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Setting Sail for the Salish Sea

Forget cleaning up Puget Sound: we have bigger waters to take care of. A new name for the Pacific Northwest's inland sea challenges us to rethink the region and its identity.

by Knute Berger / January 22, 2009

There's no such thing as a blank slate. Our studies of history, ecology, anthropology, geology, evolution, etc. all teach us that there is a there everywhere that precedes us. But in places like the West, and still more so in the last frontier regions of the Pacific Northwest that were settled so late, very little seems fixed. Despite 10,000 plus years of human habitation, pioneers tried to wipe the slate clean of indigenous peoples and old-growth forests to build the New Jerusalem, and cities like Seattle and Portland and Vancouver emerged.

But still, there is restlessness, a sense our regional identity is not fixed, that the borders and boundaries so lately settled may have been based on old paradigms.

Once we were the Oregon Territory and stretched to Wyoming and Montana. States were carved out, British colonies and provinces too. Lines were drawn. Oregon celebrates its sesquicentennial of statehood this month, a venerable age for a region that became synonymous with the promise of the frontier. The age of empires — British, American, Russian, Spanish — competing for supremacy has largely passed, though it is being replayed in the melting Arctic, which could have trickle down effects on the Northwest in terms of economic opportunities opened by resource and territorial claims. Those Russians Alaska governor Sarah Palin can see from her porch in Wasilla? They planted

a flag on the sea bottom at the North Pole in 2007, setting off a new round of jockeying in a warmer world. After 400 years, the Northwest Passage is still in play.

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The border between Washington and British Columbia was finally fixed by the sweep of Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany's pen in 1872, but it did not resolve issues that are fluid, or were unknown at the time. His stroke may have made political or strategic sense, but does it make sense in terms of economics in a globalized, or even localized, world? Does it have anything to do with managing a bio-region? Did it take into account the sensibilities and traditions of the indigenous inhabitants? As the sweep and power of empires has shifted, the old blueprints are being reconsidered.

In this and upcoming stories, I will be exploring aspects of regional identity and concepts that are currently in play in Northwest culture and politics, including notions ranging from Ecotopia and Cascadia to Pugetopolis and the Salish Sea. These ideas sprout from attempts to consider new regional iterations and they form a yeasty part of Northwest debate and discussion, touching on economic development, sustainability, the centralization of power, the role of ecosystems, and the limits of culture and identity. All suggest that while we're not a blank slate, the people of the Northwest aren't yet finished with conceiving it, that that regionalism is dynamic and ongoing.

One manifestation of restlessness and rethinking is the quiet movement to rename of inland salt waters of the Pacific Northwest. While the people of the Puget Sound region are stewing over how to "save" the Sound and its life forms from massive and ongoing pollution, the terms of the conceptual game may be about to change.

While Puget Sound has a fairly fixed identity — the deep salt water cul de sac is something you can easily point to on a map — it is connected to a larger ecosystem. The issues of Puget Sound are not

limited to it, in other words. The Sound lies within the boundaries of Washington state, but it cannot be saved without understanding its connection to a greater system.

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Retired Western Washington University professor Bert Webber, a marine ecologist, has long been arguing that the inland sea of which Puget Sound is a part needs to be recognized with its own name. In May 2009, the Washington State Board of Geographic Names will take up whether or not to formally consider Webber's proposal to name this inland waterway the Salish Sea. It's Webber's idea, but not exactly new: he first proposed the name to the board in the 1980s, but they declined for various reasons to consider it at that time, among them that there were no "solid reasons" to do so. Webber was the only one pushing for it.

Webber's Salish Sea is aborder buster: it encompasses the waters roughly from Desolation Sound south to Georgia Strait and the Gulf Islands in British Columbia to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the San Juan Islands and Puget Sound in Washington. The Salish Sea wouldn't replace any existing name but rather act as an overlay on what Webber describes as an unnamed "ecological entity," the Puget Sound-Georgia Basin ecosystem.

It's an area with distinct differences from surrounding waters. Its salinity levels, the species that inhabit it, even the mix of trees on its shores contrast with those of the open ocean or more northern shores. It's a sea rimmed by Douglas fir, not Sitka spruce, fed by the fresh waters of the Fraser River and rivers that end in "ish" (Skokomish, Duwamish, Samish, Snohomish...), as well as home to the emblematic and threatened indicator Orcas of J, K and L pods.

While the sea is described ecologically, the renaming also has political purpose and implications. As Webber writes in his proposal to the Washington board, "One of the strongest arguments for naming our inland sea is to bring focus to the challenge of managing its rich resources so that

human impact does not destroy those things we value." The Salish Sea helps promote "trans-boundary" awareness between the U.S. and Canada. This larger view is often left out of Seattle and Olympia political discussions of cleaning up Puget Sound, which cannot be cleansed or managed without Canadian cooperation, especially since the Fraser is the Sound's major contributor of fresh water, according to Webber. Webber himself has studied marine life and issues on both sides of the border. He grew up in Canada and lives in Bellingham, a town where Americans are comfortable flying the Maple Leaf flag.

