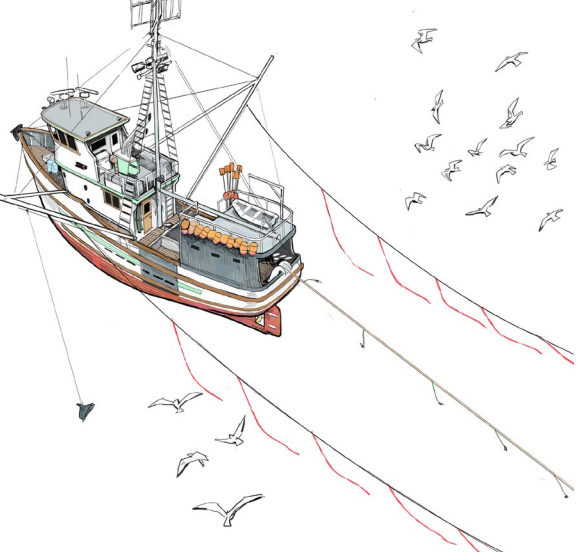


Washington Sea Grant

SEA STAR

Summer 2026

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The first Washington Fishermen's Convention makes a splash

By Alison Lorenz, WSG Communications Project Coordinator

Last December, as king tides pushed waves over Westport's seawall and nudged seawater onto nearby roads, Washington Sea Grant (WSG) hosted a successful first Washington Fishermen's Convention.

The Washington Fishermen's Convention aimed to celebrate and unify the state's diverse fishing industry, gathering longtime, new and aspiring fishermen to network, share lessons learned, and break bread together. From December 4-5, attendees took part in Drill Instructor and Fishermen First Aid and Safety Training, led by WSG fisheries specialist Robert Maw. December 6 and 7 were dedicated to a conference whose agenda was specially tailored to a fishing audience. Speakers ranged from fisheries management experts to fishermen whose families have fished for generations, and speaking sessions were interspersed with interactive meet-and-greets, coffee breaks, and Q&As to keep the energy high.

The Convention was made possible by funding from the Young Fishermen's Development Program. As the West Coast fishing industry experiences declines in the workforce, aspiring fishermen need specialized technical skills and knowledge to enter the industry and be successful. WSG is working to improve access to commercial fishing careers for new and young individuals through programs like the Convention and the Skills & Drills technical training, held for the first time in early 2025. These programs aim to prepare the next

"OUR COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF WASHINGTON'S MARITIME CULTURE, AND WE NEED MORE OF THEM."

- Bridget Trosin, WSG fisheries and boating team lead

generation for careers in commercial fishing while fostering valuable networking opportunities among both newcomers and experienced fishermen.

"Our commercial fishermen are an important part of Washington's maritime culture, and we need more of them," says Bridget Trosin, WSG fisheries and boating team lead.

Technical training was a centerpiece of Convention programming. During the first aid and safety course, students learned to quickly don survival suits and put them to the test by plunging into the icy water of Westport Marina. Maw, a commercial fisherman himself, also enlisted a conference attendee to demonstrate the deployment of a life raft during one of the programming breaks, and led a hands-on knot-tying lesson on day two.

Some attendees found the networking aspects of the Convention to be most meaningful. "Fishing was never on my radar," admitted an attendee who came to learn more about the industry. "But I feel I could sit at a table with anyone in this room and go back and forth, which is something really valuable. Listening to everybody's



WSG fisheries specialist Robert Maw (left) led a demonstration of a life raft deployment during the conference.



individual experience, how they do it, why they do it, what the environment means to them...it's helping me focus down into a field and an industry where I can really fit in."

"YOU HAVE TO BE HEADSTRONG AND POSITIVE. WE HAVE EACH OTHER, WE HAVE A BOAT, WE HAVE A JOB TO DO. IF THERE'S A PROBLEM, WE'RE GOING TO SOLVE IT, BECAUSE WE MUST."

- Brannon Finney, fisher and captain of the FV Alaskan Girl

The atmosphere was welcoming. Longtime fishermen readily shared about their experiences on the sea, their tone realistic yet positive for those looking to break in. "One of the most rewarding things is seeing what you're capable of," said Brannon Finney, fisher and captain of the FV Alaskan Girl. "Like saving a 1.5 million pound season after a boat caught on fire. You have to be headstrong and positive. We have each other, we have a boat, we have a job to do. If there's a problem, we're going to solve it, because we must." Asked what they love about their jobs, a panel of experienced fishermen made a list: the sunsets, conquering huge waves, watching a crab pot boil up to the water's surface; getting paid thousands of dollars to do something people pay thousands of dollars to do.

As one panelist noted, "It's a rewarding life."

Rep. Emily Randall of Washington's 6th Congressional District joined the conference portion of the event for a fireside chat on day two. "I was fortunate to attend the inaugural Fishermen's Conference to highlight the vital role our fishing community plays in putting food on our tables and supporting our local economy," she wrote on Facebook. Other attendees included

Conference attendees broke into rotating small groups for a meet-and-greet networking session.

