

## **THE SAN JUAN INITIATIVE: AN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH TO PROTECTING ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITY**

*Amy Windrope, San Juan Initiative*

*Jim Kramer, San Juan Initiative*

*Pete Stauffer, Surfrider Foundation*

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The San Juan Initiative is a pilot project designed to improve ecosystem protection in a manner that supports community values and builds local capacity for conservation in San Juan County. The Initiative was created in partnership with the Surfrider Foundation, the county government and the Puget Sound Partnership to assess current ecosystem protection programs and recommend improvements. Working closely with a policy board, a scientific advisory team and members of the broader community, the San Juan Initiative identified two key goals: (1) Assess the effectiveness of programs aimed at protecting the San Juan ecosystem; and (2) Recommend specific ways to improve protection in a manner that supports other community interests and respects the rights of property owners.

The San Juan Initiative followed the completion of the San Juan Marine Stewardship Area planning process lead by a local Marine Resources Committee. This two-year effort engaged scientists, managers, citizens and stakeholders in an ecosystem assessment, evaluation of threats, and development of conservation strategies. Using the findings of the Marine Stewardship Area Plan, the San Juan Initiative was able to prioritize assessing shoreline management and land use policies and programs to identify necessary improvements to protect the ecosystem.

Specifically, the San Juan Initiative protection assessment focused on the ability of protection programs to reduce or eliminate impacts from the placement of shoreline structures including docks, bulkheads, removal of shoreline vegetation, and the placement of homes within 200 feet of the shoreline. This focus was the result of the Marine Stewardship Area Plan which identified shoreline structures as a significant threat to marine health. In order to assess protection programs, we gathered data from three perspectives: ecological, management, and community. From the ecological perspective, we performed a shoreline characterization that overlaid presence of shoreline structures with existing ecological use data and shoreline type. From the management perspective, we analyzed shoreline policies for their ability to reduce or eliminate impacts. We also conducted a permit review to determine how the permits reduced impacts. The permit review was then ground checked with the shoreline characterization to see if what was built matched the permit. We also interviewed managers and held several workshops. We used the same process to analyze the effectiveness of local education programs and the conservation easements. We reviewed all conservation easements for shoreline property to determine if the easement was written to preclude the placement of shoreline structures.

Finally, we gathered the perspective of the community. This perspective was developed by segmenting the community into three focal groups: shoreline property owners, trades people (builders, realtors, contractors) and the general public. We performed interviews,

sent surveys and a series of public workshops.

The Initiative is part of the West Coast EBM Network, which includes six projects from Washington, Oregon, and California, and is focused on sharing tools and information and demonstrating success.

*Pete Stauffer  
Surfrider Foundation  
4001 SE Ivon St,  
Portland OR  
pstauffer@surfrider.org*