

Marine Shipping, Orcas, and Us

Want to know how the Salish Sea is doing? Just look to the orcas.

This was a key message at an Islands Trust-sponsored panel on marine shipping issues held June 15 on North Pender Island.

“The Southern Resident Killer Whales are the sentinels for the ecological health of the Salish Sea,” said Misty MacDuffee of the Raincoast Conservation Society. Despite more than 15 years of protection under endangered species law, these whales are not recovering, she said, due in part to marine traffic in the Salish Sea, which extends from Olympia, Washington, through the San Juan and Gulf Islands to Desolation Sound, 150 miles north of Vancouver, BC.

Shipping in the Salish Sea is poised to increase by 43% in coming years, according to the US group Friends of the San Juans. Each additional vessel increases the threat of oil spills and accidents. The impact on orcas could be devastating, says MacDuffee. She cited a recent Orca Population Viability Analysis that measured three key factors for orca survival: Chinook Salmon availability, pollutants, and acoustic disturbance. The results showed that the whales can’t sustain further stressors.

“Further reductions in their food supply or increases in vessel noise will put these whales on a trajectory towards extinction,” said MacDuffee. “But importantly, the reverse is true: increases in salmon and reductions in noise can put the whales on a trajectory toward recovery.”

It is not just orcas that are at stake. The Salish Sea is one of the world’s largest and biologically richest inland seas. Its remarkably diverse geography -- a mix of soft river deltas, rocky reefs, shallow bays, deep fjords, and open water straits -- creates an equally remarkable mix of habitat. The Salish Sea is home to 37 mammal, 172 bird, nearly 300 fish and more than 3000 macroinvertebrate species. 113 of these have been identified as threatened, endangered, or of concern.

The Salish Sea is also a marine shipping hot spot – geographically placed at what Port of Vancouver representative Chris Wellstood called the Asia Pacific gateway. Wellstood, along with speakers from Transport Canada, the BC Chamber of Shipping, the Port of Nanaimo and the Coast Guard, shared information about the shipping industry. Here are some key points:

- The Port of Vancouver handles 140 million tones of cargo annually;
- Its vision is to be the world’s most sustainable port;
- In 2016, 3200 vessels called at the Port of Vancouver; this is projected to rise by 1000 over the next ten years. This means that in 2016, an average of nine vessels come in daily; in 2026 that will increase to 12;

- Shipping in Canada is governed by the Canada Shipping Act and is also subject to over 50 International conventions such as Safety of Life at Sea and the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL);
- The public right to navigation is a basic common-law right. Ships may sail and anchor anywhere unless there are specific federal laws limiting that access due to safety concerns;
- Shipping is an essential component of the Canadian economy, getting goods into our country, and taking Canadian goods to market.

The discussion ultimately pointed at one of the biggest questions facing humans today – how to balance our economies with the imperative to preserve the earth.

“The federal government is committed to environmental protection,” said Transport Canada Regional Director Robert Dick. “And at the same time it is committed to growing the economy, increasing the middle class, and creating jobs...This will go along with increased shipping.”

The Islands Trust has no jurisdiction over shipping, but we do have the power to speak up – to advocate for the Salish Sea that is our home, as well as home to orcas and so many other beings. Soon after the marine shipping panel, the Islands Trust Council passed a resolution calling for a moratorium on establishing anchorages in the Trust area until more thorough analysis has been done. Depending on how optimistic or pessimistic you’re feeling (and how tolerant you are of aquatic metaphors), you could call this a drop in the ocean, or part of a growing wave that will one day turn the tide.