



Collaboration, Not Competition

Many - if not most - of us who live here, moved here for the outstanding natural beauty of the San Juan Islands and the Salish Sea. But beneath that beauty there are problems and threats to what we enjoy.

In our society there's always an element that decry government as being ineffective and inefficient. They're quick to claim that the 'free market' will always find a better and cheaper solution. Forgetting of course that the free market has to make a profit and likes to place a financial value on everything. The 'free market' likes to see everything in nature as a resource to be sold for the benefit of 'the individual owner' rather than seeing a benefit to us all.

With the environment it's not so easy. Despite the illusion that you might 'own' a section of the shoreline, whatever you do will affect the rest of the area. Hardening the shoreline to 'stop' erosion will just move erosion elsewhere, it may destroy eelgrass beds, or it may remove overhanging vegetation that provides the insects to feed forage fish that feed the Orcas. As you dig deeper you realize that everything we do in our environment is interconnected - and that everything we do affects the environment, and then eventually us.

Thankfully there are a multitude of organizations dedicated to protecting the environment - and ultimately us. Besides federal agencies - such as the Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) - we have state agencies too. Agencies such as the Washington Department of Ecology regulate many aspects of development, such as dealing with stormwater and developing near and on wetlands.

More importantly we have many local organizations dedicated to many aspects of the environment.

Each has its own specialty - from 'The Friends of the San Juans' to the 'San Juan Nature Institute'. Each uses a different technique to preserve and enhance what it feels to be most important. Public education and awareness, science teaching to children, rescuing wildlife or hauling egregious environmental violators off to court are all means of achieving similar goals.

The San Juan Islands Conservation District is an unusual hybrid. They fall under the supervision of the Washington State Conservation Commission, and abide by their code of conduct. It is an independent organization dedicated to protecting the county's natural resources, but is not a county agency. It receives \$5 per parcel per year in funding through a local property tax-assessment. The rest of the funding comes from federal and state grants.

Besides providing natural resources and farm planning the district is also currently managing the Agricultural Resources Committee (ARC). Ron Zee (the CD manager) is the current chair of the ARC, and Eliza Buck is the current coordinator. Between them they are making sure that the ARC is on a solid footing, and they have already made several substantial contributions to the local agricultural community.

Local farmer Bruce Gregory is the district's NRCS certified farm planner and is able to help any local

farmer with advice or voluntary farm plans - making the most of what they have while conserving their land for future generations.

Longtime Lopez and Orcas resident Danna Kinsey completed her Master's degree in Landscape Architecture at Cornell University. As the district's educator she handles our media issues and organizes many of our free workshops.

Besides acting as a resource for our many natural resource issues I also promote Low Impact Development (LID) and greenbuilding.

Traditionally conservation districts have involved themselves only with technical issues relating to soil and water. This district however has also successfully placed all of its staff on different county committees - wherever it feels that they can make most the most effective contributions. Our maritime county is unusual and faces many different problems - having a contribution to local policies that deal with our future, while dealing with today's problems, is an effective way to leverage our contribution.

Perhaps the best contribution the district has made is to act as a conduit between the different environmental organizations in the county. Since 2006 the district has spent a lot of time communicating with the other local environmental organizations. The district also hosts the San Juan County 'Water Table'. This is an informal organization where all the members have an interest in water quality issues. The informal meetings allow members to discuss topical issues and how and where our interests overlap. One practical issue has been the topic of grants.

There are many grants that can be applied for from state and federal agencies. Grantors don't like to see several different applications for a specific grant from the same area - it shows that agencies are either not talking to one another, or that they competing for the same resources. Grantors do like agencies that work

together to apply for a grant, especially those who gain letters of support from the local environmental movement.

The 'Water Table' has been a successful venue for the different members to inform each other of funding opportunities, then to decide who is best qualified to apply for the money, and who can best support them. This is also a huge saving in time and resources when agencies don't apply for grants that they may be unlikely to win. Members of the 'Water Table' have recently succeeded in being awarded several substantial grants - by cooperating with, rather than competing with, each other. Here's to more success in 2008.