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On Dabob Bay, man and nature nurture preservation

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Few places in the Northwest boast the odd mix of ingredients — man, mollusk, mammal and military — found in the deep mixing bowl that is Dabob Bay.



Viewed from the air, the delicate, current-formed sandspits separating Dabob and Tarboo bays form graceful arcs worthy of a fine painting.

By Ron Judd

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THE ORCA appeared to be up to something.

When a local oysterman saw the big blackfish swim into Hood Canal's Dabob Bay a few years back, he wasn't entirely surprised. Transient orcas often follow schools of salmon around Puget Sound, cornering them in places like Dabob, an unusually deep, uncommonly pristine pocket of water near Quilcene.

This whale seemed to be on a mission. Setting out on its own, away from the pod, the whale swam slowly up the shoreline of Dabob, then up the other side, circumnavigating the entire body of water.

Finally, out in the darker, deep water near the bay's center, the whale swam with more urgency toward Broad Spit, a thumb of land that sticks out from the Bolton Peninsula. And there, chaos erupted.

The whale's pod mates, lurking all this time behind the spit's tall, sandy bluff, pounced and, in a blitzkrieg of bared teeth, attacked a group of harbor seals, which the intrepid scout whale had rounded up and delivered right to them.

It's the sort of thing, says local conservationist Peter Bahls, that one might expect to see on the BBC, or perhaps "Animal Planet" — not in the placid waters of a quaint, quiet saltwater inlet only a short distance, as the gull flies, from downtown Seattle.

It was just another day in Dabob Bay, one of the last, best places in all of Puget Sound to witness, in a single tide cycle, the entire aquatic food chain — from microscopic organisms to eelgrass to little fish to medium-sized fish to salmon to seals to whales — in motion.

All in a place which, unlike most of the rest of the Sound, has changed little since Capt. George Vancouver entered local waters and started naming everything 220 years ago.

OK, one large exception. There is the matter of those many-orders-of-magnitude-larger blackfish — lethal, silent Trident ballistic-missile submarines, which also have made the bay their semi-secret home for decades.

And one smaller one: A half-dozen commercial shellfish operations, where three generations of growers have produced world-renowned oysters, some of them responsible for restocking the West Coast's oyster suppliers after their oysters stopped reproducing naturally six years ago. Those oyster farms, especially the hatchery run by Taylor Shellfish, rely on Dabob's pristine, forest- and tide-flat-filtered waters to turn spat into gold.

"It's sort of a flagship conservation project for Puget Sound," says Bahls (pronounced "Bails"), a fish biologist by trade who now heads the Port Townsend-based Northwest Watersheds Institute. "I don't think there's many places like it left."

Today, the question in Dabob Bay is not how all the seemingly incongruous pieces of a decidedly strange-bedfellows conservation plan fit together, but how the place moving forward might remain anywhere close to as pristine with any one of them pulled from the mix.

NATURE, LEFT TO its own devices, has been known to regularly turn lemons into meringue pie. But few places in the Northwest boast the odd pile of ingredients — man, mollusk, mammal and military — found in the deep mixing bowl that is Dabob Bay, a waterway that sticks like a hitchhiker's thumb northward from Hood Canal, the nation's longest natural fjord.

That has a little to do with luck, but much more to do with hard work by various public and private parties, with the ongoing assistance of the naturally secluded nature of the bay itself.

Dabob, tucked mostly out of sight between the Bolton and Toandos peninsulas along the northwest shore of Hood Canal, is surrounded by steep-walled, forested hills, some of them logged in the early 20th century, most now back to their evergreen state. The glaciers that long ago carved this deep notch could not have known that they were creating a chasm so impressive that it would be tough, even for humans, to screw up.

