



The Southern Strait of Georgia NMCA Backgrounder

The Southern Strait of Georgia: 'Heart of the Salish Sea'

The waters of the Southern Strait of Georgia in British Columbia are a source of resources, transportation, recreation and inspiration for millions of humans, and are home to many plants and animals whose health and well-being are intimately connected to our quality of life. Known by Coast Salish peoples as "SQELATES" (meaning "home"), this very special body of water has long been revered for its role in nurturing both human and natural ecosystems. It is truly the 'heart of the Salish Sea', situated between the northern Strait of Georgia and Puget Sound to the south.

This area includes the critical habitat of the federally endangered southern resident killer whale. Many species of fish, including rockfish, lingcod and herring, live in the Southern Strait. Approximately two million shorebirds and seabirds use the region's estuaries, tidal flats and



coastal waters as summering, staging and wintering grounds. Harbour seals are year-round residents. Steller and California sea lions are present during the winter months. Many "world giants", such as the world's largest octopus, sea urchin, nudibranch, anemone, intertidal clam, sea star, scallop and barnacle, make their home here. However, this region is also under great pressure from human impacts. Many species that reside in the area are under threat.

Tiger rockfish (Credit: Marilyn Kazmers)

A National Marine Conservation Area in the Southern Strait of Georgia

A National Marine Conservation Areas (NMCA) can help protect marine life in the Southern Strait while balancing human uses. NMCA's are established to represent a unique marine region and to demonstrate how protection and conservation practices can be harmonized with resource use in marine ecosystems for their long term sustainability. Currently, there are two NMCA's in Canada: Fathom Five National Marine Park in Georgian Bay, Ontario and Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park in Quebec.

In 1995, Canada and BC agreed to assess the feasibility of establishing a NMCA in the Southern Strait of Georgia. The feasibility study is intended to identify key environmental, economic and social outcomes of a range of conservation strategies. It will identify areas of biodiversity and other conservation values, conflicting and incompatible uses, and consider ways to accommodate appropriate activities. The study area for the NMCA extends from Haro Strait in



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the south to the waters of Active Pass, southern Trincomali Channel, Saanich Inlet and the southern shores of Saltspring Island (see map below). Based on ecosystem boundaries, CPAWS-BC along with our partners listed below, are advocating a larger area for protection, which includes the area from Haro Strait to Gabriola Passage (see map below).

If the feasibility study demonstrates support for the initiative, the federal/provincial steering committee will set out the terms and conditions under which the Southern Strait of Georgia NMCA will be established and managed. NMCA legislation requires ownership by Canada of the seabed in the proposed area, which is currently under the jurisdiction of the provincial government.

A Call for Action

Since 1997, CPAWS has been spearheading a coalition of non-governmental organizations, scientists and stakeholders to support and strengthen efforts to protect the marine environment of the southern Strait of Georgia through the establishment of a National Marine Conservation Area. The NMCA coalition has worked collaboratively to raise public awareness of and support for NMCA establishment. Over the years, we have shared many accomplishments, including:

- Building community awareness and support through a poster and brochure with detailed information on the NMCA, which were distributed widely throughout communities of the Southern Strait of Georgia.
- Organizing three boat tours through the Southern Strait with local opinion leaders and scientists.
- Collaborating with scientists from the University of Victoria to develop an ecologically-based zoning vision for the proposed NMCA using Marxan (a widely-used conservation software tool). This zoning vision was created collaboratively through workshops held throughout Southern Strait communities.
- Working with Islands Trust to gather municipal support for a NMCA. A resolution was successfully passed at the recent Association of Vancouver Island Communities (AVICC) meeting. The next step is to gather support from all BC municipalities at the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) meeting in Fall 2010.

It is a critical time for the NMCA, as the provincial government will be deciding whether to continue discussing an agreement with the federal government. The NMCA Coalition urges these governments to work together on completing the feasibility study, and to sign a federal/provincial agreement to protect the special ecosystems of the Southern Strait of Georgia.

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NMCA Coalition Members

The NMCA Coalition is a non-government body of conservancy groups, scientists, and stakeholders working to support and strengthen efforts to protect the marine environment of the Southern Strait of Georgia. The members of the coalition include:

- BC Nature
- Bird Studies Canada
- Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society-BC Chapter
- Galiano Conservancy Association
- Georgia Strait Alliance
- Gulf Island Park Studies
- Islands Trust
- Ocean Ecoventures
- Pacific Whale Watchers Association
- Pacific Wildlife Research Centre
- Pender Islands Conservancy Association
- Pender Island Power Squadron
- Pender Islands Field Naturalists
- Saanich Inlet Protection Society
- SeaChange Marine Conservation Society
- Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre
- T Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation
- University of Victoria



Southern Strait of Georgia (Credit: Sabine Jessen)