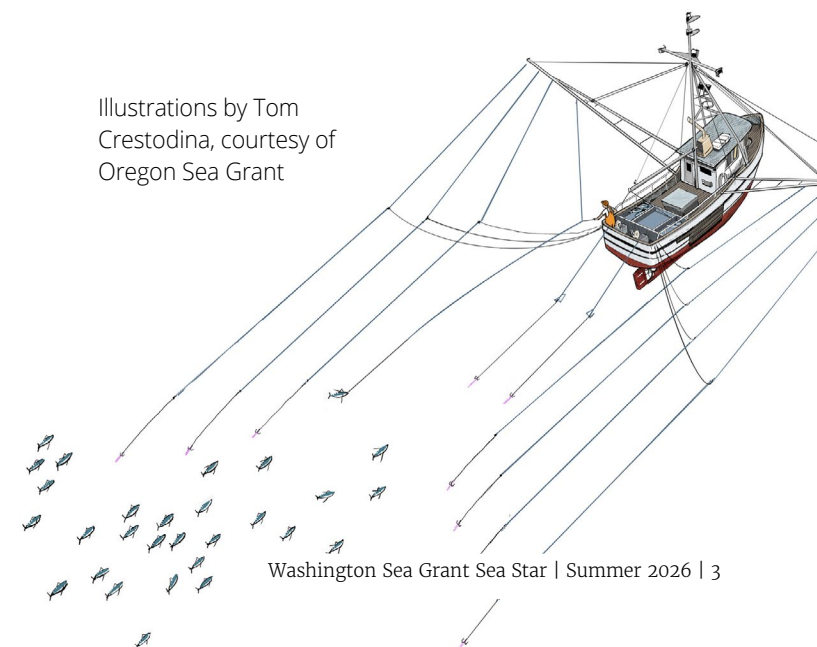
a fisherman who happened to enter the Saltwater Inn, one of the Convention venues, looking for breakfast. Informed that he had stumbled upon a fishermen's conference, he agreed to attend and ended up staying for the rest of the event, even contributing his thoughts to roundtable discussions.

"Seeing the fishing industry come together was powerful and inspiring," said Jenna Keeton, WSG fisheries specialist. "Fishing is an occupation where one has to not only know how to fish and work as a team, but also have skills in business and finance and understand science, contracts and more. This conference offered a wide variety of training opportunities to support our region's fishermen and fisherwomen and promoted the wellbeing of our fishing industry."

Both the Fishermen's Convention and the Skills & Drills training will be offered in future years, with improvements made from lessons learned during the first sessions. The event and training further WSG's ongoing work to support Washington's fishing industry.

"After taking a couple years off from running my boat in wake of the Bristol Bay market crash, attending this conference gave me the faculties I needed to begin again," said Maeva, captain of the Potential in Bristol Bay. "Every segment of this agenda was curated to supporting me as a captain, and even more than a month after the conference I still am accessing the resources that were provided. It is because of the people who put this conference together, I now have the most qualified crew my vessel has ever seen. If I hadn't attended this conference I would have missed out on a whole world of allies I didn't know existed. A huge thank you to all the folks at Washington Sea Grant and all of those who contributed to making our experience the success it was."

Illustrations by Tom Crestodina, courtesy of Oregon Sea Grant



The new Washington Sea Grant Coastal Resilience Fellowship builds capacity and careers on the Pacific coast

By Alison Lorenz, WSG Communications Project Coordinator

When Rich Desanto applied for the new Washington Sea Grant (WSG) Coastal Resilience Fellowship, he was looking for a change. After nine years in Seattle, mostly spent in grad school and weathering the COVID-19 pandemic, Desanto was feeling priced out of the city and unsettled in his career in landscape architecture. He was already subscribed to the Washington Sea Grant (WSG) Shorelines and Coastal Planners Group email listserv, and had a friend who'd completed a WSG Hershman fellowship. When she sent him the Coastal Resilience Fellowship—and he saw it pop up again in his inbox—he decided to go for it.



“I’M HOPING TO CHASE THOSE ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITY CONNECTION, CONCERN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE WAY IT IMPACTS AND IS IMPACTED BY PEOPLE.”

Rich Desanto

COASTAL RESILIENCE FELLOW WITH THE PACIFIC CONSERVATION DISTRICT

“I really put all my eggs in one basket in that moment,” Desanto laughs, describing his decision to accept the two-year, paid opportunity that had him pack up his life to move to Astoria, Oregon. “I just thought yeah, this makes sense, this is how I’ll pursue what’s most aligned.”

Desanto has since started work as a WSG Coastal Resilience Fellow in South Bend, Washington. His host organization, Pacific Conservation District (PCD), is serving as an intermediary between communities, consultants and agencies in addressing water management around the Grayland Plains drainage ditch. The ditch is essential to prevent flooding in Washington’s Pacific and Grays Harbor counties and helps to keep saltwater out of nearby cranberry farms, a key economic

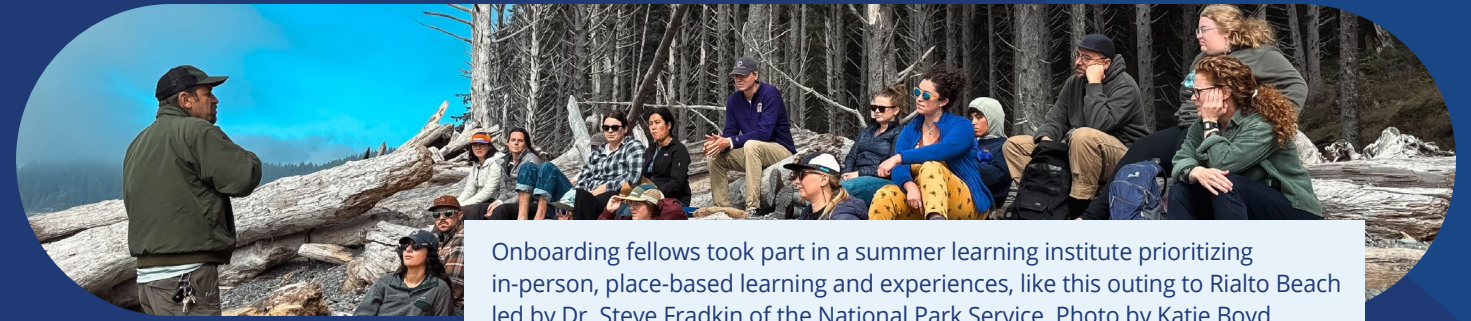
driver in the area. As changing water levels and aging infrastructure prompt a redesign of the drainage ditch, other community priorities—such as wildlife habitat conservation and protecting the area’s drinking water—can be brought into the fold. “I’m hoping to chase those elements of community connection, concern for the environment and the way it impacts and is impacted by people,” Desanto says.

