

Guest Column

BLM rocks and reefs, habitat and hazards

This is the third in a series of articles on the significant landscapes owned by the Bureau of Land Management. Further discussion of the process and possibilities of National Conservation Area designation will also be explored.

“We’re going to hit,” shouted the captain, and within an instant the hull was smashed against the slightly submerged rocks. MAYDAY!

For sea vessels from kayaks to tankers, rocks and reefs can be a navigational nightmare. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) owns more than 40 groups of exposed, submerged and

sometimes invisible rocks and reefs in the San Juans.

Though they can be a hazard, these seemingly lifeless features abound with marine life which may fluctuate with the tide. Home and resting areas for a diverse array of seabirds rocks and reefs provide valuable sanctuary for migrating and resident species alike. In 2009, this importance was recognized by the international research association SEAPRE (Seabird Islands and Introduced Predators) when it chose to hold their annual meeting on Orcas Island and to visit a number of BLM-owned islands.

Although many birds take advantage of the BLM’s small island mead-

ows, our seabird colonies are often dependent on smaller unvegetated rock habitats. These rocks just above the waves allow the nesting adults to forage close to their nests, and the lack of vegetation makes these islands unattractive to aggressive resident Canada geese that compete for nesting sites. Mink and other native weasels that prey on seabird nestlings and eggs are also unlikely to be a threat on the small rocks surrounded by strong currents.

Often left alone due to their hidden dangers and unattractive human appeal, rocks and reefs become ideal habitat for seals and sea lions to rest during low tide and sun

themselves, lazily but cautiously watching boats and kayakers float by. Cormorants, gulls, oyster catchers, marbled murrelets, harlequin ducks and many more use these rocks and reefs as feeding areas as well. Rocks and reefs are also home to some of the islands’ most colorful undersea ecosystems, and while BLM jurisdiction does not extend below low tide, sound stewardship of the upland and its seabird communities clearly benefits the marine environment as well.

How did the Department of Interior’s Bureau of Land Management become administrator and managers of these special rocks

and reefs? During early statehood, all areas which were not surveyed defaulted to federal ownership. Although small in total acreage, the rocks and reefs in BLM management are a significant part of the wild beauty of the our islands.

BLM is in the process of creating a Resource Management Plan which will review the management of the 1,000-plus acres it holds in San Juan County. This will happen June 5 in Friday Harbor and will be a chance to learn about all the BLM lands, including rocks and reefs, and to encourage BLM to continue to focus on protecting the ecological, cultural and historic values of all these public

treasures. This is our opportunity to tell BLM what we value in these lands and how we would like to see them protected and conserved for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Save the date: June 5, noon to 4 p.m., Mullis Community Senior Center, Friday Harbor.

— *Committee for National Conservation Area (CNAC): Russel Barsh, Jim Bergquist, Lincoln Bormann, Carla Chalker, Tom Cowan, Cynthia Dilling, Linda Hudson, Mike Jonas, Asha Lela, Nancy McCoy, Madrona Murphy, Bob Myhr, Sally and Tom Reeves.*