

# Rescuing South Sound Beach by Beach

By Jim Lynch

Take a closer look at South Puget Sound. Get out on the water and look at the remaining pockets of wilderness along these increasingly developed shorelines.

Compared to central Puget Sound, our southern beaches are still relatively humble and wild, not yet packed with large houses, not yet entirely barricaded with stone bulkheads.

Yet changes are rolling swiftly into the shallow fragile lower bays of this inland sea. Some 150,000 people were added to Thurston, Pierce and Mason counties during the past decade, triggering a building frenzy along the waterfront where values soared the fastest.

So how can we hope to protect what's left of our wild shorelines as population and housing demands escalate?

Fortunately, it has finally become politically hip to try to clean and preserve Puget Sound. State, federal and local agencies are now charged with protecting the Sound like never before. Many environmental groups also are weighing in with newfound urgency.

But if you peel back all the talk and studies to what is actually making a difference in South Sound, you might find yourself looking at the very small, very focused Olympia-based Capitol Land Trust.

There is a clear-minded simplicity to the Trust. It uses the leverage of salmon recovery grants, member donations and the good will of large property owners to negotiate discounted land purchases which ensure that at least some key South Sound properties remain intact.

Look around. The recent results are easy to see.

Paddle south down Eld Inlet past Evergreen State College's nude beach until you see a totem pole on the eastern side of the inlet where an archaeological dig continues to uncover native relics.

It's all part of Triple Creek Farm, which covers 3.5 miles of shoreline that the Capitol Land Trust helped ensure will never be further developed.

Or look at the wild beachhead just south of there, where the firs drape like long dresses into high water, and where twenty-five acres had been approved for a housing development before the Trust started negotiating with an out-of-state landowner to permanently protect the land.

Or wind westward, down Hammersley Inlet toward Shelton and the bottom of Oakland Bay, one of the world's shellfish sanctuaries. That's where the Capitol Land Trust persuaded Mason County commissioners to jointly purchase an 80-acre, 19<sup>th</sup> century byside homestead.

As many as 17 homes could have been built on the site. Instead, the county agreed to turn its salmon-rich creek and half-mile of shoreline into a public park. Just looking at this property might lower your blood pressure.

Writers are encouraged to write about what



Low tide in Mud Bay on Lower Eld Inlet

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they know. I prefer to write about what fascinates me. That's why I set a novel amid South Sound's dramatic tides, bizarre sea creatures and its calm, mesmerizing bays.

I wrote "The Highest Tide" without a time period in mind because much of South Sound still feels timeless to me. Tall sticks still mark old oyster farms. Aging summer cabins still stand on stilts above high water. And you can still sail to coves with few traces of civilization.

Environmental groups often sound hell-bent on alarming us about how much we've lost. And we've obviously lost a whole lot. Puget Sound's salmon runs are about five percent of what they used to be. Hood Canal is short on oxygen. The list goes on.

But there's so much still here that is worth saving.

I've received emails from European readers who say they've never even seen wild sea life. The only clams, mussels and oysters they've eaten were farmed. When the tide rolls out in South Sound, wild shellfish is still abundant. Starfish, massive moon snails, an assortment of shore crabs, sand dollars, colorful anemones and maybe a baby octopus might show up too.

Many salmon runs remain strong down here. In fact, there is evidence that young salmon are increasingly straying from polluted northern grounds to healthier South Sound estuaries before heading out into the Pacific. And during some chum and coho runs there are so many returning salmon jumping in Eld Inlet it's hard to paddle across the bay without getting splashed. At other times, the inlet is so packed with microscopic plant and animal life that the water turns phosphorescent and your paddle lights up like an underwater torch. But it's what you can see every day that gets me, including the ever-present harbor seals that pop up and eyeball you like playful Labrador retrievers waiting for you to toss a tennis ball.

Or just boat out Budd Inlet five miles from the clatter and pollution of Olympia's downtown shoreline until you come upon Gull Harbor, a gravel-streamed estuary that serves as a nursery for baby chinook, coho and chum salmon as well as surf smelt, pacific herring and other critical feeder fish.

As many as two dozen new homes could have been built along that exotic and delicate shoreline if the Capitol Land Trust hadn't stepped in and struck a deal to protect two miles of shoreline.





### Gull Harbor on Budd Inlet.

The Trust isn't on some crusade to save some rare salamanders or owls we'll never see in forests few of us will ever stroll. You don't even have to get out of your car to understand this crusade.

Drive east on Highway 101 toward downtown Olympia until you cross Mud Bay and the southernmost tip of Puget Sound. Glance up at the steep hillside along the bay's western flank where the unbroken forest rises from the shallows.

That's the 55-acre property the Capitol Land Trust hopes to buy next, so as to protect the chum and coho salmon run at its base and to protect the view corridor for every passing motorist forever.

The Trust needs to raise another \$600,000 in grants and donations to make it happen. It's an inspiring challenge and a bargain -- just like the others. But don't take my word for it or the Trust's word for it.

Take a look for yourself.



WA Department of Ecology

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*Capitol Land Trust is a nonprofit conservation organization whose mission is to further collaborative and strategic conservation of southwest Washington's essential natural areas and working lands.*



### Harmony Farms on Henderson Inlet