Hood Canal, which actually is the long, crooked western arm of Puget Sound, once boasted a wealth of rich saltwater estuaries — places where crystal-clear freshwater streams danced from the leeward Olympic Mountains and met the saltchuck, creating rich, fertile tidelands that provided the springboard for the local marine food chain. All of these remain, in varying degrees of ill-repair. A quick glance at any map reveals that the major ones — at the mouths of the Skokomish, Duckabush and Dosewallips rivers — all have a common denominator: They're partly bisected by a road, Highway 101.

Not so for Dabob. Uncommonly steep shorelines and very deep water (the center is more than 600 feet deep; picture the Space Needle submerged) made highway engineers shrug and say, "Go around." And that is exactly what most motorists do today, passing by Dabob via Highways 104 and 101 and not even realizing it's there.

The skirting of the highway preserves Dabob's secluded status in another important way: Several handfuls of homes are scattered about in the watershed's uplands, but few public roads intrude into the area. Access is primarily on private, gravel lanes that discourage tourists. The primary public access to Dabob is by water, via boat or kayak; the Quilcene Marina, a good 5 miles from the head of the bay, is the closest major public launching point.

The result: Most days, Dabob is home to many more seals, porpoises and seabirds than people. Plenty of boat traffic — some sightseers, commercial and recreational fishermen, oyster farmers and strong kayakers — does make its way into the bay. But the scarcity of year-round dwellers leaves the bay mostly to its own peaceful devices.

WHAT WOULD YOU see on a trek up Dabob?

Harbor seals, lots of 'em, with moms and pups hauled out on beaches and shellfish-farm floats. Occasional jumping salmon; recovering runs of coho and chum returning to the main feeder stream, Tarboo Creek, attract the seals.

Porpoises will fin about. Loons bobble on the waves. The lucky visitor might see an endangered marbled murrelet; known nesting sites are found here.

Perhaps more striking are the shorelines themselves. They're not much different from others in the Sound, except for one thing: They are uninterrupted, with nary a bulkhead, jetty wall or other man-made "feature" marring the symmetry.

The bay's most distinctive feature, however, is easy to miss from the water: a series of artful sand spits, a few visible at high tide, an additional half-dozen emerging at low. The spits, formed over centuries by sediment moved by the bay's unique hydrodynamics, break the inner bay into segments, with two larger ones separating Tarboo Bay, at the north tip — much of the time, an unnavigable tidal mud flat — from Dabob Bay proper, which stretches, technically, a dozen miles to the south.

The spit's sandy uplands host rare vegetation, their backwaters provide rich salt marshes festooned with eelgrass and other host species vital to the hatching of marine life.

Viewed from the air, the sand spits look like delicate artwork — sweeping arches with Renoir colors and Van Gogh curves. It's a stunning image, and the concentration of spits in Dabob's relatively confined quarters make it unique in Puget Sound.

Bill Dewey of Taylor Shellfish, who has worked in the industry for 30 years, got his start with a private grower up in the shallow waters of Tarboo. His unbiased opinion:

"It's about as close to heaven as you get. I hope it stays that way."

THREE DECADES ago, those delicate sculptures in sand drew the attention of conservationists, and of the Department of Natural Resources, charged with preserving the state's most treasured natural features. The DNR declared about 200 acres of sand spits and immediate shoreline areas as Dabob Bay Natural Area, protecting it from development.

Over the years, landowners along the bay and in its uplands realized that that designation alone would not protect the bay's true treasure, its clean water. Thousands of acres of the steep uplands were in private hands — logging company Pope Resources and others — thousands more already in DNR ownership, but slated for logging to benefit state school construction. Other private tracts were large enough to accommodate subdivision and further home construction — not at all a stretch of the imagination given the area's stunning beauty and relative proximity to the Seattle metro area.

After much grass roots lobbying and organizing, Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark in 2009 signed a measure to protect almost the entire watershed by drawing a line around the bay, nearly to the top of its uplands, and designating it as Dabob Bay Natural Area. About half the 4,000 acres inside that line was already public; all private land within the boundaries remained so.

Conservationists moved quickly, securing private donations and matching public money to convince Pope and many private homeowners to either sell land for trust status or issue conservation easements ensuring the property will never be further developed.

