buffer around key seabird breeding islands and smaller buffers around all other islands to protect marine mammals.*

Human disturbance negatively impacts refuge wildlife. Buffers can provide areas relatively free of human disturbance. Marine Protection Areas (MPAs) are one tool that can be used to reduce disturbance to Refuge resources. Various forms of MPAs exist in the San Juan Archipelago and Protection Island such as Washington Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR) tideland leases, which serve as resource management areas around Protection Island. There is both public support and concern for buffers.

Other lands - *What additional lands can be acquired/protected to increase island and shoreline habitat within the San Juan Islands Refuge?*

Quality wildlife habitat continues to be negatively impacted by human development and activities in the San Juan Islands. There may be some potential for acquiring or protecting lands that are important for seabirds, black oystercatchers, rare plants, and other wildlife. Land acquisition/protection may also help to offset loss of protected habitat due to sea level rise. There are islands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that may be relatively simple to acquire. Also other important islands owned by conservation organizations have seabirds (Goose Island) and listed species (Whale Rocks). In addition, seabird breeding is occurring on private lands with no conservation protection (Henry Island).

2. Threats to Resources

Human Disturbance to Wildlife - *What techniques can be implemented that will discourage/reduce human disturbance to the Refuge islands and their resources.*

One of the most basic breeding requirements of seabirds, harbor seals and elephant seals is that the animals have access to islands upon which they are undisturbed during their breeding seasons. Disturbance may be contributing to the loss of some seabird nesting sites and displacement of marine mammals. Seabirds and marine mammals that use the San Juan Islands and Protection Island for breeding frequently are subjected to various types of human disturbance. These disturbances include human and pet trespass on the islands, boats approaching the islands too closely, low-flying aircraft, commercial and recreational fishing and diving, and U. S. Coast Guard (USCG) visits during sensitive times of the year. In addition to disturbance during the breeding seasons, disturbances are disruptive to birds and certain marine mammals using the islands as resting, roosting and haul out sites. USFWS does not control waters surrounding Refuge islands and it is difficult to educate public users in a marine environment. Watercraft-based tours are a major industry in the San Juan Archipelago. Watercraft use, especially whale and seabird watching operations and sea kayak activity, around Protection Island and in the San Juan Archipelago has dramatically increased. USFWS perceives an inverse relationship between intensity of watercraft use and breeding seabird use of Refuges.

Oil spills- *What can the USFWS do to reduce the risk and lessen the impacts of oil spills and fuel leakage events from large tankers, as well as recreational and smaller commercial vessels? What are the cumulative effects of “smaller” fuel leaks? How do they impact Refuge resources?*

Oil and fuel spills are threats to wildlife and their habitat. Not “if,” but “when” will there be a spill? Focus is on large events with little awareness of cumulative impacts from small vessel spills or leakage. The Strait of Juan de Fuca is a major shipping lane for tanker transport of crude and refined oil mainly from Alaska’s Prudhoe Bay. Six refineries are located along the Georgia Basin/Puget Sound shoreline. As of 1997, an average of 616,000 barrels (26 billion gallons) per year moved through the Strait. Due to the high volume of tanker traffic within the Strait, a high likelihood of oil spill accidents exists. Recreational boaters and sport and commercial fishers may also experience oil or fuel leakage.

Regional Contaminants - *What are the regional (Georgia Basin/Puget Sound ecosystem) contaminants and their impacts to refuge resources? Is there anything USFWS can do to change or modify the impacts? What research can be done to effectively identify and assess the impacts to refuge resources?*

Georgia Basin/Puget Sound waters are plagued with contamination issues. It is unclear what, if any, impacts these contaminants have on refuge resources and/or forage species; however, it is a priority research issue for Washington State. In cooperation with other agencies, USFWS should take an active role in identifying impacts to wildlife.

Local Contaminants - *What are the local contaminants affecting refuge resources (i.e. rogue creosote logs and marine pilings)?*

Currently, rogue creosote impregnated logs wash up onto refuge shorelines. In addition, Protection and Matia Islands' marinas have creosote treated pilings. Creosote leaches into surrounding waters and onto refuge lands, contaminating seabirds, their nesting habitat, and marine mammal haul out areas. Marina pilings can be replaced with less damaging material and creosote logs removed from shorelines. These are local contamination issues that we can effectively solve.

Marine debris and derelict fishing gear - *What role can USFWS play in reducing the presence of marine debris and derelict fishing gear from refuge and adjacent marine areas?*

The Northwest Straits Commission, in conjunction with the seven northwest Washington counties' marine resource committees, has developed a protocol and initiated derelict fishing gear removal from their respective waters. During net removal from waters south of Lopez Island, near Refuge islands, divers found three and one half feet of marine mammal, seabird, and fish bones associated with one derelict gillnet. Derelict fishing gear kills and keeps on killing. Identify target locations and remove derelict fishing gear and marine debris.

