

The San Juan Initiative's Key Steps

December 22, 2009

The San Juan Initiative's mission was to improve ecosystem protection while supporting community values and building local capacity. This report summarizes the process of the San Juan Initiative and provides some key lesson's learned from that process.

This report is intended to help other resource protection practitioners in Puget Sound who are interested in conducting a similar assessment of protection efforts in nearshore, freshwater or terrestrial habitats. It is also intended to be useful to the Puget Sound Partnership and other state and federal agencies as they consider funding similar assessments. Additional documents and contact information can be found at: www.sanjuaninitiative.org or contact Amy Windrope, Project Manager.

1. Initiation Phase - Getting Started

In 2006, the Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Plan identified the need to assess the results of current efforts to protect the Puget Sound ecosystem. The Salmon Plan found that there are many efforts (such as laws, incentives, and education programs) to protect the Puget Sound ecosystem, but few attempts have been made to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts. In addition, there was no organization responsible for ecological stewardship in Puget Sound, and no coordinating structure to ensure that the combined efforts of government, non-profits, and private groups were efficient and effective. The Puget Sound Partnership was created to meet this need.

At the same time, San Juan County Commissioner Kevin Ranker was working with various governmental officials and private foundations nationally and on the West Coast to create a pilot ecosystem-based management project in the San Juans. This pilot brought together the emerging interest in ecosystem-based management and the gap in protection issues identified by the Salmon Plan.

An agreement and commitment to move the project forward was formalized in 2006. Shared Strategy and San Juan County agreed through a memorandum of understanding to manage the Initiative jointly. Subsequently, the Puget Sound Partnership assumed Shared Strategy's role and the San Juan Initiative became a pilot project for improved accountability at the local level. Due to financial constraints, San Juan County agreed to embark on the project only if it received funding from outside the County, though they did agree to commit some staff time. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation recognized the importance of the Initiative to the region and provided the majority of funding. These developments established official commitment to the project, financial assistance, and resource support.

Once the Initiative was set up and funded, the San Juan County Council appointed a “Policy Group” to guide the Initiative. The membership of the Policy Group was comprised of local leaders and high-level representatives from tribes, state and federal agencies with management responsibilities in the San Juan Islands. Local members were chosen to be representative of the Island’s many perspectives, but not inherently positional.

Analysis: Influential Factors in the Initiation Phase

1. **Strong Local Leadership:** The leadership and support of a local County Councilmember, Kevin Ranker, was critical to the creation of the San Juan Initiative. Ranker’s vision for the Initiative excited local leaders and kept them engaged, which was especially important in the early stages of the effort when the outcomes were not obvious.
2. **Regional Connections:** The involvement of a regional organization, Shared Strategy, helped highlight the significance of the project and gave local people a sense that their input could matter to the rest of Puget Sound, as well as at home.
3. **Outside Funding:** The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation was an early and significant financial supporter, giving the County and others confidence that the Initiative would not be a financial burden.
4. **Concerns about Local Control:** An issue not successfully addressed in the early stages of the Initiative was the perception that people outside the community created the Initiative. There was valid criticism that the Initiative was created without community input. In addition, several community groups and local leaders viewed the Initiative as duplicating existing efforts, reducing local control, and limiting funding that would otherwise be available to local groups engaged in resource protection. The credibility of the local Policy Group and their commitment to building local capacity for ecosystem protection helped diffuse these concerns.

2. Choosing a Focus for the Initiative (Phase 1)

The intent of the first phase of the Initiative was to establish a clear focus for improving ecosystem protection. To establish an appropriate scope, the Policy Group first identified potential ecological and community changes that could diminish the ability of the community to thrive in the future. These changes were organized into nine overarching focus areas. In addition, the group identified three demographic trends that intensified these changes: increasing real estate prices, loss of affordability, and loss of farmland.

Concern for these demographic trends and their threat to the overall fabric of the community was so pervasive within the Policy Group that it had difficulty shifting its focus to environmental protection. Their insistence on addressing the needs of the human community ultimately provided a context that substantively informed the assessment and solution phases of the Initiative.

