

# SHORE STEWARDS NEWS

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## Shore Stewards Makes News!

*Editor's note: We celebrated a milestone in May – our 500<sup>th</sup> Island County household. We wanted to share our success with you and thank you for being part of our fast-growing family. For the occasion Dan Pedersen interviewed our first and 500<sup>th</sup> Shore Stewards couples.*

*We hope you'll enjoy getting to know these two couples who are passionate about our islands. Please pass their story along to anyone who might also be interested in becoming Shore Stewards.*

*This article was first published in June 7 edition of The South Whidbey Record. You may have seen it also in the 2008 Stanwood-Camano Visitors' Guide or The Whidbey News-Times.*

## Whidbey, Camano Couples Work to Shape Their Island Dreams

Wings spread wide, a large raptor glides silently past as we stand at the rim of the bluff. “That’s an immature Bald Eagle,” says a grinning Bruce Russell.

Red-winged Blackbirds flit from bush to bush. Looking out from this commanding spot northwest of Coupeville we face Canada, the San Juans, the blue Olympics. And the occasional pod of orcas.

“We’d been looking for a place on the water for some time,” said Russell of Freeland. “The day we found this lot the sunset was just magnificent. “That pretty much did it for Melissa and me.”

Tom and Vicky Eisenberg felt the same in 1974 when they found their dream place on Camano Island’s wildlife-rich Port Susan Bay. An avid outdoorsman, Tom Eisenberg is curious about every creature that walks, flies, crawls or swims. He relished the wild birds, fish and shellfish, and the nearby salmon stream, Kristoferson Creek.

Like many others drawn to the shores of Whidbey and Camano islands, it would be easy for both couples to say it can’t get much better than this. But they both know the truth lies deeper. It used to be better.

“We have a responsibility to take care of this,” Melissa Russell said. “Bruce and I are learning. We moved to Whidbey from Pierce County six years ago. This is an island and everything we do affects our drinking water and the marine waters around us. We have been living in the woods of south Whidbey. Now that we are moving to the shore it’s an entirely new climate and geology. We want to do things right – for the land, the beach, the bluff and everything that lives here.”



**Bruce and Melissa Russell stand at the rim of their 150-foot bluff overlooking West Beach, northwest of Coupeville. They are the 500<sup>th</sup> household in Island County to become Shore Stewards. Photos by Dan Pedersen**

For the Eisenbergs, love of the shore and nature has led to a variety of community boards and roles, but none that Tom Eisenberg loves more than Friends of Camano Island Parks (FOCIP), for whom he leads many tours of Camano Island's special places. "It just comes naturally," he said. "If you like to talk about your surroundings and your environment, it's hard to shut me up."

Vicky Eisenberg agreed, quick to point out that it's all toward a purpose. "We want to protect this for our grandchildren and the generations to come. If we don't do it, nobody will."

That mixture of passion and responsibility is what connects the Russells and the Eisenbergs, two couples on two islands who have never met. In 2003 the Eisenbergs became the first couple in Island County to join Shore Stewards, a new stewardship education program for shoreline owners. Last month the Russells became the 500<sup>th</sup> household to sign up.

Melissa Russell has been doing her homework. Since moving to Whidbey she completed training from Washington State University Extension as both a Waste Wise Volunteer and a Master Gardener, two programs that teach how to use the island's resources wisely. She and Bruce are looking forward to learning more about shoreline living at the annual, one-day Sound Waters University, held every February in Coupeville, and from WSU Beach Watchers.

Scott Chase, who coordinates Shore Stewards, says Puget Sound's salmon, birds and orcas are struggling in part because generations of homeowners made decisions about their beaches, bluffs, lawns and gardens with little understanding of the impact. "We lost precious habitat, damaged the food chain and polluted the waters," he said. "Now, property-by-property, we need to do things differently. The way to turn things around is not more laws but better everyday decisions by hundreds of thousands of people. That's the whole purpose of Shore Stewards – to help people find habitat-friendly solutions for their properties. We give people resources and a chance to learn."

For Bruce and Melissa Russell, and other shoreline residents like them, the program will gently guide them toward drought-resistant native landscaping, better care of their bluffs and septic systems, rainwater collection for their gardens, fewer chemicals, and greater reliance on composting and recycling. It will also make them better observers of nature.



**Vicky and Tom Eisenberg walk the beach at Iverson Spit, near their home on Camano Island's Triangle Cove. Tom Eisenberg had just finished leading visitors on a wildlife tour. In 2003 they were the first to enroll in Shore Stewards in Island County and in Washington.**

The Eisenbergs know from experience that property owners are often the first to notice troubling changes, and can be the catalyst to solutions. Years ago they became curious about a tough variety of grass that was growing in their bay, choking the fish and crab out of it. “My brother kept looking at it and asking, ‘What the heck is that grass out there? Did you ever see it before?’ I said, ‘No, but I’m starting to see it everywhere,’” Tom Eisenberg said.

