

Habitat Restoration

In 1999, Chinook salmon were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in the waters throughout the Bellingham area. These fish, the largest of the Pacific salmon, once filled the surrounding waters and represented the natural heritage of the northwest coast. A combination of factors including over fishing, the destruction of habitat in the rivers and the ocean, and dams and other barriers, brought these massive fish to the brink of extinction. The decline of salmon is closely associated with the decline in the health of Bellingham Bay and Puget Sound. Over the past one hundred years, there has been a large recession in the population of species which inhabit the surrounding area including forage fish, bottom fish, orca whales, salmon and marine birds. The restoration of shoreline habitat is critical to a coordinated, ecosystem-wide restoration effort and figures prominently into redevelopment plans for the Waterfront District.

Bellingham's central waterfront was once surrounded by shallow mudflats and extensive eelgrass beds which offered a surplus of food and protection to juvenile salmon as they left nearby rivers and adjusted to salt water in preparation for a journey out to sea. This natural environment has been devastated by more than a century of unregulated heavy industrial activity on the waterfront. Historic industrial development expanded on top of traditional salmon spawning grounds and the shallow mudflats were filled to create new industrial land. Shorelines were hardened with bulkheads, docks, wharves and rip rap and, as young salmon lost their traditional habitat, they became increasingly vulnerable to predators.

Today, the shorelines throughout the Waterfront District include a legacy of

failing bulkheads, old docks and over-water industrial structures. While these structures were important to the waterfront operations that supported the local economy for many years, they are now recognized as impediments to the new community waterfront envisioned by the WFG. Removing this infrastructure will create opportunities to soften and reshape the shorelines to provide richer and more productive habitat for salmon at all tidal stages.

The Port and City, working in collaboration with the multi-agency task force, the Bellingham Bay Pilot, have identified the highest priority habitat restoration areas in Bellingham Bay. The Waterfront District will support Puget Sound recovery efforts by restoring several miles of urban shorelines, removing creosote pilings and unnecessary overwater structures, improving nearshore connectivity, and building more than four acres of new shallow habitat benches. Human activities and the natural environment will be balanced through design solutions which integrate shoreline habitat into mixed-use urban redevelopment. While salmon recovery and the customary return of Chinook will ultimately require all causes of decline to be addressed, the Waterfront District redevelopment will restore critical nearshore salmon habitat and serve as a Puget Sound model for how urban development can be carefully balanced with intricate human-nature interactions.



Figure 3-2: Habitat Restoration Opportunities

