Telling Stories: Designing Effective Data Visualization and Climate Change Communication Tools

Ilon E. Logan  
*Environmental Science Associates, ilogan@esassoc.com*

Carol Macllroy  
*Carol Macllroy Consulting, cmacllroy@gmail.com*

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Telling Stories: Designing Effective Data Visualization and Climate Change Communication Tools

Carol Macllroy, Macllroy Consulting, LLC
Ilon Logan, Environmental Science Associates

Salish Sea Conference
Vancouver, British Columbia
April 15, 2016
Presentation Overview

• Skagit River Watershed
• Who is the Skagit Climate Science Consortium?
• Finding and Unpacking Hidden Assumptions
• Need for Storytelling
• Portfolio of Materials
• Visualizing the *Seemingly* Unreal
• Take Aways
SC² – Skagit Climate Science Consortium

Members:

- Western Washington University
- University of Washington, Climate Impacts Group
- US Geologic Survey, Forest Service, Park Service
- NOAA, National Marine Fisheries Service
- Seattle City Light
- Pacific Northwest National Labs (Battelle)
- Skagit River System Cooperative
- Swinomish Indian Tribal Community
- University of Notre Dame
Mission

- Foster collaborative Skagit climate research
- Produce relevant climate science and products
- Link local people with local scientists and Skagit-specific information
Activities and Local Workshops

– General climate impact research
– Workshops with flood managers – flood risk
– Workshops with Skagit Watershed Council – salmon recovery
– Collaboration with WDFW – habitat assessment and adaptation
SC² – Skagit Climate Science Consortium

Presentations/Panels
- Transition Fidalgo, Alliance for Jobs and Energy, Skagit Democrats
- Congressional Tours
- Council of Environmental Quality Roundtable
- Skagit Council of Governments, Skagit Farm Forum, Transition Fidalgo
- EPA and Washington Dept. of Ecology Webinars
- Skagit River Festival

News Media
- KSVR, NPR, KCTS
- Skagit Valley Herald
A Scientific and Community Collaboration
A Scientific and Community Collaboration

REFINE   RESEARCH

COMMUNICATE

INTEGRATE

Most Learning

Community

TAKE ACTION
Finding and Unpacking Hidden Assumptions
A Story…

Observed Trend

Peak Average

PDO

Cumulative net balance

Mean Annual

Annual Rate of Projected Change

Projected Future Monthly Average Flow
A Story…

By 2040’s the current 100-year event will be a 22-year event!
Portfolio of New Materials for SC2 Storytelling

• Case studies
  – Two page fact-sheets with infographics and photographs
• Infographics
  – Stand alone graphics to illustrate concepts
• Interactive Flood Risk Map
  – Web-based map tool displaying SC2 flood model
• Visual Simulations of Potential Flood Conditions
  – Images of future floods at known locations in watershed
Delta ecosystems include sand and mud flats, eelgrass and kelp beds, salt marshes, and tidal-influenced shrub and forested wetlands. These ecosystems are critical for numerous birds, mammals, fish, and shellfish, all of which are valued by many. Delta ecosystems are also a significant tribal resource that provides salmon and shellfish for tribal food supply, traditional harvests, and cultural practices. A significant portion of the Skagit delta was altered at the turn of the century when much of it was drained and drained for agricultural and other purposes. Today, the fish and wildlife in the delta face threats and changes from climate-related impacts such as high water temperatures, rising sea levels, increasing sediment loads, and increasing frequency and magnitude of floods. Science and restoration practitioners are working to improve their understanding of how much climate change, in conjunction with other actions, will alter delta ecosystems and how best to guide protection and restoration actions and investments to be most effective.

**Some key issues for delta ecosystem restoration:**

**BALANCING INCOMING SEAS AND OUTGOING SEDIMENT**

Natural delta habitats are built and maintained over time by a continuous supply of sediment transported down the channels and river channels. Much of the area encompassing the Skagit delta is slowly sinking due to natural and human-induced subsidence and the lack of near-surface sediment, which is mostly cut off by cliffs and levees and a channelized flow. As sea levels rise and more sediment is transported through the watershed as a result of climate change, how will delta habitats react? Where will sediment be deposited? Will the sediment continue to help habitats build and “keep pace” with a rising sealevel? Will sediment flow in too quickly and cover important habitats like eelgrass beds? Will sea levels rise and submerge existing habitats resulting in different landscapes and a set of vegetation or mudflats?