Bringing Desanto onboard helped PCD to release the project’s Request for Qualifications in January 2026, officially moving it into the implementation phase. It’s just this type of on-the-ground capacity building that the Coastal Resilience Fellowship aims to provide, with an innovative offer to host organizations: not only are fellows strongly encouraged to relocate to better integrate into their hosts’ communities, but they also join their host organizations for two years free of charge. On the fellows’ side, the positions are well-compensated, allowing fellows to be supported while also attracting a wider pool of applicants.

WSG’s Coastal Resilience Fellowship is funded by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Climate Resilience Regional Challenge, a competitive grant program focused on increasing the resilience of coastal communities to extreme weather, sea level rise and other impacts of a changing environment. WSG’s coastal resilience and fellowship teams had talked for years about how best to support the rural communities on Washington’s Pacific coast as they pursue increased resilience. Based on deep knowledge and experience, conversations with partners, and learnings from projects and reports like the William D. Ruckelshaus Center’s Washington State Coast Resilience Assessment, a fellowship program seemed apt for helping these communities build local capacity.

“We know there’s a lot of need out there,” says Sydney Fishman, WSG coastal management specialist and an advisor in developing the program. “The Coastal Resilience Fellowship is very different from other programs. In addition to it being no cost, it’s a two-year program, so it creates more stability for the host. That continuity is important, because sometimes you can’t finish a project in one year.”

The unique nature of the fellowship is also due in part to Becky Bronstein, whom WSG hired to spearhead the development and stewardship of the program. With the support of a working group, she reached out to partners to create a program that conscientiously balances the experiences of fellows with the needs and expectations of their hosts. “The working group was an amazing opportunity to learn from other Sea Grant fellowship programs, Tribe



Onboarding fellows took part in a summer learning institute prioritizing in-person, place-based learning and experiences, like this outing to Rialto Beach led by Dr. Steve Fradkin of the National Park Service. Photo by Katie Boyd.

and state agency partners, and fellow alumni,” Bronstein says. The working group met throughout the year to give members time to hear updates about the program and guide and advise its development based on their particular expertise and experiences.

“Fellowships provide a unique opportunity for a two-way exchange between hosts and fellows,” Bronstein says. “For the Coastal Resilience Fellowship, hosts receive meaningful contributions from a fellow through new capacity and a fresh perspective, while the fellow gets to build new relationships, receive customized professional development, and hopefully build the skills to set them up for a career in coastal resilience. We look for hosts and fellows that can carry out this exchange.” What Fishman calls the “overwhelming amount of interest,” both from potential hosts and fellowship applicants, “is testament both to the fact that there is a big need and also that the details of the program were working out for folks.”

Sanpisa Sritrairat, WSG community engagement specialist and another advisor for the Coastal Resilience Fellowship, notes that while a lot of fellowship programs depend on the host to lead everything, “With this fellowship, fellows stay connected with experts from WSG and partnering agencies. Fellows are introduced to a strong network of coastal resilience professionals and gain access to a wide range of resources, including professional development opportunities.”

As the network of skilled professionals who are well integrated with the local community grows, she says, “I’d hope it would broaden community-led coastal resilience work and increase long-term capacity in the area.”



“IT FEELS LIKE MY HOME.”

Maddy Lucas

COASTAL RESILIENCE FELLOW WITH THE SHOALWATER BAY INDIAN TRIBE

For Coastal Resilience Fellow Maddy Lucas, her placement at Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe has allowed her to imagine a career path outside of academia. As a PhD candidate in earth and space sciences at the University of Washington,

Lucas has been working to understand earthquake and tsunami hazards in the Pacific Northwest in collaboration with the Cascadia Coastlines and Peoples Hazards Research Hub. Her fellowship has allowed her to directly apply her research. “My research is supposed to result in products that are useful to communities that are preparing [for coastal hazards],” Lucas explains. “I wanted to engage with communities, and I’m really enjoying it, getting to directly apply change.”

Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe’s small staff means that, alongside her work improving tsunami evacuation routes for the Tribe, Lucas has already connected with a range of professionals outside her host planning department—and begun to build strong relationships in her field. “Helping Maddy with career development also helps us with mentoring and learning more about her expertise. She has an expertise that nobody else here has,” says Risa Thomas, planning director and community development coordinator at the Tribe.

Beyond the valuable professional experience and network-building is the personal relationships Lucas and the other fellows have already built. During our interview, Lucas’s colleagues repeatedly poked their heads in, curious if she would be joining them to play Dungeons and Dragons during lunch. “I can’t imagine what my life would be like if I hadn’t come here, and it’s only been two months,” Lucas says. “It feels like my home.”

Similarly, Desanto describes joining a local knitting group at the suggestion of Connie Allen, leader of Pacific County’s erosion mitigation group Wash Away No More. “That’s been the most delightful thing so far,” Desanto says, noting he gets to learn about knitting and how his project impacts local people at the same time. “As time progresses I will have those opportunities to connect with people human to human instead of government organization to community member.” Though Desanto and his cohort hoped to make a change in accepting their fellowships, working alongside local resilience leaders on the Pacific coast may be changing their lives more than they could have imagined.