Following discussion, the Policy Group agreed to maintain the overall objective of assessing protection and developed a set of criteria to determine where in the ecosystem to direct their focus. It was agreed that the focus areas should have ecological and community significance, be facing conspicuous threats under current protection practices, and have apparent opportunities for improving protection.

In support of the Policy Group direction, local and regional environmental managers and scientists reviewed nine potential focus areas and ranked them using the criteria. The scientists and managers gave the highest priority to improving protection of nearshore and terrestrial habitats.

The nearshore marine habitat was selected as the first priority for detailed assessment of ecosystem protection because there was more information available on current status and threats to marine habitat than to nearshore habitat. This was due to the recent completion of the San Juan County's Marine Stewardship Area Plan. Terrestrial habitat was the second option, not because it was less important, but because there was less available information.

Analysis: Influential Factors in Phase 1

1. Narrowing the Scope While Still Achieving Ecosystem-Based Management:

One of the Policy Group's first challenges was to develop an understanding of ecosystem-based management, which focuses on protecting the interconnected processes and functions which support life. Policy Group members were concerned that if the Initiative was to understand the ecosystem, they would need to assess every part of it. But due to limited money, time, and baseline information, the project would need to focus on just a few components. One of the main frustrations in Phase 1 was facing the need to reduce scope while still meeting the goals of ecosystem-based management.

2. Lack of Baseline Data: The Policy Group questioned whether existing data could present a clear picture of the current status of key ecosystem functions, and whether they were improving or declining.

3. Building on Past Work: San Juan County Marine Resource Committee's recent completion of the Marine Stewardship Area Plan provided a critical foundation.

3. Ecosystem-based assessment of protection programs. (Phase 2)

The intent of Phase 2 was to evaluate educational, regulatory, and voluntary programs to determine which elements of nearshore ecosystem protection were working and which were not.

The assessment was designed to bring together three perspectives: science, community, and managers, which are described more fully below. These three perspectives influenced and shaped each other; they were continuously woven together to bring a deeper understanding than would have been possible if each were looked at in isolation.

Selection of Case Study Areas: There are over 400 miles of marine shoreline in San Juan County and the Initiative did not have the time or resources to conduct a detailed assessment every mile of it. The Science Committee recommended using nine-mile long case study areas on three of the most populated islands to gather detailed information that could be used as examples and to develop an overall understanding of the ecosystem issues county-wide.

The case study areas represent about 10% of the San Juan County shoreline, and were the focal point for most of the data gathering. Within these study areas, the Initiative documented all shoreline structures and vegetation changes over time, interviewed and surveyed shoreline property owners, held public workshops, and reviewed permits.

Development of a Scientific Analysis: A science advisory team was created to assist in developing the scientific analysis. The team consisted of local and regional scientists whose involvement in the overall design of the protection assessment was critical to its success. The Science Team identified potentially high impact human modifications along the shoreline and described key impact-reducing improvements. Existing protection programs were then analysed to determine their role in promoting shoreline modification and whether those programs would allow for improvements.

Education & Outreach Programs: The Initiative researched the effectiveness of current educational & outreach resources. It identified organizations involved in providing the public with information about protecting shoreline habitat and interviewed them about their programs and the public's response to those programs.

Community Input: To incorporate a range of perspectives, the Initiative gathered information from three groups: trade groups (builders, architects, engineers, landscapers, realtors and excavators), shoreline property owners within the case study areas, and the general public.

Multiple workshops were held with each group to gather their perspective on what is working and what is not and what ecosystem changes most concerned them. Surveys were sent out and individual interviews were held as well. Contact was made with postcards, emails and phone calls. Our goal was to involve as many people as possible so we could develop a more accurate understanding of people's concerns.

Permit Review: Staff examined regulations and permits to analyze how effectively they reduced or eliminated high impact structures on the shoreline. We focused our analyses on docks, setbacks, armoring and shoreline vegetation. Staff reviewed San Juan County Unified Development Code, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Hydraulic Permit Approval process, and Department of Natural Resources permits.

Information from the permit review was useful in providing specific information and examples about how individual permit decisions are impacting long term protection. A larger sample size would have provided even better information about trends in permitting and its impact on protection.

Following the review work, we summarized the strengths and opportunities for improvement in regulations and permits, and asked for feedback on our findings from agency staff.

