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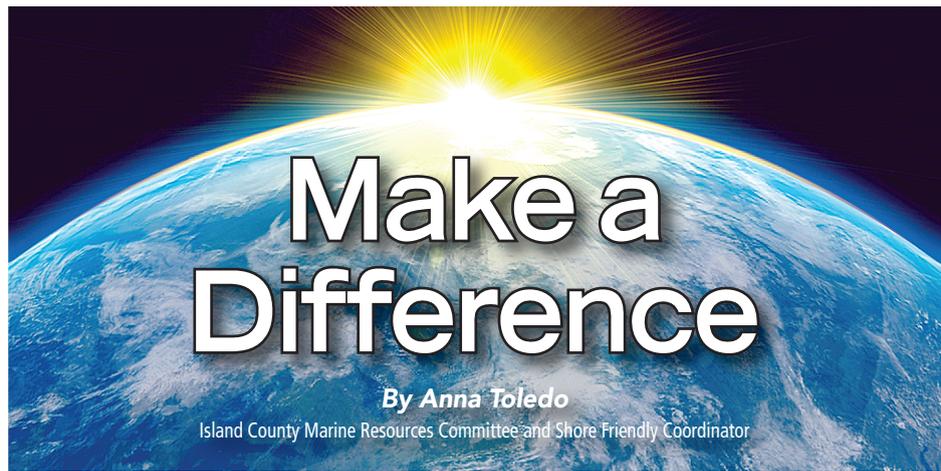
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Make a Difference

By Anna Toledo
Island County Marine Resources Committee and Shore Friendly Coordinator

IT'S ALL CONNECTED

This is the time of year when we are often asked to reflect on what we are grateful for. Even as the weather turns colder and wetter, I find myself grateful for the ability to enjoy a walk in the woods, covered by a canopy of evergreens. For this month, I would like to take a new spin on the gratitude of this season, and invite you to reflect on the interconnectedness of the natural world.

Earlier this year, the Island Local Integrating Organization (ILIO), published a report on a survey focused on Island County residents' natural resource values, their sense of place and their interactions with the shoreline. One of the key findings from this report, which can be read on the ILIO website (www.islandcountywa.gov/Health/DNR/ILIO/Pages/Home.aspx), was that residents understand Island County's natural resource goals are connected. That is, it is hard to prioritize natural resource goals precisely because each component of the ecosystem is connected to and reliant on other components of the ecosystem.

In a complementary effort, the Island County Marine Resources Committee (MRC) conducted a needs assessment, involving in-depth interviews with county leaders and natural resource partners, with one of the goals being to identify pressing and emerging marine resource issues. The report and supporting materials can be read on the MRC website: www.islandcountymrc.org/projects/2021-needs-assessment/. One of the key findings from this report was also related to the interconnectedness of ecosystem relationships – recognizing how actions in one part of the ecosystem impact species and processes in other parts of the ecosystem.

With this recognition of the complexities and interconnected relationships of the environment we live in, what can we do with this information?

A great first step is to dig a little deeper into our own behaviors. In this season of reflection and gratitude, I invite you to an increased awareness of your natural surroundings. I encourage you to choose a couple of different habitats; get to know them up close and reflect on their connection to other parts of the ecosystem. To get you started, here are a few suggestions:

Take a walk in a shoreline habitat. Ask yourself:

- What materials do I see here that originated in the uplands? Which are natural and which were introduced by humans?
- What organisms do I see here? What natural resources do they rely on? How are they impacted by actions in the upland?

Next week, take a walk in an upland habitat. Ask yourself:

- When rain falls here, where does it go? What might it pick up along the way?
- What actions in the upland might have a positive impact on neighboring habitats? What actions might have a negative impact?
- You can try this with other habitat types as well – lakes, wetlands, streams, forest, prairie.

Now, take a walk around your yard. Ask yourself:

- What organisms utilize this area?
- How does my use of this space impact the habitat?
- What do I value about the natural environment? How can I help protect what I value?

We each have a role in the habitats we live in and those we visit to consider how our actions affect the ecosystem as a whole. The impact we have on the environment stretches beyond our immediate view. Living on an island, this impact can be felt even more closely. We are surrounded by the very water that is impacted by our actions in the upland. The fertilizer we spread on our yard may wash into a nearby stream. The native vegetation we plant on our bluff may stabilize the soil and provide important habitat for nearshore organisms. The candy wrapper we leave on the picnic bench may blow into a storm drain and out into Puget Sound.

Our actions have far-reaching impacts, and we have the choice to make positive impacts or negative ones. With increased awareness, we can be more mindful of what potential effects our actions might have and choose to protect the natural resources not only in our own backyard, but throughout the Whidbey ecosystem and beyond.



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