Wildlife photographer Keith Lazelle, a 20-year Dabob resident, stepped forward. He recently sold two 6-acre parcels of forest land that sit on either side of his home, about 350 feet above Dabob, to the DNR's natural reserve, and signed a conservation easement with the Jefferson Land Trust for his home lot.

He'd like to see the best feature of his land — the almost eerie quiet — remain that way. Some of the oyster farmers across the bay occasionally run old trucks with “funky mufflers,” but that's about the only unnatural sound you hear at Lazelle's place.

“You can actually hear people talking on the other side of the bay,” more than a mile away, he says.

All of those oyster farmers — some have been here for three generations — have been active advocates for the conservation effort: With fragile water tolerances for shellfish production, they fret about even small changes to the upland forests that filter their water.

The state has done its part, as well, transferring some 2,000 acres of School Trust timber land to conservation status, in exchange for either cash or replacement timber acreage that's less environmentally sensitive.

And a seemingly unlikely partner, the U.S. Navy, has been proven to be a tremendous ally in Dabob's green quest. The Navy, whose West Coast base for Ohio-class Trident submarines is a short distance to the east, at Bangor in Kitsap County, set aside outer Dabob's deep waters as a non-explosion missile test range long before conservation status came to the inner bay. Sub fleet commanders have an interest that dovetails with conservationists: keeping the area undeveloped, and the submarine test range isolated, for the most part, from people.

The Navy has actively helped find federal matching money just for that purpose. And more is on the way, via a mitigation fund for Bangor base expansion.

The net effect: A patchwork quilt of potential threats above fragile Dabob is turning more and more green, likely for the long haul.

“It’s absolutely a success story,” says Chris Davis of The Nature Conservancy, one of the first groups to stand up for Dabob.

“It’s a conservation success but it’s also a win for community members who have harvested fish, crab, prawns and oysters for generations.”

In rural east Jefferson County, with a history of logging, the expanded Dabob protective boundary drew opposition only from a handful of property-rights advocates. And once they heard land owners inside the boundary supporting the designation, much of that rancor fizzled, Davis says.

“There’s a lot of local pride and sense of place in that area,” he notes. “A lot of people have a real history of going there and using it for picking oysters off the bay.”

CALL IT LUCK, call it effective land management, call it a Navy conspiracy. But it’s working in Dabob Bay. At least for now.

Conservationists in general are loath to declare victory, and any satisfaction they get in the ongoing wild status of Dabob Bay is tempered by the notion that global change — or even small doses of local greed — could render it all moot.

Bahls and many volunteers, for example, invested many years and up to \$20 million acquiring and restoring critical salmon-spawning habitat along Tarboo Creek, only to see a couple boats from the Skokomish Tribe charge into the bay and, in a few net sets, wipe out entire runs of fish waiting for rain to enter the stream.

“It’s a crying shame,” Bahls laments.

The dispute still simmers.

He also points to 50 private parcels in the watershed, their future in question, and cautions: “The game is not over by any means. It’s a long-term process.”

Bahls also knows DNR has long-term plans to establish better public access to the area, possibly with an uplands trail system. Don’t expect him to be seeking matching grants for that.

“I kind of like how it’s hard to get to,” Bahls concedes. “It’s almost a wilderness experience. I don’t think every place in Puget Sound needs to be roll-right-down-to-the-water.”

Even if all the local pieces fall into place at Dabob, stubborn storm clouds linger on the margins of the bigger picture. Increasing ocean acidification, already blamed for stopping shellfish production elsewhere in the Pacific, could easily spread into Dabob, spoiling the fragile water balance, and upsetting the entire ecological apple cart, from beneath.

Tests show dangerously acidic water already lurking in the bay’s dark depths, oyster growers point out.

“We’re talking about water here,” Lazelle says. “It’s all related. We could have this area protected all you want, but still, outside forces could wreak havoc. All you can do is do your part, and hope for the best.”

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