Creation of Phase 3 Action Plan: At the end of Phase 2 we summarized our findings and created an action plan for Phase 3, with consensus on which areas of protection to explore further.

The Policy Group held two meetings to determine where to focus the Initiative's efforts in Phase 3. The first meeting was with the local members of the Policy Group. Staff then met individually with agency Policy Group members to brief them and their agency heads about assessment findings and initial prioritization by local Policy Group. Each agency was asked to come to the second meeting prepared to commit resources to resolve the protection problems identified in the report. This report is called "What's Working, What's Not: An Assessment of Ecosystem Protection."

Analysis: Critical Elements in Phase 2

1. **Weaving the three perspectives:** Insights from scientists, property owners, and program managers were used to form the picture of what's working and what's not. Property owners and trades people were key to informing our findings and our understanding about ecosystem changes, permitting problems, and scientific gaps from their long-term observations. Meetings with county planning and agency staff in small groups helped to reveal the workings of the regulatory protection system and provided useful on-the-ground examples of what was working and what was not. Each of the groups, though they used different language, were often addressing the same concern. For example,

agency staff talked about how there wasn't enough enforcement, while the community talked about how the permitting system seemed unfair and arbitrary.

2. Role of Science Committee: The Science Committee was pivotal in helping design the overall approach of the protection assessment. They advised staff on what data was most important to collect through the nearshore case study characterization, and helped interpret that data. The mix of regional and local scientists was useful in framing questions that would be relevant to the larger Puget Sound scientific community.

3. The Case Study Approach: The development of the case study approach was critical to the success of this phase. In order to understand why protection was working or not, we developed a two-tier approach. First, we identified hypotheses about protection based on county-wide issues. Second, we gathered data to test the hypotheses at the case study level. This approach allowed us to see the big picture and then dive into the details of parcel-level decision-making. Although issues like compliance and coordination are recognized as concerns at the county-wide level, there had never been a systematic attempt to understand how those issues play out at smaller scales.

4. Limitations of the Permit Systems: We had not anticipated how poor the permit records would be and the difficulty in analyzing local and state permits. The size of the case study areas was also slightly too small to be able to review enough permits to make broad statements about protection.

4. Developing Solutions and Gaining Commitments for Action (Phase 3)

The intent of this Phase was to develop solutions to protection challenges and secure commitments from responsible agencies and organizations to implement the solutions.

Choosing focus for solutions: Based on resources available, the Policy Group was asked to focus on just a few protection issues. Instead of choosing a variety of problems to address, the Policy Group decided to focus on improving the entire suite of protection tools for two ecosystem components: shoreline vegetation and erosion issues. These two ecosystem components were chosen based on lack of protection identified in the case study areas and the amount of community interest in improving regulations.

Developing criteria for improving protection: The Policy Group developed five criteria that staff used to test potential solutions and ensure that they would collectively create an effective protection program to preserve shoreline vegetation and sedimentation

processes. These criteria strongly reflect the findings of what is working and what is not. The criteria were:

1. Tailor protection efforts to match the level of ecological function and sensitivity.
2. Increase consistency in requirements and increase certainty in the buying, permitting and building processes.
3. Foster a collaborative approach involving both the public and private sectors to increase communication and effectiveness.
4. Provide information to decision makers, whether County planners or property owners, in an accessible, relevant, and timely manner.
5. Reward actions that protect ecosystems and discourage actions that are damaging or not in compliance.

Science Team provided a framework for improving protection: The Science Team provided the scientific framework to tailor protection by identifying types of shoreline that are more sensitive to damage from loss of shoreline vegetation or natural erosion processes. Using a new report that classified shoreline types (Shipman, 2008), staff was able to develop management approaches applicable to the various types of shoreline. For example, in areas more sensitive to human disturbance, the Policy Group recommended more regulatory oversight, more education, and more incentive programs.

Continued strong community engagement: In order to ensure that the recommendations would be community-supported and reflect community values, staff held multiple community workshops, using the same segmentation developed in earlier phases. We further refined our community engagement strategy by developing five work teams: Trades people, property owners experiencing erosion, property owners with retained vegetation, county planning staff, and Department of Fish and Wildlife staff. We met with each of these work teams and interviewed individuals to help brainstorm ideas, refine staff ideas, and gather community concerns. The work teams were very small, 4 – 7 people.

