

Kelp Protection and Recovery

Local Action in the Northwest Straits

Puget Sound has many rich and diverse marine habitats that include bull kelp, the floating seaweed familiar to boaters, divers, beachcombers and fishermen. Bull kelp has disappeared in some areas, where in others it's thriving. A new program to map and monitor local kelp populations is engaging volunteer kayakers around the region.

Of the 23 species of large brown algae (known as kelp) that are native to Puget Sound, the beautiful *Nereocystis luetkeana*, or bull kelp, is the largest. Reaching a canopy height of 60' or more, this is likely the one you've tangled in a propeller, marked as a prized fishing spot or dive site, or perhaps eaten – pickled, as a tasty appetizer.

In response to concerns about declining bull kelp populations in some parts of the Sound, and mounting interest in kelp restoration, the Northwest Straits Commission is gathering information for use in local and regional planning and research.



Photo: Kathleen Hermann

Marine Resources Committees (MRCs) in Clallam, Jefferson, Island, San Juan, Snohomish, Skagit and Whatcom counties are field testing a boat-based protocol developed by the Northwest Straits Commission in 2014, tracking the density and distribution of local bull kelp populations. Surveys are done during the peak of annual growth in June-September.

As with eelgrass and other marine plant habitats, there are many factors affecting bull kelp populations. Known stressors include reduction in light (often due to overwater structures), sedimentation, excessive nutrient runoff, increases in water temperature, and competition from the invasive seaweed *Sargassum*.

Grazing by sea urchins and kelp crabs can also have a dramatic impact on kelp. In order to protect this valuable habitat, there is no commercial harvest in Washington; the allowable recreational harvest is 10 (wet) lbs. per day. In summer months, one can sometimes see Southern Resident Killer Whales cruising the outer edges of bull kelp beds in search of salmon, herring and other prey. Bull kelp provides shelter and food for an astounding variety of fish, crabs and other marine wildlife.

What actions are we taking for kelp?

- Conducting citizen science surveys to track changing kelp populations.
- Producing aerial images for use in conservation planning.
- Coordinating with leading experts to foster a better public understanding about the importance of kelp.

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