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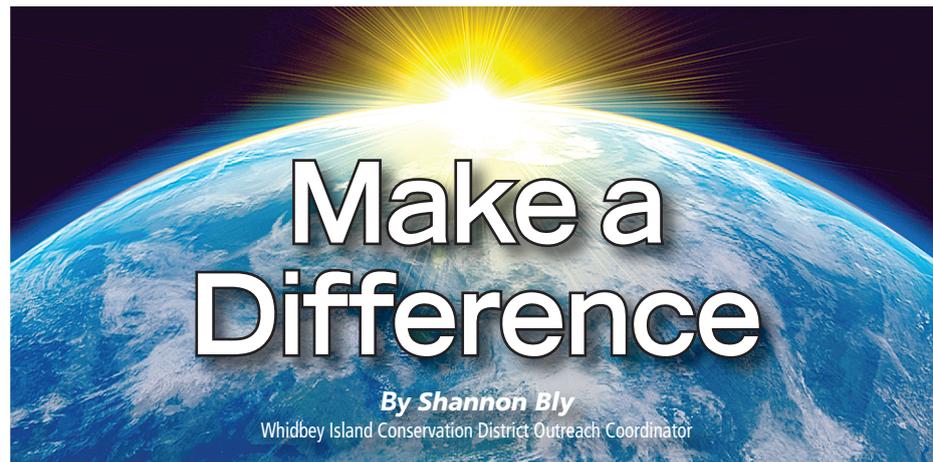


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Make a Difference

By Shannon Bly
Whidbey Island Conservation District Outreach Coordinator

ACTION FOR ORCAS, SALMON, AND OUR FUTURE

Saturday, Oct. 19, over 2,300 people put on their rubber boots and ventured out in uncertain weather to participate in 65 events across the Puget Sound extending south to Northern California, east to Idaho and north to British Columbia. The day was officially proclaimed Orca Recovery Day by Gov. Jay Inslee, and it was a region-wide day of action to improve the living conditions of our endangered southern resident orcas and their main food source – salmon.

In the Puget Sound Region, Orca Recovery Day highlighted the connection between our activities on land and the effect they have on surrounding waters and marine life, including orcas. Local conservation districts launched a new "Better Ground" campaign to reinforce the connection between ground and sound. Events included work parties on salmon streams and along shorelines, rain garden restoration events, educational workshops, beach clean-ups, and more. Volunteers of every age came out to take action for the orcas. Region-wide information about the events can be found at betterground.org.

Almost 17,000 native plants were installed along shorelines and riparian areas. Native plants provide shade, erosion control, and noxious weed suppression for salmon streams as well as bays and coves where salmon can be found. Cornet Bay is one area where juvenile salmon stop to eat, rest, and seek refuge on their journey to the ocean. Five years ago, a 1,600-foot section of Cornet Bay shoreline was restored to increase critical nearshore habitat for juvenile salmon by removing creosoted bulkheads, re-grading the beach to match the natural contour, and installing native shoreline vegetation. The Orca Recovery Day work party at Cornet Bay planted an additional 229 native plants along the shoreline to complete a long term project that has seen positive, measurable results.

With help from the Northwest Straits Foundation and Island County Marine Resources Committee, the Sunlight Shores community in Clinton voluntarily removed 350 feet of hard armoring along their shared shoreline, replacing it with a natural shoreline of sand, driftwood, and native vegetation. This past spring, they planted the first round of native plants on their new natural shoreline, and on Orca Recovery Day, they led another round of planting for volunteers. Replacing hard armor with a natural shoreline connects the nearshore to backshore and upland habitats, restoring a piece of marine ecosystem. Native vegetation provides shade and insects that are critical to juvenile salmon, which are in turn critical to orca survival.

In Langley, the Orca Network went into seventh grade classrooms, educating students about the impacts humans have on orcas and how we can reduce those

impacts through storm water improvement, boat noise reduction, and volunteering. Then, the students met up on Orca Recovery Day to remove 25 pounds of trash from the beach in Langley. That's a lot of trash!

At Greenbank Farm, WSU Extension Master Gardeners led volunteers in restoring a rain garden which had been installed in 2012. Over time, weeds and grass had encroached on the rain garden's edges, and a vigorous Dwarf Blue Arctic Willow had taken over the entire area, pushing out the other native plants that had originally been planted there. The work party weeded, added new mulch, and planted new plants.

Rain gardens are one way excess rainwater can be stored during a storm. Rather than allowing all the extra water to run off the property into storm drains, ditches and the ocean, rain gardens catch some of the water, filter it, and allow it to slowly drain over time. Retaining storm water through rain gardens, swales, and rain barrels improves the quality of water that is draining into our waterways, which improves the homes of salmon and orcas.

Orca Recovery Day was a wonderful way to come together as a community, an island, and a region. It showed just how much we can do when we work together to improve water quality and marine life habitat. Let's keep the momentum going and look ahead at taking more actions.

Work parties take place all year long along shorelines, bluffs, salmon streams, and wetlands. Many organizations on Whidbey Island and the surrounding area need volunteers to help remove noxious weeds and plant native vegetation. Some of those organizations include Northwest Straits Foundation, Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, Island County Marine Resources Committee, Washington State Parks and Whidbey Camano Land Trust, but these are only a few of the organizations working to improve the marine environment. There are so many volunteer opportunities out there!

On individual properties, we can help the orcas by improving the quality of the rainwater that leaves our land. Keeping pollutants, fertilizers and chemicals, and trash from being washed off our properties and into the ocean is an important action we can all take in our daily lives.

As a community, our actions have put the southern resident orcas on the critically endangered list. As a community, we can work together to return the Salish Sea to it's former, biodiverse glory and protect the orcas, the salmon, and all other marine wildlife. When we work to create better ground for the orcas, we're also creating better ground for ourselves.