Recommendations address the entire suite of programs: The Policy Group created recommendations to improve education, regulatory, and incentive programs. From the beginning, we assured the public that the San Juan Initiative would include more than regulation. With this commitment, we generated more community buy-in and fulfilled our goal of addressing the entire system of protection. The product from the first three phases is called “Protecting Our Place for Nature and People.”

Analysis: Critical Elements in Phase 3

Work teams were critical in creation of recommendations: The Trades Group work team was particularly helpful in providing ideas and real life examples for how to improve protection. Staff, the Science Team, and the Trades Group work team spent a day visiting shoreline sites to field test the idea of a tailored

approach. The conversations between the scientists and the builders were incredibly useful and productive and shaped the recommendations substantially.

Scientific framework to improve protection: The idea of a tailored approach is not new, but the ability to achieve it has been limited by existing information. With the publication of Shipman’s paper, the Policy Group was able to advance policy discussions and recommend a way to modify our protection approaches based on existing ecosystem components.

4. Implementing Solutions (Phase 4)

The intention of this phase was to advance several key recommendations. This phase involved additional analyses and decisions by the Policy Group at a sufficient level of detail that the implementing organization – the County, non-profits or others – could take action.

Choosing Focus for Implementation: Priority was given to recommendations that were funded, inexpensive and/or ripe for action, either due to partnership opportunities or political will. We also intentionally advanced recommendations pertaining to all three program areas: regulation, education, and incentive actions.

Integrating with Existing Programs: Successful integration of the changes envisioned by the Policy Group required that the organizations responsible for the programs embrace the recommendations. The difficulty of integrating the recommendations varied based on the organization, with some accepting the changes and others not. The willingness to embrace the change seemed to be directly related to whether or not the organization perceived that there was a problem.

5. Overarching Lessons Learned

Below are a few of the important overarching lessons to be considered for similar efforts in the future.

1. To understand what is working in regard to environmental protection requires an assessment of whether ecosystem functions, processes and services are improving or diminishing. Unfortunately, there is little quantitative baseline information available. This limited our ability to make an accurate assessment. Consequently, we were forced to measure actions and activities that have been shown to impact the ecosystem. For instance, we documented presence of bulkheads as an indication of near-shore health but we did not measure the change in beach substrate and biological communities post bulkhead. Without baseline information and trend information on the ecosystem, it is difficult for people to believe their personal choices make a difference.

2. To determine what was working and what wasn't, we involved the scientific community, landowners, land development professionals and government managers/permit staff in individual meetings. Once we had the assessments from each group individually, we integrated the results to help us refine our overall findings. This provided significant insights about the success of environmental protection and created helpful relationships for identifying solutions.
3. It takes a holistic look to understand what is working and what isn't. Assessing the effectiveness of protection required a look at all three types of tools: regulation, incentives and education. It also required looking at three scales--- countywide, shoreline reach and individual parcel--- to know what was intended, and what was achieved, by the various programs. We also looked at what effect these programs had on property owners, the most important sector in determining success. If the programs did not make sense, significantly inhibited the basic interests of landowners, or were confusing, we found that the ecosystem outcomes were diminished.
4. A smaller scope of work that could be advanced and implemented was preferred over a broader scope of work. At each stage of the Initiative, the Policy Group focused on key elements to advance to the next stage. This constant pruning was difficult yet yielded tangible results. It was at times difficult for the Policy Group to stay focused on initial stages without jumping ahead. However, the careful exercise of figuring out what's working and what's not allowed a deeper understanding of the problems and therefore a more holistic approach to the solutions.
5. The diversity of perspectives, responsibilities and experiences of the Policy Group was key to its success and its ability to "audit" protection programs. Similar to many stakeholder efforts, the Policy Group consisted of people from the environmental, development and business communities. Stakeholder groups are often not successful because each person feels responsible to represent only the hardened position of their interest. Policy Group members brought their interests to the table, but not their hardened positions, and consequently were often able to reach agreement quickly. The Policy Group, as a whole, was focused on co-creating solutions. There was also strong facilitation and a deep commitment to consensus by staff and Co-Chairs