Restorative aquaculture: The science behind increasing subsistence access to basket cockles for the Suquamish Tribe

By Mel Lemke, WSG Science Communications Fellow

Basket cockles (*Clinocardium nuttallii*) are saltwater clams native to the Pacific Northwest. With their charismatic ruffled shells and colorful banding, they are easily recognizable at low tide, peeking out from their fine-sediment habitats among eelgrass beds. These clams are more than just beautiful: as a preferred First Food (a food gathered and consumed since time immemorial), they hold significant cultural and nutritional value for the Suquamish people.

“THE SMILES, JOY, AND CONNECTION THAT COCKLES BRING TO FOLKS IS WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN GOLD.”

– Jay Mills, Suquamish elder and Tribal Council member

“The smiles, joy, and connection that cockles bring to folks is worth its weight in gold,” says Suquamish Tribal Council member and elder Jay Mills. Cockles are a favorite delicacy that, when available, are featured in Suquamish clam bakes, an important part of birthdays, weddings, funerals, and other gatherings and celebrations. Consuming cockles helps the Suquamish people to maintain their history, traditions and connection to the land, waters and one another.

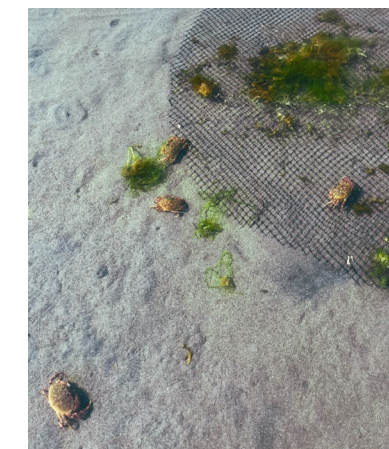
Despite their importance to the Suquamish Tribe, cockles are not as available to Tribal members as they once were. Traditionally the Suquamish people harvested wild cockles in abundance, waiting for low tides to find the clams on Puget Sound’s tidelands. But in recent years, increased ecological stressors from human-caused pollution alongside the transmissible bivalve neoplasia (clam cancer) may have negatively impacted some of the Sound’s bivalve populations. Stresses to wild populations combined with limited knowledge on how to rear cockles using mainstream aquaculture practices have made basket cockle availability to Tribal members a significant area of concern.

A Washington Sea Grant-funded research project aims to enhance subsistence access to cockles for the Suquamish People by investigating restorative aquaculture strategies that aim to minimize or eliminate any negative impact on wild cockle populations. “Native species aquaculture [is] a complicated topic,” notes Elizabeth Unsell, a shellfish biologist with the Suquamish Tribe and the lead on the project. While conventional aquaculture may focus on simply producing more cockles, native species restoration aquaculture needs to also ensure the

health of wild cockle populations. This is done largely through understanding and maintaining wild genetic diversity.

The first step towards increasing cockle abundance and access, then, was to document the genetic diversity of Washington cockles. This analysis provided critical background knowledge to the researchers, giving them a frame of reference to use while learning about cockle aquaculture and aiming to safeguard the health of wild populations. The results of this initial genetic testing demonstrated that while some populations of cockles show genetic variation, many cockle populations in Washington state have substantial genetic similarity. A high degree of relatedness between known cockle populations is a good thing for the project because it allows researchers to transfer cockles between strongly related populations without risk to wild cockle population genetics.

With this knowledge, experiments could begin to determine the best methods for supplementing cockle populations. The two-part project included a transplantation experiment to investigate methods for successfully transporting batches of juvenile cockles from locations of high abundance to low abundance. The team harvested cockles from geoduck tubes in south Puget Sound, where they are a nuisance to geoduck farmers, and moved them to a beach in Central Sound for close monitoring. Cockles were out planted using several different treatments to test which treatment would result in the greatest success in terms of survival and retention. Some cockles were placed in a garden bed, some under predator exclusion mesh, and some



Cockles protected from crabs by predator exclusion mesh during experiments. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Unsell.

on bare substrate with no protective garden bed or mesh. Researchers then repeatedly returned to these treatments to sample cockle survival and retention over time.

The results of the transfer experiment were clear. “We determined that if we wanted to transfer cockles on any sort of scale, we need to be protecting those animals with mesh if we want higher survival and retention rates,” Unsell says.

Armed with information on how to successfully transplant adult animals, the researchers took another step in the process of restoring cockle access: learning more about hatchery production of cockles. Specifically, the team is investigating different hatchery strategies aimed at increasing the genetic diversity and survival of cockle offspring.

Though the nature of cockle reproduction is fascinating, it can also make rearing the clams in hatchery conditions somewhat complicated. “Cockles are simultaneous hermaphrodites, which is super fun,” Unsell remarks. “Every animal is seasonally producing both sperm and eggs, alternating one after the other.”

However, this also means cockles are susceptible to “selfing,” or fertilizing their own eggs—not ideal for maintaining a genetically diverse population. Luckily, cockles are successful batch spawners, meaning multiple reproductive individuals release their gametes into the water at the same time. Because this strategy can increase overall genetic diversity and reduce the probability of selfing, another goal of the research project is to examine the genetic diversity produced by different family sizes used for batch spawning. By assessing the genetic diversity of the offspring produced by different batch sizes and comparing these genetics to wild cockles, the team can find the best number of cockles to use when spawning in hatchery conditions in order to optimize the genetic diversity and create cockles with higher potential to thrive.

