

Stewards of the Tidelands

Protecting shoreline areas for shellfish harvesting is a daunting task. Clean water and healthy shoreline habitats are essential for shellfish harvesting, and both are increasingly precious and rare commodities. Substantial portions of the state's shorelines are already so developed or degraded that they are unsuitable for harvesting, and other areas continue to follow suit.



Photo courtesy Washington State Department of Health

Shoreline living involves stewardship responsibilities

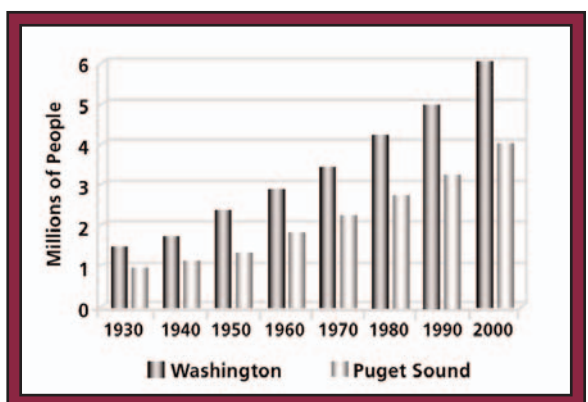
The state's population now tops six million people, two-thirds of which live in the Puget Sound basin. Although Washington has experienced a recent leveling in growth, population statistics show increases of about 20 percent each decade. The fastest growth is now centering in Puget Sound's rural, shellfish-rich counties.

Much work is needed and many important choices must be made to preserve the state's remaining shellfish growing areas, and to rehabilitate other polluted or degraded areas where possible. While certain responsibilities fall to growers, elected officials and resource managers, everyone shares the responsibility of caring for these resources. If you spend time in Washington's coastal watersheds, you play an important role as a steward of the tidelands.

Sensitive Resources

Shellfish must be grown in waters that are clean and free of disease-causing bacteria and viruses, such as Norwalk and hepatitis viruses, as well as naturally occurring biotoxins, such as paralytic shellfish poison (PSP) and domoic acid (also known as amnesic shellfish poison or ASP). For biotoxins, the only reliable safeguard is to stop harvesting when the toxins are present. However, there is much we can do to stop or reduce harm from other contaminants.

Shellfish grow best in shallow, coastal waters near freshwater flows, which makes them vulnerable to pollution from shoreline and upland land uses as well as water-based activities.



Washington Office of Financial Management

Washington Population Growth, 1930-2000

The main concern is feces from humans and other warm-blooded animals. Primary pollution sources include municipal sewage treatment plants, failing septic systems, pet and farm animal wastes, stormwater runoff, wildlife wastes and discharges from boaters and other shoreline recreational activities.

Fascinating Facts

- Shoreline areas approved for shellfish harvesting must meet high water quality standards to protect public health.
- More than six million people now live in Washington and the population is increasing by about 20 percent each decade.
- Two-thirds of the state's population live around the shores of Puget Sound.
- Diffuse pollution sources such as failing septic systems, pet and farm animal wastes, and stormwater runoff are key pollution threats in shellfish areas.
- Non-native pests such as oyster-drill snails, green crabs and spartina can devastate shellfish areas.
- Development disrupts natural hydrologic processes and reduces a watershed's capacity to absorb precipitation and break down pollutants.

A Call to Action

The continued contamination of shorelines and ruined shellfish beds is sobering, but the problem is not unmanageable or unsolvable. Thoughtful attention and careful choices by all of us can make a difference. Enjoying and preserving your shellfish resource involves you, so get involved. Start by taking on one of the *Top Ten Things You Can Do for Your Shellfish* and start protecting and restoring the resource today.


Top Ten Things You Can Do for Your Shellfish

- 1 Stop Pollution.** This applies to a host of issues. For example, make sure your septic system works properly and gets a regular checkup; pick up and properly dispose of pet wastes; keep farm animals away from waterways; and minimize stormwater runoff from structures and hardened surfaces.
- 2 Heed Warning Signs.** When a problem emerges, such as a home or community sewage problem, ask for help and get it fixed. On a regional scale, the Washington Department of Health annually reviews the classification and status of all commercial shellfish growing areas and identifies sites that may be closed because of declining water quality. Pay attention to all the signs and head off any problems as soon as possible.
- 3 Preserve Natural Systems.** Nothing does more for clean water than healthy, natural watersheds. On your property, make an effort to preserve and restore native forest cover, soils, wetlands and waterways that serve as nature's safeguards for healthy shorelines.
- 4 Build Naturally.** Consider new ways to live and build to lessen harm to the landscape. For example, build away from streams and shores, preserve natural shorelines and buffers, replant native trees on cleared or disturbed lots, and use low impact development practices and other conservation practices wherever possible.
- 5 Learn the Basics.** Familiarize yourself with the basic principles and tools of watershed management and shellfish protection. You'll then be better positioned to participate in community planning and restoration efforts and help shape the future.
- 6 Go to the Beach.** Set aside time, even make it a habit, to visit a local beach and reacquaint yourself with this special environment. You can harvest shellfish on many public beaches, but make sure you learn and follow the rules for safe and legal harvesting, and always start by calling the state's biotoxin hotline at 1-800-562-5632.
- 7 Grow Your Own.** Take advantage of the opportunity to garden shellfish on your beach or to help start a community shellfish farm. Small-scale shellfish farming involves a number of important rules and guidelines, so getting good information and developing a game plan are the first steps. Your local and state health department can provide information on shoreline water quality conditions. Contact Washington Sea Grant Program at sgpubs@u.washington.edu for the informative booklet, *Small Scale Oyster Farming for Pleasure and Profit in Washington*.
- 8 Lend a Hand.** Take advantage of opportunities to volunteer and assist with issues ranging from exotic species monitoring to watershed planning.
- 9 Make the Investments.** Smart and targeted investments in well-designed programs and capital improvements can establish an essential framework for lasting protection of the shoreline environment.
- 10 Spread the Word.** Help others learn about the issues by sharing good information about clean water and healthy shellfish beds with your neighbors and others in the community.

For assistance with many of these *Top Ten Things You Can Do for Your Shellfish*, contact your local health department, conservation district, public works department, or UW Sea Grant or WSU Cooperative Extension field office. See also the accompanying resource page for more information.

Sources

Washington Office of Financial Management, 2002, *2002 Population Trends for Washington State*.



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