Invasive Species - *What can USFWS do to prevent the introduction and dispersal of invasive plants and animals and facilitate their removal from the Refuges?*

With a few exceptions, San Juan Islands NWR is composed of native-dominated plant communities. Invasive plants, such as English ivy (*Hedera helix*), Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus discolor*), and holly (*Ilex spp.*) are found at a few specific sites. The adjacent developed islands have serious problems with domesticated rabbits. In addition, ranched Russian mink were released onto the larger islands and have been observed in extremely high densities on adjacent islands. The introduction of invasive marine species is of special concern in the tidelands surrounding the islands. European green crab has been identified at two locations within the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Invasive species typically out-compete native species and can result in decreased population levels and degraded habitats. If USFWS does not aggressively address invasive species, then these small, unique island ecosystems will be at serious risk.

Deer - *Are deer adversely impacting seabird nesting habitat or native plant communities?*

The deer population on Protection Island has increased since Refuge establishment. Water troughs may be supporting an artificially high deer population. USFWS wants to support deer population levels on Protection Island that do not adversely impact seabird nesting habitat and plant communities. Extensive deer browsing was also observed on other islands in the San Juans with fragile native plant communities.

Geese – *How much of a threat are geese to native plants on refuge units and what should be done about it?*

Prior to introductions of 2 large subspecies (*Branta canadensis maxima* and *B.c. moffitti*) into the region, Canada geese were not common nesters in the San Juan Islands. Their abundance today, especially during the breeding season, puts fragile special status plants and plant communities at risk of extirpation/extinction from geese grazing. Geese can also increase the dispersal of exotic species between islands. There have apparently been some efforts to reduce their numbers in the area.

3. Habitat Restoration

Wetland Restoration on PI - *Is there a potential to restore a portion of the historic wetland on Protection Island?*

Protection Island had a wetland at the base of violet spit prior to development of the marina. Potential remains to partially restore Protection Island wetland

Native plant community restoration - *Is there a potential to restore or enhance special status species or communities?*

USFWS is committed to increasing biodiversity when feasible. Some islands have special status species or communities that may be maintained, enhanced, restored.

4. Wilderness

Refuge signs - *How do we identify Refuge islands or try to inform the public to maintain a distance from the islands to prevent disturbance and still meet the intent of wilderness?*

Eighty of the 83 islands in the San Juan Islands NWR are designated wilderness. A variety of signage is present on refuge islands including standard Refuge Boundary signs and a limited number of 4' x 6' informational signs (200 yard buffer request). Refuge lands need to be identified by a variety of methods, such as marine charts, publications, and signage. Although the larger signs help to reduce wildlife disturbance, they are not in keeping with the wilderness character.

Navigation Aids - *If navigational aids are no longer necessary in some of these locations, is their removal feasible?*

Between 18 and 21 islands have navigational aids on them. Is there a need to revisit the MOU with the USCG to determine if the navigational aids are all still needed? The USCG has primary jurisdiction on some of these islands; the USFWS has "secondary jurisdiction." Navigational aids detract from wilderness character. When feasible, removing navigational aids will increase wilderness character of islands.

5. Research

On refuge - *What research activities are appropriate and compatible on the Refuges?*

Because of their close proximity to the mainland, the Refuges provide accessible opportunities for seabird research. There has been a variety of research efforts associated with Protection Island, notably glaucous-winged gull ecology and behavioral modeling, and rhinoceros auklet breeding biology and survival. PI has an extensive history of research studies by university professors and their graduate students that predates refuge establishment but has continued to the present. Research has also occurred within the San Juan Islands. Some publics feel that a limited number of institutions are granted permission to conduct research on Protection Island. USFWS supports scientific research conducted to provide resource information and influence management.

Off refuge - *How can USFWS encourage off-refuge research, such as seabird by-catch and prey species availability, which benefits Refuge resources?*

Research conducted only on the Refuges provides limited opportunity for protecting, maintaining, or enhancing seabird populations. Coordinating research and synthesizing information with other federal and state agencies, tribes and educational organizations is fundamental to seabird conservation.

6. Visitor Services

State Marine Parks – *Should we continue to have State Marine Parks on the San Juan Islands Refuge? What is the best way to facilitate compatible priority public uses on the San Juan Islands NWR?*

USFWS entered into a MOU with Washington State Parks (WSP) to manage portions of Matia and Turn Islands as part of State Marine Parks system in 1959. The latest MOU expired in 1992 - although meetings have been held with WSP to modify some uses since that time. WSP has expressed a desire to obtain Matia and Turn Islands from the USFWS. At this time USFWS is not interested in giving up Matia or Turn Islands. The precedent has been set with the transfer of Jones Island to them in 1982. They have suggested that they would “trade” for some islands they own.