The project is still underway, and one future step is to fine tune the best out planting techniques for hatchery produced cockles. Unsell and the team are excited to care for the hatchery-bred cockles until they are old enough to use in the next round of out planting experiments, and to learn more about successful breeding and rearing strategies. While the science behind cockle restoration aquaculture is exciting, the project doesn’t just focus on cockles from a research perspective. To highlight the cultural significance of cockles and the importance of cockle restoration, in February 2025 the Suquamish Tribe hosted Celebrate the Cockle: Weaving Together Tradition & Science, a multi-day event that brought together Tribal and other folks from across the region and as far north as Alaska to talk about all things cockle. Despite a power outage, the event showcased a mix of culture, science, and restoration learnings, and further highlighted the importance of basket cockles to Tribal members, scientists and community members alike.

With the continued dedication and hard work of Tribal members, aquaculturists and research teams, the restoration of the basket cockle for subsistence access is one step closer. Though restorative aquaculture is a complicated and sometimes lengthy process, the hard work is well worth it, and the support for these efforts is extensive. The hope is that cockle restoration will ultimately protect access to a culturally significant, preferred First Food. By using ecologically restorative practices, the return of cockle abundance will not only benefit the people who love them, but will safeguard the health of wild cockle populations, ensuring they can be enjoyed by generations to come.

THE RETURN OF COCKLE ABUNDANCE WILL NOT ONLY BENEFIT THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM, BUT WILL SAFEGUARD THE HEALTH OF WILD COCKLE POPULATIONS, ENSURING THEY CAN BE ENJOYED BY GENERATIONS TO COME.



Diving into *The Mysterious World of Bull Kelp*

By Samantha Larson,
WSG Communications Lead and Science Writer

A cluster of elongate olive-brown tubes floats on the surface waters off the North Pacific Coast. Each has a head-like bulb at one end topped with a flourish of thin sinewy blades, almost resembling hair. Perhaps a sea otter has entangled itself among the algae. Or perhaps it would have in the past — before their numbers so drastically dwindled.

This is the bull kelp seascape seen from the surface. It is beautiful and compelling on its own — and yet, this scene offers only a hint of the richness and literal depth of the entire ecosystem. As bull kelp forests become increasingly imperiled, it is increasingly important that we are able to see down through the entire water column. Otherwise, we won't be able to grasp what's at stake if we lose them.

With *The Mysterious World of Bull Kelp*, Josie Iselin and Marianna Leuschel created a way for anyone with an internet connection to take a deep dive into these interconnected underwater worlds, which exist along the Pacific Coast from Central California to the Aleutian Islands. The multifaceted webstory is the centerpiece of the Above/Below ocean literacy campaign, which received funding from Washington, Oregon and California Sea Grants.

The webstory uses captivating art, historic maps, and photography, including interactive illustrations from artist Ellen Litwiller, of the important characters found within bull kelp ecosystems. The overall work presents a wealth of science-based information in sections organized by species, region, and other topics. The content from the webstory is

now also available as a print book, which was released by Heyday Books in March 2026.

“WE WANTED TO BRING THIS WORLD OF BULL KELP TO PEOPLE WHO OTHERWISE WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO EXPERIENCE WHAT'S BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE WATER.”

- Marianna Leuschel, co-creator of *The Mysterious World of Bull Kelp*

“We wanted to bring this world of bull kelp to people who otherwise wouldn't be able to experience what's below the surface of the water,” Leuschel says. And, as major declines have occurred in bull kelp forests up and down the Pacific coast — including a staggering 95% loss since 2014 on California's North Coast — getting to know these ecosystems has never been more important.

Iselin and Leuschel's partnership blossomed out of a shared passion for telling the story of a “spectacular organism in dire straits.” Iselin, a photographer by training, brought years of experience creating seaweed-focused art, writing about seaweed, and collaborating with seaweed researchers. Leuschel, a communications strategist

and designer, brought her two decades of experience and connections from running a creative studio.

Over the course of writing two seaweed books, *An Ocean Garden: The Secret Life of Seaweed* and *The Curious World of Seaweed*, Iselin developed ongoing relationships with many seaweed experts. She and Leuschel have become familiar with the many factors threatening West Coast marine environments, from sea star wasting disease to warming waters. “There was quite a bit of desperation in the research community,” she says. “At the same time, talking to these scientists, I saw there were so many interesting stories about bull kelp natural history, a lot of point-in-time journalism, but nowhere to find the overriding holistic ecological story. Everyone was focused on their own research.”

Iselin and Leuschel recognized the potential to use art and storytelling to build bridges between the information silos. The creative team worked with more than two dozen advisors and collaborators on the project, including scientists who offered regional expertise. In Washington, this included Tom Mumford of the University of Washington Friday Harbor Labs and Jodie Toft of Puget Sound Restoration Fund (PSRF).

Toft's work on bull kelp includes leading a recent Washington Sea Grant-funded project that investigated the population structure of Salish Sea bull kelp forests. The scientists found there were genetic differences between kelp in different areas, information that could help determine how to preserve the genetic integrity of wild bull kelp when outplanting it as part of aquaculture or restoration efforts. This research could help guide initiatives included in the Puget Sound Kelp Conservation and Recovery Plan, which outlines a path toward a revitalized bull kelp population in Puget Sound.

“Our forests below the water's surface are powerhouses, just as those above the water. Spanning the full height of the water column, bull kelp forests are disproportionately important in the marine ecosystem, as food factories, for the refuge they provide from sound and predators, and more,” Toft says. “PSRF and the broader kelp recovery community are feverishly working to develop and deploy in-water bull kelp reforestation projects where forests have thinned or vanished. The successes we've had thus far are wildly inspirational. The road ahead involves maintaining momentum, integrating new

information, and finding ways for more kelp enthusiasts to have a hand in restoration.”

