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## A slow recovery for Puget Sound

By **Craig Welch**  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*

Many of Puget Sound's declining herring populations have rebounded, the acres covered by the invasive grass spartina are half what they were a few years ago and sites once contaminated with heavy metals are slowly being cleaned up, according to a biennial report by the state on Puget Sound's health.

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But toxic chemicals still can be found in the fat and livers of some fish and marine mammals; runoff continues to flush pollution from parking lots and streets into the Sound; and populations of seabirds, such as grebes and scoters, are still down dramatically from the 1970s.

The report suggests that even as progress is being made in restoring the region's signature waterway, growth and decades of abuse continue to take a toll.

"We've been at this long enough that all these years into it we had hoped the trends would be more clearly improving," said Scott Redmond, with the Puget Sound Action Team, a partnership of state agencies that has monitored the health of the Sound since 1986.

Instead, trends are mixed, and several key indicators of the Sound's ecosystem health are in such a state of flux it's often hard to characterize which direction things are heading.

For example, 1,655 acres of shellfish beds that had been closed because of stormwater runoff contaminated with human or animal waste were reopened in the past two years — even as the number of shellfish beds on the brink of closure has doubled since 1997.

"Our concern, overall, is that we not lose ground," said Mary Getchell, a spokeswoman for the Action Team.

While the region's transient killer-whale population dropped from 97 in the 1990s to 78 in 2001 — a decline so precipitous that the federal government last month proposed protecting orcas under the Endangered Species Act — the population since has grown to 87, including two new calves born in December.

And populations of small, schooling herring, eaten by salmon and

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whales, dipped across the Sound in the 1990s, but "they've been coming up pretty well, and for the most part, are now above average," said Greg Bargmann, a marine fish manager with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. He attributed the increase to better weather, now that the warming El Niño has dissipated.

Yet two local populations of herring — one near the refineries at Cherry Point and one at Discovery Bay — are down.

The Action Team's report is timed to coincide with the beginning of the state's two-year legislative-budget cycle and forms the backbone for a work plan and a \$31.5

million budget request to continue monitoring and cleanup in the Sound.

Gov. Christine Gregoire, who once ran the state Department of Ecology, said in a news release that the state needed to increase its effort to protect the Sound, and she promised to work with lawmakers to take action on the work plan.

The report highlights 15 indicators of Sound health, from the vitality of wildlife populations and habitat to its water quality and the health of submerged lands. Most were in fair shape, and a handful were considered poor. Only one indicator — the effective effort to begin ridding the Sound of spartina — was considered good. Likewise, only one indicator was considered critical — the steep decline throughout the 1990s and early 2000s of the Sound's rockfish species.

In some cases, information in the report is enough out-of-date that it's not clear how well it reflects ongoing cleanup. For example, the report card shows that the amount of polycyclic hydrocarbons, a byproduct of gas-burning engines, increased at four of 10 monitoring stations between 1989 and 2000, and it suggests English sole in Elliott Bay are 24 times more likely to contract liver lesions as a result.

"This data is quite old," said Sandie O'Neill, a research scientist with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. "I would say the Seattle waterfront is still more contaminated than others, but it's come way down, and in 2003 the trend was downward again."

Still other points were remarkably up-to-date.

Puget Sound's eelgrass beds — the slender waving forests of grass in the Sound's near-shore environment that anchor sediments, provide nooks and crannies for underwater creatures and serve as forage and spawning grounds for a variety of fish — declined 4 percent between 2002-04. In Westcott Bay along the northwest corner of San Juan Island, for example, scientists had noted a change in the eelgrass bed in 2001. By 2003, it was gone.

"It's very significant and, at this stage of the game, we're still trying to

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figure it out," said Tom Mumford, with the state Department of Natural Resources. "It was a bit startling, and we're seeing similar patterns elsewhere."

Redmond, of the Action Team, said the problem could be runoff from upland development, changing water flows, water-quality issues that alter light penetration or something else entirely: "I'm not sure what the answer is."

Regardless, efforts to control stormwater runoff into the Sound will continue to be one of the region's thorniest environmental battles. This year, the state plans to begin requiring some 75 organizations and local governments to better manage how stormwater flows across polluted areas and into the Sound. And better management of such pollution also will be requested at smaller construction sites.

Still, "stormwater continues to be a problem," Getchell said. "It's just not getting much better."

*Craig Welch: 206-464-2093*

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