Why Restore the Deschutes Estuary?

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The Deschutes Estuary Restoration Team ("DERT") is a non-profit organization dedicated to the restoration and protection of the Deschutes Watershed, South Puget Sound and the Salish Sea. Our first objective is to restore the Deschutes Estuary. We believe, and studies have shown, that restoring the Deschutes estuary from its current incarnation as Capitol Lake would be environmentally and financially beneficial to the State and local community. It is time for Washington State to move beyond the "lake vs. estuary" debate and begin estuary restoration.

The Past…..

The history of Capitol Lake in Olympia reflects the time in which it was constructed. In the mid-20th century, damming the free-flowing Deschutes River to create Capitol Lake was viewed as an answer to what was considered an unsightly natural mudflat environment of downtown Olympia, and as a way to eliminate some of the odor caused by the lack of sanitary facilities from harbor-side residents and the state capitol campus. Damming the estuary eliminated what was known as the Little Hollywood area, a shanty village of "undesirables" built on the edge of the estuary, insinuating a class element in the decision to form a lake. At the time, creation of a lake was welcomed as a panacea.

It was also believed at the time that the Capitol dome, rising above the estuary, would be permanently reflected in a freshwater pool, a vision that was borne from the existing reflection in the estuarine waters.

Historically, the estuary thrived as a healthy ecological system as well as a water passageway for the community. The natural scouring action of the undammed river provided deep water areas and transported much of the annual sediment load further into the Budd Inlet creating shellfish habitat and building beaches. The marinas and port existed long before the dam was built, and deep draft ships sailed to the port and into what is now the lake.

When Capitol Lake was created, the Deschutes Estuary was polluted with human waste due to the lack of waste treatment facilities. That is no longer the case. Other free-flowing

estuaries in this area, including Nisqually Delta, Ellis Cove, Henderson Inlet, and Case Inlet are vibrant, clean environments, with thriving wildlife populations and few or none of the types of problems that encouraged the damming of the Deschutes Estuary.

The Present…

Capitol Lake is not a lake...it is a river attempting to reconnect with its estuary. It is not allowed to act as a naturally functioning system. As a result, Capitol Lake is choked with sediment from the Deschutes River. It is estimated that the river deposits 35,000 cubic yards of sediment each year into the dammed-up basin. Capitol Lake will continue to fill with sediment, eventually forming land around the Deschutes River as it meanders through its center.

DERT believes that many of the concerns raised by opponents of estuary restoration can be addressed through an open dialogue and a willingness to thoughtfully consider the issues and potential solutions. Long-term environmental and economic consequences of lake management need to be better understood.

DERT knows interim steps may be necessary to ease the transition back to an estuarine environment. For example, after the accumulation of a half-century's worth of sediment behind the dam, dredging will be needed prior to restoration to ensure that massive slugs of sediment don't simply move downstream. Management of this ecosystem would also be better in the hands of the Department of Natural Resources or another state resource management agency, instead of its current overseer, the Department of Enterprise Services (DES), the state agency in charge of facilities.

Estuaries are among the most productive habitats on earth and provide many key ecosystem functions like nurseries for juvenile salmon and many species of invertebrates crucial to the food web. If the dam is removed, river sediment would naturally flush into and build a productive Deschutes estuary. Outcomes include:

- Cooler water temperatures in an ever increasing warm water environment
- Substantial improvement in South Sound's Budd Inlet water quality
- Dramatic curtailment of noxious weeds and invasive species, i.e., milfoil, purple loosestrife and New Zealand Mud Snails
- Increased habitat for fish and wildlife
- A return to public access and recreational opportunities currently closed due to invasive species infestation.

Advocates for saving Capitol Lake have used the term "swamp" to represent an estuarine environment and continually refer to estuaries as stinking mud flats. We want to clarify the ecological distinction between a swamp and the historical natural estuary: a swamp is a "wetland featuring flooding of large areas of land by shallow bodies of water" (similar to the ecological role Capitol Lake plays today), while an estuary is a "partly enclosed coastal body of water with one or more rivers or streams flowing into it, and with a free connection to the open sea, forming a transition zone between river environments and ocean

environments, and are subject to both marine influences, such as tides, waves, and the influx of saline water; and river influences, such as flows of fresh water and sediment."

As of 2009, the Puget Sound Partnership has estimated over $222 million has been spent on capital expenses and $178 million on ongoing operating expenses relating to restoring and protecting Puget Sound and the watersheds that drain into it. Many of these dollars get spent on estuary restoration projects. Some of the restoration happens in small scattered locations around the Sound, as bulkheads are removed and buffers of native vegetation created. Some are large projects of a historic nature, such as the successful removal of the Elwha Dams and the Nisqually River delta dikes.

Our communities celebrate each of these as necessary, commendable and far sighted steps to recovering some of the 85% of our Puget Sound estuaries lost to development, dams, fills, and dikes over the past 150 years.

And yet the State Capitol is the home of a dammed-up estuary that is polluted, full of invasive species, closed to recreation and a public health hazard. This is an obvious public policy contradiction. How can environmental authorities and state legislators support this contradiction while encouraging, funding, and sometimes requiring restoration of other nearshore and estuarine areas?

The large expenditure of funds, while impressive, cannot succeed unless we are willing to tackle and correct obvious mistakes of the past, no matter how well intended they may have been at the time. What makes sense now is to respond to the needs of our current times by investing in our environmental and ecological health, and doing whatever we can to provide a clean environment for future generations.

The Future…

Removal of the 5th Avenue dam in Olympia holding back the Deschutes River from its estuary is a fundamental step towards a healthier Deschutes watershed, South Sound and Salish Sea. DERT is researching impacts to juvenile salmon and productive habitat caused by the dam. We are concerned about Clean Water Act violations. We are growing weary of the State of Washington's reluctance to fund restoration and recognize the inaction as a clear policy contradiction. DERT is currently researching the implications of this inaction and its resulting Clean Water Act violations.

While DERT is interested in an on-going dialogue with all parties directly involved in management of this water body, we are also clear in our intentions to restore the Deschutes estuary as soon as possible. We stand ready to work on restoration legislation. We are actively educating the public on the values of a restored Deschutes estuary. We want to see Deschutes estuary restoration move to the top of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project list. We want to access federal funding at 65% of the costs for Deschutes Estuary Restoration Project. We want to relieve the State of Washington taxpayer of the significant long-term financial burden to managing a "lake" that will

continually fill up with sediment, attract invasive species, degrade water quality and present risks to human health.

Most of the funding for estuary restoration will most likely come through federal appropriations. ***To our knowledge, there are no federal programs or funding available for preserving artificial lakes. With federal dollars, the state tax burden could be significantly lower if the estuary were to be restored. And of course, natural systems such as estuaries are basically maintenance free.***

We want to work collaboratively with the community, industry, the port, local, state and federal governments and the tribes to help bring about the vision embraced by former Governor Christine Gregoire in these words:

"[It is our task] to ensure that the Puget Sound forever will be a thriving natural system, with clean marine and freshwaters, healthy and abundant native species, natural shorelines and places for public enjoyment, and a vibrant economy that prospers in productive harmony with a healthy Sound."

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