Iselin and Leuschel hope that building a broader understanding of restoration work and why it is necessary will help to build more support for that work. In addition to *The Mysterious World of Bull Kelp* webstory, the pair have taken on initiatives such as Kelp Reverberations, an exhibit that was on display at the San Juan Islands Museum of Art in late 2025 (which Washington Sea Grant also supported). They also organized the North Coast KelpFest, an event that celebrates kelp through art, science, food, and film, in Mendocino and Fort Bragg, California. The next KelpFest! will take place October 9–12, 2026.

“SPANNING THE FULL HEIGHT OF THE WATER COLUMN, BULL KELP FORESTS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPORTANT IN THE MARINE ECOSYSTEM, AS FOOD FACTORIES, FOR THE REFUGE THEY PROVIDE FROM SOUND AND PREDATORS, AND MORE.”

- Jodie Toft, executive director of Puget Sound Restoration Fund

“It's such a beautiful world, and if we can just get people into the story, they'll be curious to learn more,” Leuschel says. “And the more people learn about bull kelp, the more inclined they'll be to help protect it.”

Photos and illustrations courtesy of Josie Iselin/Above/Below and Ellen Litwiller/Above/Below



SCAN THE QR CODE TO CHECK OUT THE WEBSTORY!



In strengthening coastal resilience, COHORT supports local leadership

By Alison Lorenz, WSG Communications Project Coordinator

Almost ten years after the [Washington State Coast Resilience Assessment](#) pointed to a need for a unified, state-funded response to growing hazards on Washington’s coasts, the Coastal Hazards Organizational Resilience Team – or COHORT – is making its mark in coastal resilience by letting communities lead. The team recently published their first [two-year report](#) detailing their accomplishments.

The Coast Resilience Assessment kickstarted a chain reaction of projects to quickly grow the state’s capacity to prepare for coastal hazards. Follow-ups like the [Washington Coastal Resilience Project](#) (2016–2019) and the [Resilience Action Demonstration Project](#) (2019–2021) proved the concept of bringing state funds, expertise, and helping hands directly to communities and letting locals direct the process of building coastal resilience.

Funding for the Washington State Department of Ecology from the Washington State Legislature supports four full-time COHORT staff: one at Washington State University Extension, Washington Emergency Management Division, Washington Department of Ecology, and Washington Sea Grant.

Since COHORT’s inception, the group’s achievements include:

450 outreach and engagement events across all 15 of Washington’s coastal counties

75 projects that address coastal hazards and advance community goals

86 MILLION in federal funding secured for resilience projects and funding efforts

Beyond those numbers are the real people and communities coming together to safeguard what matters to them.

LOWER COLUMBIA “BAY TO BAY” RESILIENCE STRATEGY

COHORT works by supporting and augmenting local leadership for community-oriented resilience efforts. The [Bay to Bay](#) project in the Lower Columbia River Estuary was one of the first to demonstrate the value of this ground-up approach to building coastal resilience. Running from 2021 to 2024, the project was led by Pacific Conservation District, the Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership, and Washington Sea Grant and

created a roadmap for future community-led coastal resilience planning efforts. After initial outreach helped project partners better understand the local historical context and priorities in Baker Bay and Grays Bay, community members came together in a series of eight workshops, with four centered around each bay. COHORT team members helped to facilitate each workshop, inviting participants to share the concerns, assets, questions, and collaborators most important to them.

“THE UNIQUENESS OF COHORT IS THAT WE’RE REALLY ON THE GROUND, SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY IN THE WAYS THAT THEY’RE PRIORITIZING.”

– Sanpisa Sritrairat, WSG community engagement specialist

“The uniqueness of COHORT is that we’re really on the ground, supporting the community in the ways that they’re prioritizing,” says Sanpisa Sritrairat, WSG community engagement specialist and a core member of the COHORT team.

The workshops homed in on actions the communities could take to address the issues they saw, began scoping specific projects, and identified ways these projects could continue to be moved forward. Of the 12 projects put forward for advancement, 7 have now either been funded or continue to receive COHORT support, including the Wahkiakum Common Ground project described in this article. But COHORT’s inter-agency nature means that projects can sprout outside the scope of the specific community workshops as well. For example, during the Bay to Bay workshops, the idea of a tsunami Vertical Evacuation Structure in Long Beach took hold; after COHORT connected the relevant parties to Emergency Management Division staff, the project was developed into a proposal for a Federal Emergency Management Agency grant.

WAHKIAKUM COMMON GROUND

Wahkiakum County, in Washington’s southwest corner, is one of the state’s least populated and most rural counties, and regularly experiences severe high-water events and erosion. Recurrent flooding has damaged homes, roads, and businesses, as well as impacted salmon runs crucial to the area’s economy.

Co-leads of the county’s Marine Resources Committee (MRC),

Sandra Staples-Bortner, Carrie Shofner (WSU Extension) and Sam Shogren worked with COHORT to plan a series of workshops aimed at helping their community work better together to address flooding hazards. The workshops didn’t dwell on mistakes of the past, but focused on introducing community members to local, successful watershed restoration projects. Attendees heard presentations, visited project sites, and then came back together to build connections and discuss the benefits of restoration work for people, salmon, and the local economy. The workshops convened leaders, both formal and informal, from all sectors: private landowners, community groups, county and tribal governments, nonprofits, local businesses, and state agencies.

COHORT team members supported the MRC in planning, structuring, and setting up the workshops. “They would come help us set out tables, make sure we had lunch out,” Shofner says. “They were rolling up their sleeves along with us.” COHORT members also attended the workshops to provide community members technical and subject matter expertise that wasn’t necessarily tied to a regulatory agency. Finally, they connected the MRC with Andrea Mah, a social scientist at Oregon State University who documented the mutual trust the workshops grew.