**SAWMON SURVIVAL AND REPRODUCTION**

All Pacific salmon species swim through river deltas as they move from their freshwater birthplace to the Puget Sound saltwater estuary. Each species uses delta habitats differently and at different times of year. Salmon are potentially affected by rising sea levels and ocean acidification through changes in quantity and quality of estuary rearing habitat, prey supply, migration timing and success, and loss of previous rearing actions as a result of sedimentation or sea level rise. Changes in upstream hydrology and increases in sediment affect fish survival through egg scour and suffocation, stranding, high water temperatures, and habitat alteration or lack of access at peak or low flows. How can restoration activities in the delta be designed to meet these changing conditions? Where and what type of habitat restoration would best ensure salmon survival and reproduction into the future?

**BEAVERS AND VEGETATION CHANGES**

Beavers in the Skagit Delta rely on tidal shrub habitats. As “nature’s engineers”, beaver dams and lodges create deep pools in the tidal channels of the delta and these pools serve as high quality rearing and refuge habitats for juvenile salmon and other small fish. In fact, beaver dams can quadruple the number of “avoidable” pools, which in turn support three times the amount of juvenile salmon as low-flow shallow waters. One recent study found 117 functional beaver dams in the Skagit delta. Tidal shrub vegetation appears to be more sensitive to sea level rise and changes in salinity than other vegetation types, thus there is concern for the long-term viability of this habitat and its benefits for salmon. Furthermore, due to past alteration, there is very little tidal shrub habitat remaining in the delta making the importance of this habitat.

**LOOKING FORWARD TO MORE SOLUTIONS, MORE ACTION**

Scientists have the opportunity to better understand the linkages between salmon survival thresholds and projected changes in temperature, peak and low flows, erosion, and shifts in vegetation as a result of changes in salinity, water levels, and sediment form a changing climate. We are conducting extensive hydrodynamic modeling of restoration efforts in the Skagit delta, which will inform discussions between farmers, salmon advocates, and flood risk managers. We can use empirical models to further determine how tidal marsh vegetation and habitats will react to changes in sea level rise and changes in upstream flow patterns. Lastly, we are pursuing more information about the role tidal marshes play in protecting important dikes and levee infrastructure from storm surge, waves, and flooding.

The Skagit Climate Science Consortium (SC2) is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization consisting of scientists working with local people to access, plan, and adapt to climate-related impacts. Comprised of research scientists from universities and federal, municipal, and tribal governments and agencies working the Skagit basin, SC2 members seek to understand how the landscape, plants, animals and people may be affected by changes in the patterns of rain, snow, temperature, storms and tides.
DRINKING WATER

THE CHALLENGE

Located in the lowlands of the Skagit watershed, the previous City of Anacortes Water Treatment Plant was aging, inefficient, and at risk for flood-related damages projected to increase in the future in a changing climate.

The plant's regional importance is clear—it is the largest single source of potable water in Skagit and Island Counties. It provides 29 million gallons of water each day to approximately 60,000 customers, including the Shell and Tesoro refineries, the City of Anacortes, the City of Oak Harbor, the Town of La Conner, the Naval Air Station Whidbey, and the Swinomish Indian Tribal Nation. The Anacortes Public Works Department wanted to build a bigger plant for its customers, but they wanted to build a smarter plant too.

A smarter plant would need to tackle current and future issues such as:

FLOOD DAMAGE

Critical pieces of the facility that process the water and make it safe for delivery were at risk of flooding. Flood waters would flow over the ring dike that protected the plant and then needed to be pumped out. To make matters worse, floods in the Skagit watershed are projected to happen more often and during more months of the year, resulting in increased risk of damage to the treatment plant.

SEDIMENT

Along with cold rain waters, the Skagit River carries huge amounts of sediment. Every year, treatment plant employees remove more than 20,000 cubic yards of river sediments so water will be safe for drinking. This is a normal task carried out with 11 feet of dirt! The annual sediment load in the Skagit River is expected to increase significantly as a result of climate change—more than any other watershed in the Puget Sound region.

SALTWATER INTRUSION

When the tide is high, salty water from the bay travels up the Skagit River. In recent decades, tidal influence has moved up the river, closer to the water intake pipe for the treatment plant where salt water would contaminate drinking water. Of concern is a potential change in the saltwater wedge, which is the result of having lower summer flows in the Skagit River and higher sea levels in the bay that pushes the donor seaway farther inland.

SC3 as a Proven Resource

SC3 scientists supported City of Anacortes in developing a smarter plant—resilient to climate change.

