Bainbridge Island Review

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From Oysters to Kelp: Healing the Waters of the Salish Sea

By Jodie Toft, Executive Director, Puget Sound Restoration Fund

Summertime in the Pacific Northwest is nothing short of glorious. The long days unfurl with plenty of time to enjoy strawberries and Rainier cherries, take hikes scented with sun-warmed cedar, and dive into all that the Salish Sea has to offer. The saltwater ecosystems of Puget Sound, the San Juan Islands, and the Strait of Juan de Fuca sparkle as they invite us to explore, eat, and appreciate the rich world hiding just below the water's surface. And to give us a helping hand, the sun and moon line up just so, pulling back water to reveal tideflats that teem with life.

At the Puget Sound Restoration Fund, our work takes us to these tideflats and to rocky reefs and marine forests. Our focus spurs tangible, place-based projects that restore and maintain a healthy marine system. We do this by restoring living marine habitat and species: Olympia oysters and bull kelp to form structure and pinto abalone to enhance it. Restoration of these core elements has ripple effects, providing support to fish, crab, and marine mammals throughout the food web. Another focus is the water itself. Community shellfish farms that help drive pollution control and seaweed recycling programs both aim to maintain and recover clean water. Combined, all of these efforts can build resilience and possibly serve to mitigate ocean acidification.

PSRF started as a nonprofit here on Bainbridge Island nearly 30 years ago, founded by Betsy Peabody. We have grown from ideas and innovation to implementation and impact. Now, we have enhanced nearly 150 acres of native oyster habitat, produced and outplanted almost 100,000 pinto abalone and over 25 million Olympia oysters, grown kelp forests from seafloor to sea surface, and launched and operated the first conservation hatchery on the West Coast, with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. We have our eyes on kelp and Dungeness crab through innovative, community-led monitoring programs, and have measurably improved water quality in historic shellfish growing areas. The work is simultaneously rewarding, challenging, and fun.

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Near Indianola, at Point Jefferson / dx-qig-əc (Place of Deer), PSRF and the Suquamish Tribe have regrown a bull kelp forest from seafloor to surface for the past six years. This tribally significant marine forest disappeared in the 1990s, alongside other bull kelp forests throughout central and southern Puget Sound. Now, as our dive team reseeds the forest and monitors success, we see second-generation growth – a global restoration first and a sign that the cycle of unaided forest regeneration is underway. Take a swim through the 2025 forest: youtube.com/watch?v=o6mQ9FBpSj8&t=1s.

We also operate the Port Madison Community Shellfish Farm on the shores of the Bloedel Reserve. At the farm, PSRF, members of the farm's Community Supported Aquaculture program, and other volunteers grow Port Madison Petite oysters and some oversized lunkers well-suited for oyster Po' Boys. As community members grow, tend, harvest, and eat oysters from the beach, they have a tangible and delicious way to directly connect to the benefits of a healthy watershed. The Bainbridge farm is PSRF's third, all of which have been a model for activating community for clean water and healthy food. We know of no other community shellfish farms in the nation and are proud to have a thriving one, right across the water from downtown Seattle.

There is so much more to highlight: the three largest native oyster restoration projects on the U.S. West Coast that are all less than 10 miles (as the crow flies) from Bainbridge; the nascent kelp gardening program on Bainbridge that counts on the generous support of so many islanders; the West Coast's only conservation hatchery just across the water from Fort Ward Park; and the successful effort, championed by Bainbridge Island high school student Sebastian Ford in 2025, to designate bull kelp forests as the official marine forests of Washington.

We invite you to join us at any of our celebratory events: Back to the Beach Bash, Whiskies for Wildlife, Oyster New Year, and our 30th Anniversary Gala in 2027. Try out your blue thumb as a shellfish gardener or member of the Port Madison Community Shellfish Farm. Or help with kelp monitoring through our KelpSpot program on iNaturalist. Explore the tideflats and beaches at low tide, paddle through the forests, and continue to find tangible ways to steward the lands and waters that surround us. You'll undoubtedly be rewarded with wonder and awe, and the chance to tether yourself to this special place.



Jodie Toft is a marine scientist, restoration practitioner, and the executive director of Puget Sound Restoration Fund (www.restorationfund.org).