Staples-Bortner, Shofner and Shogren soon saw the benefits of the positive, apolitical space the workshops provided. Local experts in hydrology, landscape ecology, and fish biology were able to explain how the projects benefit local property owners and fish, while agencies, as Staples-Bortner put it, “were seeing who people really are.” As community priorities around both watershed restoration and local economic development coalesce, she says, “we, hopefully, can recognize agencies more as one of us.”

“COHORT provided resources we didn’t have in the county to have these conversations,” Shogren says. “They provided the expertise to think about and structure these workshops and enrich the conversations and our own thinking about what we wanted to do. COHORT was the door we could walk through to other resources.”



Participants in the Wahkiakum Common Ground workshop series. Photo by Andrea Mah

SHOALWATER BAY INDIAN TRIBE

For Risa Thomas, planning director and community development coordinator of the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe, COHORT has been supportive in a variety of ways. They helped support the first Winter Storm Forum, bringing together groups and communities from all 15 coastal counties to network and share knowledge and resources around storm-driven coastal flooding. Another gathering, NOAA Adaptation for Coastal Communities, was hosted by the Tribe, and convened partners from up and down the Pacific coast to talk planning, grant-matching, proposal development, and how to frame local issues and projects in terms decision makers understand.

“With COHORT, my hope is that we continue to build on the relationships we have,” Thomas says. The recent launch of WSG’s Coastal Resilience Fellowship, which she helped WSG to develop, was a further strengthening of Washington’s growing network of coastal resilience practitioners. Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe welcomed their own Coastal Resilience Fellow, tsunami and geohazard-expert Maddy Lucas, in September, and Lucas was able to attend both the Winter Storm Forum and the NOAA event. “We are helping Maddy, but she’s also educating us on the work she’s done in the past, so it feels so natural,” Thomas notes. “I can’t see her not being here.”

As far as the Tribe’s work in coastal resilience and relocating their community, Thomas explains that it can be difficult to find help that is genuinely helpful. “There’s maybe ten of us relocating an entire village,” she says. “COHORT are so respectful of our time and really show up on how they can help us instead of the other way around. They’re helpful in a real way.”

BUILDING CONNECTIONS AND RESILIENCE

COHORT’s unique model of bringing technical expertise, facilitation experience, and additional capacity directly to the communities who need them has had great success. The group plays an essential role in supporting locally led resilience efforts, tailoring their offerings to the needs of each specific community. The help can look like anything from helping write a grant to analyzing sea level rise or coastal flooding vulnerabilities – to setting out sandwiches during a community workshop.

“This is really a program that needs to continue to see funding and needs to be sustained,” says Shogren. “Bringing expertise into small rural counties, being able to have the funding to hold these conversations, and having local voices treated with equal weight breaks down barriers to cooperation and understanding. COHORT helps build bottom-up solutions to coastal hazards built on local community values, needs and concerns. It makes the government feel like it’s not so far away.”

FIELD NOTES

Catch up on the happenings at Washington Sea Grant this season

NEW WSG FELLOWSHIPS

WSG launched three new fellowships: the WSG Coastal Resilience Fellowship, the WSG Puget Sound Science Research Fellowship, and the WSG Marine Carbon Dioxide Removal Fellowship. The WSG Coastal Resilience Fellowship is a two-year opportunity for early career or shifting professionals to provide additional capacity for communities around coastal resilience. In partnership with Puget Sound Partnership, the WSG Puget Sound Science Research Fellowship supports graduate student research that advances Puget Sound recovery. The WSG Marine Carbon Dioxide Removal Fellowship is a unique opportunity to advance responsible marine carbon dioxide removal (mCDR) in the Salish Sea by ensuring that scientific models used to track and verify carbon removal are informed by the people most affected by them.

WSG WELCOMES



WSG has two new staff members this season: **Stuart Thomas** is a new aquaculture specialist, and **Aina Hori** is the new WSG Crab Team outreach specialist. Welcome aboard!

WSG STUDENT ASSISTANTS



WSG is grateful for the work of several student assistants over the last year. **Isaac Olson** has worked with WSG carbon specialist **Meg Chadsey** on several ocean acidification-related outreach projects; **Maya Ades** assisted WSG's communications team; **Jane Wybenga** assisted the operations team; **Hannah Brown** and **Christopher Harris-Adams** supported WSG Crab Team; **Emma Klessig** assisted WSG social scientist and education specialist **Nicole Naar** on shellfish-related projects; and **Olivia Horwedel** worked on communications for the Indigenous Aquaculture Collaborative.

2025-2026 CLASS OF WSG FELLOWS



Congratulations to the class of 2025-2026 WSG fellows! Ava Vaughan served as the 2025 Community-Engaged Intern, supporting coastal hazard mitigation planning and social vulnerability assessments. Recent graduates **Delaney Cyphers**, **Cirque Gammelin**, and **Courtney Skalley** were awarded the WSG Hershman Fellowship, which places fellows in marine and coastal host offices throughout Washington. The 2025-2026 Keystone Fellow is **Danielle Brady**, who is completing her fellowship with host Puget Sound Partnership. WSG also welcomed **Seiler Grubb** as an undergraduate Science Communications Fellow, and **Emily Bjornsgard** as a graduate Science Communications Fellow.