Scientists from SC3, including Eric Grossman, Tarang Khangdaar, and Alan Hamlet, worked directly with the City Public Works Department for over three years to provide unbiased scientific information that the City could use to make smarter investments and weigh the risks of action and inaction. This required new analysis and taking the time for the scientists to understand water treatment operations. Once the scientists understood key thresholds, they designed analyses and studies to answer specific questions City of Anacortes staff had. As a result, the new plant was constructed with design elements to protect it against current and future flood events and the increase in sediment load. In addition, SC3 performed preliminary modeling of salinity risks to the water intake pipe and found that it is not likely an immediate concern based on currently modeled rates of sea level rise and the lifespan of the plant.

Looking Forward to More Solutions, More Action

SC3 is positioned to support communities and decision-makers with water supply infrastructure. In the future, we plan to:

- Develop a better understanding of the future composition of sediment loads in the river and its impact on plant maintenance and functions
- Work with other water right holders, such as farms, to identify climate change pressures on their water supply
- Work with Anacortes on their wastewater treatment plant to make sure it is also resilient to climate change and sea level rise in particular
- Advancing the integrated model of hydrology, glacier melt, and sediment

“...it's really refreshing to see a local community just making practical, common sense, scientifically engineering-driven decisions rather than ideological issues. That’s an inspiring example of how you just focus on science and what it means in your machinery, you get things done.”

— Governor Jay Inslee (Skagit Valley Herald June 3, 2016)
Rain-on-Snow Model Outputs

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<th>% Rain</th>
<th>% ROS</th>
<th>% Snow</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>2040 (+3.2 °F -+ 900 ft)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2080 (+5.3 °F -+ 1500 ft)</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acres Rain</th>
<th>Acres ROS</th>
<th>Acres Snow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>350,000</td>
<td>309,000</td>
<td>1,411,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2040</td>
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<td>716,000</td>
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Rising Winter Freezing Levels

HISTORIC

When precipitation falls as snow, it is stored as ice and snow that slowly melts, providing water to the Skagit River throughout the year, including late summer and drought periods.

CURRENT

FREEZING LEVEL

When precipitation falls as rain, water quickly enters the Skagit River during fall and winter, often contributing to flood risk. As freezing levels rise, the area potentially susceptible to flooding increases.

PREDICTED

In the Skagit, the average winter freezing elevation has risen consistently since 1948.
Changes in Glaciers

A glacier forms when winter snowfall exceeds summer melting. It shrinks or "retreats" when melting outpaces the accumulation of new snow. Glaciers are extremely sensitive to climate change. The warmer air temperatures have resulted in increased rates of melting and a longer melt season. As freezing elevations have moved higher over the past several decades, portions of some glaciers are not able to rebuild themselves in the winter through accumulated snowfall.

South Cascade Glacier
Lower slopes of Sentinel Mountain, North Cascades; flows into South Fork Cascade River

Forbidden Glacier
North slopes of Forbidden Peak, North Cascades; flows into Thunder Creek and Ross Lake

1960 2003
1960 2005
Changes in Glaciers

**South Cascade Glacier**
Lower slopes of Sentinel Mountain, North Cascades; flows into South Fork Cascade River

A glacier forms when winter snowfall exceeds summer melting. It shrinks or "retreats" when melting outpaces the accumulation of new snow. Glaciers are extremely sensitive to climate change. The warmer air temperatures have resulted in increased rates of melting and a longer melt season. As freezing elevations have moved higher over the past several decades, portions of some glaciers are not able to rebuild themselves in the winter through accumulated snowfall.

**Forbidden Glacier**
North slopes of Forbidden Peak, North Cascades; flows into Thunder Creek and Ross Lake

**Silver Glacier**
North side of Mt. Spickard, North Cascades; flows into Ross Lake
Flow of Sediment

How Climate Change Affects Sediment in the Skagit River

**Sediment** is the sand, mud, and pebbles that were once solid rock.

**Source:** Erosion from landslides, retreating glaciers, forested slopes, logging roads, and migrating river channels generate a lot of sediment.

**Sink:** Sediment is deposited across natural river deltas and floodplains, but in the channelized Skagit, the majority is pushed out to the bay and Puget Sound.

Current flow of sediment from Cascade Mountains to Skagit Bay and Puget Sound.

