

## Guest Column

# Taking care of what's ours: BLM lands in S.J.

By Russel Barsh  
and Madrona Murphy

San Juan County includes hundreds of small islands, most of them too small and isolated to attract human settlements today. Coast Salish people nonetheless used many of these small islands in the summer as camas gardens and dog corrals, the sea providing a natural fence to keep deer outside, and dogs inside!

Much of the ancient wealth of our islands — roasted camas and dog wool yarn — was produced on these tiny plantations in days when the sea posed little obstacle to cedar canoes with woven cattail-

mat sails and seasoned sailors.

Apart from their human history, the county's small islands have become a refuge for rare and unusual plants and seabirds. In late spring, scores of small islands are carpeted with our most striking native flowers: blue camas, delicate pink farewell-to-spring, chocolate lilies, bright orange Columbia lilies, red Indian paintbrush, deep indigo Menzies larkspur, and many others. Isolated by miles of water, populations of native flowers are genetically isolated and highly diverse.

The Bureau of Land Management manages 31



Oak Island is located in West Sound off Orcas Island.

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small islands in the San Juans, including some that are large enough to be popular places for visitors, such as Victim, Blind and Indian islands. The Indian Island Marine Health Observatory, an Orcas-based volunteer program of Kwiáht and Beach Watchers, provides monitoring and public program-

ming on Indian Island, and is developing a high school conservation corps with BLM to help maintain Indian Island for recreation and education. Plants and wildlife on all of our small islands face growing challenges, however.

Burgeoning populations of native deer and feral mouflon sheep swim to

small islands, grazing out native plants and spreading non-native grasses. Canada geese transport grasses and aggressively displace native seabirds. Rats have spread to many of our small islands, where they eat seabird eggs, native mollusks and other animals. Seeds of highly invasive plant species

such as spurge laurel and English ivy have reached many small islands in the gut of birds and the shoes of humans.

Reclassification of BLM lands as a National Conservation Area would be one way to increase resources to restore and maintain the beauty and diversity of these small islands for future generations. BLM scoping meetings will be held in early June to familiarize islanders with these special places and ask for local perspective on appropriate management activities.

This is the second of a series of articles highlighting significant landscapes owned by the BLM. Future articles will continue to explore the process and possibilities of a NCA designation.

— Russel Barsh and Madrona Murphy live on Lopez Island and have been conducting studies of plant and animal diversity on BLM lands. They are members of the local Committee for National Conservation Area.