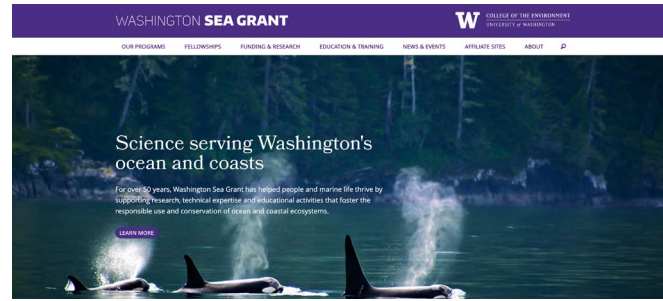
WSG also welcomed the first cohorts of several newly launched fellowships. The first WSG Coastal Resilience Fellows, in their positions from 2025 to 2027, are **Anabel Baker**, **Teagan Darmody**, **Rich Desanto**, **Elyse Kelsey**, and **Maddy Lucas**. The first Puget Sound Science Research Fellows are **Isaac Olson** and **Gabe Diephuis**. Finally, WSG welcomed **Mariah Ricci** as the WSG Marine Carbon Dioxide Removal Fellow.

DISCOVER WEST COAST SEAFOOD



WSG, in collaboration with Oregon Sea Grant and California Sea Grant, launched the Discover West Coast Seafood website in October. The three West Coast Sea Grant programs created the website as part of a larger project funded by NOAA's National Sea Grant to increase consumer awareness and knowledge of West Coast seafood choices. Alongside information about the wide variety of West Coast seafood species and how they're harvested, the website hosts profiles of West Coast harvesters, more than 100 seafood-specific recipes, and illustrations by artist and commercial fisherman Tom Crestodina. "This resource is a one-stop shop for information about seafood species, gear and the people who harvest it," said WSG fisheries specialist **Jenna Keeton**, making it easier for consumers to select seafood when deciding what's for dinner.

NEW WEBSITE



After many months of development in partnership with University of Washington's College of the Environment, we are excited to share that WSG has a new website. In addition to a fresh look, more cohesive branding, and beautiful imagery, we placed a particular emphasis on making sure information about our many programs is accessible, up to date, and easy to find.

Visit the new WSG website at waseagrant.uw.edu.

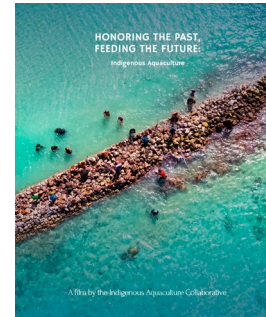
COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT AWARDS



We are happy to share that five staff members have been selected for 2026 College of the Environment awards. The WSG Fisheries Team — including **Jenna Keeton**, **Bridget Trosin**, **Brandii O'Reagan**, and **Robert Maw** — received the Outstanding Community Impact Award, due to their invaluable stakeholder engagement and services through which they strengthen the fishing industry and improve the lives of the people who work within it. This includes their work launching the Skills and Drills course, the Washington Fishermen's Convention, and the Discover West Coast Seafood website, and continuing longstanding bodies of work such as life-saving training programs and brokering the land agreements between crabbers and towboat operators.

Lisa Watkins, WSG community science specialist, received the Outstanding Commitment to Inclusive Excellence. She was recognized for her leadership of Molt Search, part of WSG Crab Team's outreach and monitoring efforts to protect Washington shorelines and nearshore ecosystems from invasive European green crab. "Her ability to build partnerships, empower volunteers, guide students, and inspire public engagement comes from a lifetime spent translating scientific knowledge into community benefit," her nominators shared.

THE INDIGENOUS AQUACULTURE COLLABORATIVE



The Indigenous Aquaculture Collaborative — a community of practice coordinated by WSG — released *Honoring the Past, Feeding the Future: Indigenous Aquaculture*. This 13.5-minute documentary features the place-based efforts to restore loko i'a (Hawaiian fish ponds), beng (Palaun stone fish traps), and clam gardens (Northwest Coast walled features), and the network that continues to learn together about the extensive diversity of ancestral stewardship of marine food abundance. The documentary highlights principles that guide the Indigenous Aquaculture Collaborative Network such as sharing knowledge, working collectively for abundant First Foods, resilience in the face of change, and healing relationships across generations. The film was produced by **Melissa Poe**, WSG assistant director for outreach and community engagement, co-directed by **Olivia Horwedel**, and primarily filmed by Katie Jennings of New Canoe Media.

NEW SEAFOOD HACCP TRAINING



WSG is offering Seafood Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) training for the first time. The training meets the federal requirements to sell seafood to the public, and emphasizes real-world scenarios and applications. While initial sessions will be held at WSG's South Bend office, we hope to offer future trainings in Forks, Bellingham, and Port Townsend. "We are committed to bringing these educational opportunities to more rural communities," said **Brandii O'Reagan**, WSG fisheries specialist and the HACCP course instructor. With these course offerings, WSG is widening the path for small fishing and seafood operations to get fresh, local seafood into the hands of their customers.

ECONOMIC CHANGES IN COASTAL WASHINGTON

A new analysis by WSG coastal economist **Kevin Decker** found that rates of unemployment in Washington's rural coastal counties — such as Grays Harbor, Pacific, and Wahkiakum — have become more aligned with state and national economic trends following the COVID-19 pandemic, a change known as convergence. Before the pandemic, these counties had unemployment rates higher than the state average. Additionally, evidence shows this change is not just a short-term effect from the pandemic, but a shift that persisted through 2025. "For rural counties that have often been left out of Washington's growth, this is a significant step toward greater connectivity," Decker said.

We moved our office! You can now find the Seattle WSG office up the street from our old one, in Condon Hall on the UW campus.

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WSG HAS A NEW WEBSITE!

If you've visited the Washington Sea Grant website recently, you may have noticed our new look! After many months of development in partnership with University of Washington's College of the Environment, we are excited to share our new website with you. Our website is the best place to find information about our many programs, fellowship and volunteer opportunities, workforce trainings, and more. We also invite you to explore our two new searchable databases for our funded research projects and free publications. Visit the new WSG website at waseagrant.uw.edu.