**River Channel**

**Filled in Channel**

**Increase in Sediment Buries Eelgrass Beds**

**Higher Snow Levels and More Area with the Potential to Generate Sediment and Floods**
Projected High Tide Model Outputs

Figure 1. Current extent of high tide if there were no dikes

Figure 2. Projected extent and depth of an extreme high tide with the current dike system
Rising Sea Levels & Storm Surge

Factors that Affect Local Sea Level

- Amount of water in ocean basin (includes ice)
- Water temperature (warmer water expands)
- El Niño years (and other natural climate patterns)
- Bathymetry (shore slope affects wave height)
- Atmospheric pressure
- Ocean circulation
- Land subsidence and uplift
- Wind and storms

NOTE: Sea, tide, and storm surge levels are for illustrative purposes only and do not depict actual or projected levels.
Projected Groundwater Model Outputs

Figure 4. Areas in red depict where fresh groundwater surfaces
Rising Sea Levels, Groundwater & Storm Surge

Factors that Affect Local Sea Level
- Amount of water in ocean basin (includes ice)
- Water temperature (warmer water expands)
- El Niño years (and other natural climate patterns)
- Bathymetry (shore slope affects wave height)
- Atmospheric pressure
- Ocean circulation
- Land subsidence and uplift
- Wind and storms

NOTE: Sea, tide, and storm surge levels, depth of groundwater, and location of saltwater lens are for illustrative purposes only and do not depict actual or projected levels.
Climate Change: Combining Forces
Why Skagit Flood Risk is Increasing

- Warmer temperatures resulting in more water
- Rising Winter Freezing Levels
  - More Rain, Less Snow
- Shrinking Glaciers
  - More Sediment in Rivers
- Larger and More Severe Storms
  - Longer Flood Season

More Water

- Dam Operations
- Roads and Infrastructure
- Private Property Damage

More Severe and More Frequent Flooding

- Drinking Water
- Salmon
- Agriculture

More Water

- More Extreme High Tide Events
- Rising Groundwater
- More Extreme Storm Surge

Rising Sea Levels
- Larger Storm Events

People, places, and things affected by increased flooding

Warmer temperatures resulting in more water
Visualizing the Seemingly Unreal
Combined Effects of Projected Sea Level Rise, Storm Surge, and Peak River Flows on Water Levels in the Skagit Floodplain

ABSTRACT
Current understanding of the combined effects of sea level rise (SLR), storm surge, and changes in river flooding on near-coastal environments is very limited. This project uses a suite of numerical models to examine the combined effects of projected future climate change on flooding in the Skagit floodplain and estuary. Statistically and dynamically downscaled global climate model scenarios from the ECHAM-5 GCM were used as the climate forcings. Unregulated daily river flows were simulated using the VIC hydrology model, and regulated river flows were simulated using the SkagitSim reservoir operations model. Daily tidal anomalies (TA) were calculated using a regression approach based on ENSO and atmospheric pressure forcing simulated by the WRF regional climate model. A 2-D hydrodynamic model was used to estimate water surface elevations in the Skagit floodplain using resampled hourly hydrographs keyed to regulated daily flood flows produced by the reservoir simulation model, and tide predictions adjusted for SLR and TA. Combining peak annual TA with projected sea level rise, the historical (1970-1999) 100-yr peak high water level is exceeded essentially every year by the 2050s. The combination of projected sea level rise and larger floods by the 2080s yields both increased flood inundation area (+74%), and increased average water depth (+ 25 cm) in the Skagit floodplain during a 100-year flood. Sea level rise combined with the observed FEMA 100-year flood resulted in a 35% increase in inundation area by the 2040s, as compared to a 57% increase in inundation for the combined 2040s scenario.
Explore Potential Flood Impacts in the Lower Skagit Watershed through Modeling Scenarios

Choose Levee Scenario

- All Levees Intact
- Left Levees Removed
- Right Levees Removed
- No Levees

Choose Year/Projected Sea Level Rise

- 2015: +0 in
- 2040: +13 in
- 2080: +29 in

http://www.skagitclimatescience.org/flood-scenario-map/
Take Aways

Finding and Unpacking Hidden Assumptions

– Listen honestly and respectfully to concerns/questions and do the work to find and unpack assumptions

Visualizing the *Seemingly* Unreal

– Try new ways to show how the future might look

New Partners and Partnerships to Communicate and Learn

– Who doesn’t think or view the world like you? Can they be an ally?
Take Aways

Terminology Matters

– Understand specifically what decision-makers need to understand the challenge or explore solutions that concern them

Audience

– Who are you trying to reach? What can you learn about what they know, want, or how to reach them?
For more information, visit SC² website at

www.skagitclimatescience.org

Carol MacIlroy  cmacilroy@gmail.com  206–293-4741
Ilon Logan  ilogan@esassoc.com  206-789-9658