Twenty years ago, Webber was still ahead of his time in getting the ecosystem recognized, but in the years since he has smartly gained some allies for his concept. First among these are regional Indian tribes — the coast Salish recognized in the name itself. The boundaries of the sea are part of the homeland of the Salish speaking tribes and they have adopted the term in their discussion of the region and their management of fisheries resources.

Their history and use of the Salish Sea also helps anchor the concept to history and existing culture: These waters are where these coastal peoples have lived, traded, hunted, fished, gathered, warred, and potlached for millennia, and the natives of this region are distinguishable culturally and lingustically from others nearby. The Salish Sea, for example, in Webber's conception extends part way down the Strait of Juan de Fuca, but not to Neah Bay on Washington's Northwestern-most tip, territory of the non-Salish Makah tribe who are more closely linked with the coastal Indian groups farther north. The tribes were often shaped by the ecosystem, and vice versa, and are indelibly linked to it.

Last spring, the Chemanius tribe on Vancouver Island proposed re-naming Georgie Strait the Salish Sea and the BC government said they would look into it. When I checked last fall with BC Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, they said the idea had not advanced and seemed reluctant to say much about it, as if mere question about the change was a political hot potato. Such proposals often are: the removal of old names can really stir the pot. The subject of changing Mount

Rainier's name to Tahoma once caused great debate. Some Seattle citizens battled for years against changing Empire Way to Martin Luther King Way. Canadian press coverage indicates that changing the name of Georgia Strait could meet stiff opposition and some see it as mere symbolism and a waste of time.

But tribal views are taken much more seriously these days in both Canada and the U.S., and in fact the tribes have a great deal to say in Washington state about how the "cultural landscape" is managed. In Canada, the adopting of a second, native name for a place is not unprecedented: Haida Gwaii is an accepted name for the Queen Charlotte Islands, home of the Haida Indians. The procedures outlined (pdf) by the BC Geographical Names Office indicate that tribal input on proposed names is actively sought.

One good sign for Webber is that a group that discusses trans-border policy issues for the Salish peoples — the Coast Salish Gathering — uses the Salish Sea name and concept in their dialogue about trans-border resource and environmental policy issues. In other words, and this is important for entities like name boards, the terms Salish Sea is in current use.

So Webber's initiative has some momentum: tribal acceptance and a political cause that is current. The term is not only favored by many tribes, but also by greens and researchers. In February, a major policy conference in Seattle on the Puget Sound Georgia Basin ecosystem is themed: "The Future of the Salish Sea: A Call to Action." Donate $1,000 to People for Puget Sound and you can join the "Salish Sea Society." Another plus is that Webber doesn't actually propose to rename anything — favored names like Georgia, Puget, Juan de Fuca, San Juan — all stay in place. It's all addition, not subtraction.

A tricky part is that Washington is unlikely to approve the name change without the agreement of the Canadians, and vice versa. Therefore for the Salish Sea to have a shot, it will have to come

before both the Canadian and Washington boards simultaneously. Webber says on advice of the folks at the Department of Natural Resources (which runs the Washington state names board) he has submitted a brief proposal to the BC Geographic Names Office too and that someone from that office in Victoria plans to attend the May names board meeting in Washington.

The May meeting won't necessarily decide anything. The board can either undertake a more thorough study of the proposal, it can defer consideration (as it did in 1990), or it can kill the idea. If the board considers a name and then formally rejects it, it cannot be revived for consideration except in exceptional circumstances, which is highly unusual. The name would also have to be approved at the national level before all maps and charts would reflect the change.

So for Webber, greens and the tribes, a lot rides on the Salish Sea concept. As many activists know, a name can be everything in getting the public's attention on an issue, or to frame debate. Webber quotes Linnaeus writing in 1737 that "...if you do not know the names for things, your knowledge of them is lost." The late author, outdoorsman and environmental activist Harvey Manning, often said that coining the name Issaquah Alps in *Seattle Weekly* was key to preserving those gorgeous foothills at the edge of suburbia from rampant development. Manning, by the way, also tried to name the waters surrounding the San Juan Islands "Whulj," the Lushootseed word for "salt water," but happily the more poetic, alliterative Salish Sea has moved to the front of the line.

The Salish Sea doesn't assume a blank slate — it seeks to refine the map of the region to include an eco-entity that is fragmented in public consciousness now and honor the ancient inhabitants of the region. It names a definable feature, though not one that leaps out to the naked eye like an island or mountain. Nevertheless, Webber would argue that it is real and deserves recognition, and if he's right, a new name could have a profound, border-transcending impact on the way we look at ourselves.

It could also force government policy makers to scale the Puget Sound (or Georgia Strait or Strait of Juan de Fuca) clean-up in significant new ways. Victoria's sewage becomes our sewage, our oils spills become theirs. At this point in the battle to fix the mess we've made and save what's left of the waterways, sea life, and adjacent lands, we can't really afford to get the context part of the equation wrong again. The Salish Sea is an effort to get it right.

NOTE: *The Washington State Board of Geographic Names invites advance input on the Salish Sea proposal. Their contact information is: Washington State Board on Geographic Names, 1111 Washington St. SE, PO Box 47030, Olympia, WA 98504-7030, phone 360-902-1231, Fax 360-902-1778, Email bogn@dnr.wa.gov*

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