

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **Port Susan Marine Stewardship Area (MSA)** comprises diverse marine and estuarine ecosystems and has been identified as a high priority conservation area in the Puget Sound. In 2012, the **Island County and Snohomish County Marine Resources Committees (MRCs)** collaborated with community partners to create a **Conservation Action Plan (CAP)** aimed at conserving and restoring Port Susan Bay to achieve thriving biodiversity and to support strong recreational and resource-based industries. The 2012 CAP serves as a vital planning tool that outlines conservation targets, threats, and strategies relevant for Port Susan. As 10 years have passed since the initial development of the CAP, the Island County and Snohomish County MRCs are working collaboratively to re-engage community partners. This process aims to review the 2012 CAP in order to identify how conservation and restoration efforts in Port Susan can remain effective to support the needs of key habitats and species and to promote inclusive stewardship of the area.

Our research team is composed of five University of Washington graduate students from the **Evans School of Public Policy and Governance Student Consulting Lab**. We conducted a comprehensive review of the 2012 CAP based on the following **research questions**:

1 Updating Knowledge

- Based on updated scientific information, how have the viability and threat rankings for each conservation target outlined in the CAP changed over the past 10 years?
- What are the relevant regional policies and environmental justice considerations that should be included in a CAP review, update, or alternate process?



2 Effectiveness

- What best practices should the MRCs and relevant partners take to effectively steward the Port Susan MSA?

3 Community Engagement

- What community engagement tools would be most effective in communicating the successes and challenges of the CAP and eliciting relevant feedback/suggestions for continued conservation and restoration efforts in Port Susan?



In collaboration with the **Island County and Snohomish County MRCs** and **Environmental Science Associates (ESA)**, our team analyzed **stakeholder survey** and **interview data**. This information together with an extensive **literature review** and a **Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats, and Opportunities (SWOT) analysis** aimed to answer these research questions.

Findings from the survey and interview data revealed insights on **future opportunities** for the continued conservation and restoration of the Port Susan MSA:

- Based on updated scientific understanding, survey respondents stated that they were most concerned with prioritizing **sea level rise** and **climate change** in future conservation action and planning.
- Roughly half of the survey respondents indicated that **they had not used the CAP** in their professional work setting in the last 5 years.
 - To **increase the utility** of the CAP, survey respondents recommended making a shorter version of the report, creating more concrete and actionable steps, meeting more regularly with stakeholders, and linking efforts to related local initiatives.
- Interviewees shared **additional opportunities for improvement** including incorporating a place-based approach, refining community engagement strategies, and increasing the relevancy of the overall project.

Literature review findings suggested that the emphasis on biological systems and indicators in the 2012 CAP **limited the opportunity for the sociocultural values of the local community** to be integrated into the plan. Community “buy-in” was lacking, which led to reduced collective ownership in the project and its successes.

The **recommendations** proposed in this report include **opportunities for improving the 2012 CAP** and **alternative pathways for future conservation planning** that centers local community values and creates space for the co-development of knowledge among scientists and community members.

Improvements to the 2012 CAP include:

- Updating the **conservation targets** based on new information
- Revising the **viability indicators** of conservation targets for congruency
- Incorporating **sociocultural conservation targets** to capture community values, needs, and visions
- Establishing a **process to better track progress of strategic actions** to ensure efforts remain coordinated and efficient
- Creating a **communication tool**, such as a digital dashboard, to share key information and highlight successes

Other opportunities for strengthening conservation action planning include:

- Creating a **crosswalk** with the Puget Sound Partnership Action Agenda to align related efforts
- Joining the Washington State Environmental Justice Council’s interagency work group to learn best practices for **equitable community engagement** and incorporating **environmental justice** into government projects
- Creating **relationships with additional community members** to include in future planning and decision-making
- Utilizing **diverse participatory tools** when engaging stakeholders
- Enhancing modes of **collaborative governance** to inform a more community-based approach