



Skagit Land Trust's Conservation Strategy

Skagit County extends from Puget Sound's marine shorelines across the floodplains of the Skagit and Samish Rivers to the North Cascades. Much of the wildness of Skagit County's North Cascades - its forests and peaks, lakes and glaciers - is protected through designation as national park and forest land. The lowlands to the west, however, where streams and wetlands, estuaries and tidelands lie alongside towns and working farms and forests - provide space where wildlife thrive and people can experience the natural world. This area is mostly privately owned and remains largely unprotected.

By 2040, the County's population is expected to grow almost 40% from 117,000 to 162,000. Such growth will bring increasing pressure to develop the lowlands. In the face of such pressure, Skagit Land Trust, a community-supported nonprofit organization founded in 1992, is perfectly positioned to permanently conserve important natural areas. Skagit Land Trust's Conservation Strategy guides the Trust in protecting Skagit County's vulnerable natural areas.

Skagit Land Trust has conserved more than 7,000 acres of natural lands in Skagit County, and built a highly successful and respected land conservation program. We are uniquely "Skagit" -- community based, collaborative and volunteer oriented -- drawing from a diverse pool of conservation professionals and committed citizens who care enough about this special place to work hard for its future. With our growth and success has come a deeper understanding of conservation planning, and of Skagit County's landscape. Our evolution reflects a gradual shift from a focus on individual parcels of land towards how a property fits into the larger landscape and "ecosystem context".

Our Conservation Strategy provides a framework for identifying and selecting the most important land conservation projects. We seek projects that will enable us to protect and restore enough land in key places to preserve naturally occurring ecosystems and connect people and nature. We do this while sustaining the working farms and forests vital to the County's economic health.

Using specialized mapping techniques, science based landscape analysis and local knowledge, our Conservation Strategy guides us as we make decisions about the conservation value of specific projects brought to us by landowners, both public and private. It also enables us to take proactive and systematic looks at larger undeveloped areas, seeking out opportunities to conserve those natural areas once common to Skagit County but now disappearing. Our Strategy reveals natural corridors that allow wildlife to travel safely from one protected habitat to another and plants to disperse,

adapting to the pressures of climate and land use change. The Strategy also identifies undeveloped areas within or near communities that connect urban dwellers to the natural world.

Whether evaluating individual land conservation projects or looking for larger areas in need of proactive conservation efforts, the Strategy first categorizes potential projects into basic conservation elements: a land element (terrestrial), a saltwater element (marine), a freshwater element, and a connecting-people-and-nature element. Projects can fit into more than one of these elements.

Within each of the four elements the Trust's Conservation Strategy identifies specific priorities. Fish bearing streams, for example, is one of the priorities within the Freshwater element. Each priority is further refined with criteria that help define more precisely a project's conservation character and worth. Chinook salmon in a fish-bearing stream is one such criterion. Using this layered conservation framework we are able to use our limited public and private resources for land conservation where it matters most. Our multilayered Conservation Strategy can also direct the Trust to the best funding sources or conservation and restoration partners for a particular project.

Our Strategy also directs the Trust to conserve special or rare habitats. When you walk along the Trust's Barr Creek trail you are on a property with land and connecting-people-with-nature elements. The trail is in a low elevation native forest, predominately Douglas firs and western red cedar over 150 feet tall. Tree type and tree height greater than 150 feet are criteria that increase conservation value within our native forests. As you gaze upward toward the tops of old firs and hemlocks, you're looking at roosting opportunities for bald eagles and potential nesting sites for marbled murrelets and northern spotted owls. Available habitat for unique species is a second target priority in the land element. If you continue upward rather than following the fork to the Barr Creek waterfall, you'll be on the old trail leading to the top of federally protected Sauk Mountain. Landscape connectivity, the melding of one protected land to another, is a third target priority in the land element. Here again the Strategy reflects and supports the critical interconnections of the natural world.

The Conservation Strategy considers all four elements of equal value. Increasingly the connecting-people-with-nature element is part of many of our conservation projects. Because people can only love what they know and want to protect what they love, as our population becomes increasingly urbanized, the experience of living in and with the natural world will become ever more critical.

Trails, like that at Barr Creek, connect people with the natural world, and technology can too. On your home computer you can watch the Trust's multilayered strategy in action as our video cam records herons feeding chicks in their nests high on the branches of firs in Skagit Land Trust's March Point Heronry, the land and connecting-people-and-nature elements working in concert.

In a changing world, the future is difficult to predict and prepare for, but with our Conservation Strategy as a guide, working together with our partners and supporters, Skagit Land Trust is conserving lands that are vital to the health of the natural environment for Skagit County.