Camping- *Should USFWS continue to allow camping on Matia and Turn Islands?*

Camping currently occurs on Matia and Turn Islands as part of the State Marine Parks system. Which, if any, of the priority public uses does camping support? In light of the new Appropriate Uses Policy, a review of current uses is warranted. There are other options for boat access camping in the area. Camping outside of the designated camping area is occurring on Matia.

Fishing – *Should we officially open Turn and Matia Islands to fishing?*

The San Juan Islands NWR has never been officially opened to fishing however bank fishing and island-based diving for fish is occurring. The timing of these activities may result in disturbance to refuge resources.

Beach Activities – *Should we open beaches on Turn and Matia Islands and, if so, what beach activities would be allowed?*

Visitors to these Refuges use the beaches for picnicking, pet walking, camping, group parties, beachcombing, and some sport activities. Also, some island-based SCUBA diving is occurring from Matia Island. Additional diving may be occurring from Turn Island, the other open refuge unit that is a State Marine Park. These uses displace or disturb wildlife and may degrade shoreline habitat.

Boat Access - *What is the best way to manage watercraft access to refuge islands?*

The only practical way to access the Refuges is by boat and currently there is boat access to Turn and Matia Islands. Turn and Matia have a limited number of mooring bouys and Matia has a boat dock. Both of these islands are very popular motor-boat and kayaking destinations. With the exception of the boat dock, the Matia shoreline is supposed to be closed, but both kayakers and motorboats access the island via its many coves and beaches. A group of approximately 30 kayakers were seen beached and camping on the closed shoreline of Matia recently. All boats beach themselves on Turn. These activities limit wildlife use of the shoreline. Trespassing on closed refuge islands also occurs. Public perception is that non-motorized watercraft such as kayaks do not create a disturbance to wildlife.

Environmental Education/Interpretation on Protection Island - *Are there appropriate activities and venues for providing Protection Island NWR's environmental education/interpretation purpose?*

Protection Island has off-site education/interpretation accomplished through the Port Townsend Marine Science Center and local Audubon groups. Educational tours from chartered boats, such as the 70-passenger *Glacier Spirit*, are regularly hired by educational organizations to study Protection Island wildlife. From the boats, they are able to observe the main seabird and marine mammal breeding areas. There have been requests for on-site environmental education and interpretation. Organizations, such as Audubon, have requested to visit Protection Island during the seabird breeding season. Environmental education on Protection Island should be highly scrutinized and controlled because of the sensitivity of nesting seabirds and breeding marine mammals to disturbance. No public requests for on-site interpretation during the breeding season have been approved. Allowing selected public access increases the difficulty of maintaining the closures and increases potential for trespass disturbance to vulnerable breeding seabirds. Requests from secondary or university level schools for on-site programs would be considered; however, probably because of the difficulty in acquiring boat transportation, no schools have requested these programs.

7. Refuge Administration

Lack of USFWS Presence in the San Juans - How does the USFWS create a stronger presence within the Refuges to better facilitate effective management and public education?

Wildlife use of the San Juan Islands NWR has diminished over time, while public use in the San Juan archipelago has increased. Trespass on islands closed to the public, disturbance caused by boaters coming too close to nesting seabirds or hauled out marine mammals, and overall boating use and speeds in areas adjacent to refuge islands have all probably contributed to the decline in species numbers and diversity. Refuge staff has increased the number of visits to the San Juans and have provided more outreach as to who we are, where refuge lands are located, and how to contact us if needed. This increased presence has resulted in contacts with numerous user groups and governmental agencies; begun to quantify the extent of trespass and disturbance incidents; and verified our need of permanent/seasonal staff stationed in the San Juans. Although Refuge involvement in the San Juans has increased, management, maintenance, and biological needs, as well as expressed public desire for USFWS presence remain unfulfilled. Prior to approximately 5 years ago, only one or two trips to the San Juans were made yearly to conduct wildlife inventories and do minor maintenance.

Facilities on Protection Island NWR - What administrative facilities should be located on Protection Island, and where should they be located?

Existing facilities include a marina, caretaker residence, research bunkhouse, vacant office, equipment shop, and storage shed, which currently houses out-dated fire suppression equipment. Administrative facilities should be kept at the minimum, so as to not impact seabird nesting habitat and marine mammal breeding.

8. Cultural Resources

Historic/cultural resources on SJ and PI NWRs - Are cultural resources being identified and protected?

During the preplanning process, Refuge staff became aware of 10 Washington State listed historic sites in the San Juan Refuges. We do not know how many islands have been surveyed. There also exists the strong possibility of Tribal cultural sites on many of the islands.