Section 7: The Future of the Salish Sea? A Call to Action

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SECTION 7

THE FUTURE OF THE SALISH SEA?

Herring spawn & fishing boats off of Cape Lazo, BC
Photo: Yuri Choufour
A CALL TO ACTION

Ginny Broadhurst, Natalie Baloy, and Kathryn Sobocinski

What is the state of the Salish Sea? As this report documents, the Salish Sea is compromised by the cumulative impacts of global climate change, regional urbanization and a growing population, and intensive human use and abuse across the ecosystem over the last two centuries. While biological response varies throughout this diverse ecosystem—owing to biophysical drivers like geology and oceanography, and gradients of human impacts—caring for our shared waters in more holistic, multi-jurisdictional, and multi-disciplinary ways is sorely needed to be responsive to current and emerging threats.

Over time, government agencies and others around the Salish Sea have implemented numerous management programs, policies, and regulations to protect the ecosystem. Transboundary governance agreements have been signed and initiatives launched. Yet, as the Coast Salish Gathering Treatise asks, “Would the Salish Sea be in the state [it’s] in if, in fact, these agreements were doing what they intended to do?” (2010:6).

Ecosystem decline has outpaced restoration and protection (Treaty Indian Tribes of Western Washington 2011; State of the Sound 2019). Layers of laws, treaties, regulations, and jurisdictions make for a complicated and even fragmented approach to Salish Sea governance (Clauson & Trautman 2015), exacerbating challenges from global climate change to local lack of enforcement and funding. The cost of business as usual is high—staggering—especially as we anticipate further declines and unknown repercussions for the region (Kehoe et al. 2021).

It is clear that structural changes are needed if we are to be truly effective in supporting a thriving ecosystem. Righting the course to a more functional and sustainable Salish Sea requires strategic planning, systemic changes in governance, large-scale investment, and significant shifts in our economic systems, collective values, and relationships to lands and waters (Treaty Rights at Risk 2011; Poe et al. 2016; Caillon et al. 2017; Kehoe et al. 2021).

It is unlikely that we will fully reverse the legacies of urbanization and industrial impacts to the Salish Sea, but it is possible to improve conditions from what they are today. Much can be achieved through well-coordinated restoration, mitigation, and protection measures to restore ecosystem function and create greater resilience to the future impacts we know are coming. In some cases, the ecosystem will rebound on its own once harms are removed, but action is imperative.

We end this report with a series of questions to invite dialogue and ignite action. While the science documented in this report is sound, science alone is not a solution. Enhanced collaboration is needed but is also not the only answer. Many voices beyond our own will be needed to respond meaningfully to the challenges presented in this report. Our questions acknowledge the limitations of this project, and invite dynamic and diverse responses across disciplines, sectors, communities, cultures, and borders. We ask readers to consider your roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for caring for our shared waters in the days, years, and generations ahead. We encourage you to add your own questions and answers to this list for debate and action in organizations, institutions, and communities across the Salish Sea.

“Science gives us knowing, but caring comes from somewhere else.”

Robin Wall Kimmerer

Can we create and commit to shared goals to recover the Salish Sea? Can agencies, people, and organizations acknowledge the Salish Sea as a shared ecosystem to shape their work ahead?

Can we liberate ourselves from a pollution-based economy in support of a healthy Salish Sea and connected watersheds for all beings who call this place home?

How will we collectively prioritize restoration and stronger protection of the Salish Sea through shared governance, shared ingenuity, and shared responsibility to act?

How will we recognize Indigenous sovereignty and laws, and support Coast Salish involvement and representation at all decision-making tables?

How and when will we fully apply science, Indigenous knowledge, and multiple ways of knowing in making critical policy decisions?

How can we sustain and deepen existing practices while also building new habits and systems to connect people with each other and to the Salish Sea?

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As a convenor of many voices in the Salish Sea, the Salish Sea Institute recognizes the need to gather and promote diverse ideas to build solutions collectively and collaboratively. Through curriculum, collaborations, and convenings, we look forward to stimulating dialogue, connection, and collective action for restoring and protecting the Salish Sea.

This report synthesized science to help us all better understand the Salish Sea as an interconnected and shared ecosystem facing many unrelenting threats. In light of this realization, how will we collectively move forward together?

Our hope is that the science presented here serves to inform, illuminate, and ultimately ignite deep discussion and meaningful action, from grassroots efforts to large-scale collective and governmental investments. Addressing centuries of degradation, swelling human population, and global climate change requires vision and solutions for the future that are innovative, adapt easily to local needs, and spark change in our collective values and relationships with the Salish Sea.

Regeneration of the Salish Sea will require multi-faceted and collaborative approaches that support greater understanding through education and science, plus sufficient political will, public support, and systemic changes. Fundamental alteration of human–environment relationships, coupled with new and ambitious goals, are needed to change the arc of anthropogenic impacts (Diaz et al. 2020). Will we choose to work together to make these commitments and investments toward a future of resilience and connection across the Salish Sea?