

2011 FRIENDS of the San Juans Annual Meeting

Welcome Speech by President George Lawson



Words cannot express how thrilled I am to be here with you in what I consider to be one the largest and greatest demonstrations of care for the San Juans.

I say this not simply because at this 32nd Annual Meeting we have a record number of kids crawling, playing and having hands on learning about restoration. I say this not only because we are on the island, Shaw, that has had a disproportionate impact on the birth and growth of the FRIENDS of the San Juans....think of Fred Ellis, Lynn Bahrych, John Christopherson and many others. Not only because we celebrate the 10 year Anniversary of Shaw resident and inexpressibly stellar Executive Director of the FRIENDS, Stephanie Buffum Field, but I say this because we today are at the crossroads in restoration of the San Juans, and at this fork in the path you made the decision to bear witness for the natural health, restorative resources and mystical power of a group of islands that were given to us to steward hundreds of thousands of years ago. We thank you!

May I share a few words from Walter Rauschenbusch's "a broader sense of communion"?

"We are grateful for this universe, our home; and for its vastness and richness, the exuberance of life which fills it and of which we are a part, and for the winds,...for the clouds which navigate and for the constellations, there so high...for the oceans and for the fresh streams, for the endless mountains, the trees, the grass under our feet...for our senses, to be able to see the moving splendor, to hear the songs of lovers, to smell the beautiful fragrance of the flowers.

Give us a...heart that is open to all this joy and all this beauty, and free our souls of the blindness that comes from preoccupation with the things of life, and of the shadows of passions, to the point that we no longer see nor hear, not even when the bush at the roadside is afire with the glory of...colors. Give us a broader sense of communion with all living things, our sisters...with whom...this world is a home along with us.

We remember with shame that in the past we took advantage of our greater power and used it with unlimited cruelty, so much so that the voice of the earth, which should have arisen...as a song was turned into a moan of suffering.

May we learn that living things do not live just for us, that they live for themselves...and that they love the sweetness of life as much as we do, and serve in their place, better than we do, in

ours. When our end arrives and we can no longer make use of this world, and when we have to give way to others, may we leave nothing destroyed by our ambition or deformed by our ignorance, but may we pass along our common heritage more beautiful and sweet, without having removed from it any of its fertility and joy, and so may our bodies return in peace to the womb of the...earth which nourished us and spirits..."

The FRIENDS cannot recall a more determinative and pivotal time for what nourishes us and our spirits than now.

Now is the time to set the compass for restoration of the San Juans for the next two decades and beyond. Now is the time to work to see that the County passes a Critical Areas Ordinance (critical aquifer recharge areas, fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas) that has real teeth in environmental protections, addresses the cumulative impacts, climate change and does not regard mitigation as a quick fix over protecting critical areas in the first place.

Now is the time to give local input to the state act, the Shorelines Management Program, that protects land, water, native vegetation and wildlife along the shorelines.

Now is the time to protect eelgrass, forage fish spawning habitat and feeder bluffs.

Now is the time to learn again that living things do not live just for us, and that bulkheads that disrupt forage fish spawning beaches and docks that cast their shadow of death across light-starved eelgrass beds are permitted in only extraordinary circumstances.

It is not going to be easy. We have to deal with the cries that we hear:

1. *"I love the islands but the government cannot tell me what I can and cannot do with my property."*

Of course we believe that environmental action should be voluntary. That is why we have education programs, seminars and why we provide personal counsel and literature to property owners. In the end, however, property rights are relative rights and are related to the broader community interests. When a few blithely pay no attention to the best available science-based buffers, set-backs and free flowing, natural beaches then code enforcement becomes, regrettably, necessary.

2. *Another cry is "you latte sipping, granola crunching, moneyed snobs think that preserving and restoring the environment here is more important than jobs for the middle class."*

Yet tourism hangs on the preservation of a clean and attractive environment. Who will come if our waters are inert, dead, lifeless, bird-less and fish-less? I worked my way through college

and graduate school reef netting and purse seining in the San Juan Islands in the 50's and 60's. Thousands of jobs were created because we had not yet done extensive damage to fish stocks, both through habitat loss and imprudent harvests.

3. Another cry that you will hear is "what I do on my property is so insignificant when you consider the size of the San Juans and the depth of the sea."

But that is the argument used everywhere, including hood canal, where oxygen starved marine life is dying. The fact is that cumulative impacts can destroy. One failed septic tank in hood canal does not harm the environment. But a thousand failed septic tanks can wreak havoc. Likewise, one bulkhead in the San Juans will not harm the marine ecology, but a thousand bulkheads changes nearly all of our sea life dramatically. Cumulative impacts matter.

However, I see us turning a new page.

In my imagination I see our grandchildren and great grandchildren pulling Dungeness crab pots with the same crab abundance that I have in my pots today.

I imagine that those who come after us will see the results of our caring for feeder bluffs and will be able to see a recovery of wild Chinook salmon and the consequent preservation of the other-worldly orca whales, murrelets and their cousins, and the recovery of bottomfish.

I can imagine a vibrant, productive, healthy and dynamic eco-system that is an example to the entire Salish Sea area in Washington State and British Columbia.

Our imagination of what could be will be transformed into reality if we resolve to get involved-- become informed, talk with our county councilors, write letters, send emails, ask questions, volunteer with the friends, support the friends and all who work for restoration.

Be there for the September 7 CAO town hall meeting in Friday Harbor, the September 27 and 28 deliberations on wetlands and the October 19 hearing on fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas.

If we will do these things, and coordinate with other fine groups that truly care about the preciousness and uniqueness of the gift of the San Juans, I am confident that we will usher in a new day, an era in which we will not have removed from the San Juans any of its fertility and joy and we will again hear the earth sing.