That was the beginning of a 20-year successful fight against invasive Spartina, in which Eisenberg brought the plant to the county’s attention and organized neighboring property owners.

“We formed the Triangle Cove Task Force,” he said. “I went over to Driftwood Shores, the most heavily populated area, and spoke to their homeowners’ meeting. One old guy said there used to be sea-run cutthroat trout and crab. I asked how long ago that fell apart. He said, ‘About the time the grass showed up.’”

“That grass choked everything,” Vicky Eisenberg said. “That monoculture – it grows so thickly. Even in the mud there are no worms, no clams, no mollusks –nothing. But now, once again, we’ve got salmon going up the creek at the end of the bay.”

Property owners are getting smarter, Tom Eisenberg said. While it’s painful to watch more and more houses squeeze onto the remaining shoreline, he feels encouraged by the rising public awareness.

“I think the people of these islands, most of them, really want to do the right thing,” he said. “Programs like this – Shore Stewards – are educating people who live along the shore.”

Eisenberg says he is also greatly heartened by the volunteer spirit of the community.

“The number of people who come to these programs – geez, it amazes me. They are willing to support them – willing to do anything to help.”

## **Meehan Folds Up His Tent!**

*Don Meehan is the Director of WSU Extension in Island County. Without his vision and guidance, we would not have Shore Stewards and WSU Beach Watchers programs in most of the counties in Puget Sound. Below are his thoughts on his 26 years as Director of Island County’s WSU Extension office. Although Shore Stewards is not a typical volunteer program, you do try to voluntarily follow ten simple guidelines, so consider this message as also being directed to you.*

26 years ago I came to Island County from Okanogan County. My primary duties dealt with Gardening and Family Living, and of course, the administration of the office. At the time we had three other faculty working in Island County, one dealing with dairy, one with livestock, and one with 4H. They all were serving other counties and based from Skagit County. Before I had arrived the 4H agent had left and I quickly found myself immersed in overseeing the 4H program.

Life was actually simple back then. We had three people who worked in the office in Coupeville, Jan Coffman, Donna Hurlbert, and myself. We did not have computers back then. I am guessing we had about 100 volunteers on board, primarily 4H leaders and a handful of Master Gardeners. The only source of funds for our work was from the County. Our office was located in the old courthouse and we occupied the two hallway closets on each side of the entrance. Space was so tight there we met people in the hallway.

Our county program was quite traditional, typical of WSU Extension for the previous 65 years in Island County, dealing with agriculture, 4H, and Home Economics. I found myself out in the field a lot helping farmers and gardeners. Writing newspaper columns and conducting workshops. The population in the County was about 44,000 people back then. I think there was only one stop light in the whole county. We were rapidly changing from a rural area to a bedroom community for the mainland and an expanding military presence. We were one of the fastest growing counties in the state and everyone wanted to own a piece of shoreline.

Today our office supports close to 800 active volunteers. We have 10 staff members working in three different offices, one of which is the Admiralty Head Lighthouse, perhaps the most unique Extension office in the nation. Two thirds of our funds come from other sources than the County. We have a heavy emphasis on natural resources protection, as we should living is such a marvelous place. I spend most all of my time pushing paper, finding funds, dealing with attorneys and commissioners and bragging about our great programs to anyone who will listen. There are more traffic lights in the county than I have fingers. About 77,000 people call this place home and about 1% of them are presently on our WSU Team working to improve our community.

August 31<sup>st</sup> I will retire from 26 wonderful years of being part of our terrific island communities. I can say without hesitation that working in Island County has been the best of the best jobs one could have. It has been all about the people and this place. I am not going to recite all the things that one might think I have accomplished here, only to say what has been accomplished during my tenure really was not about me but about **you** who have given selflessly of yourself to our community to make it better. Frankly, it is a bit hard to leave the “*being in the middle*” of such wonderful things you all do. We have done good things together! I only hope you feel I have helped you somewhat in your quest to make a difference. Always know I always wanted to help you more.

The people who have done most of the work and who have made me look good were often the program coordinators. I can only thank them for their superior dedication; it is rivaled only by the efforts you volunteers have made. Thank you all!

What does the future hold for me? I am moving on to another job with WSU Extension. I find that all of the years I have worked for WSU, the team that has been assembling of late, from the new President through the Deans and District Directors, is the best I have ever seen. I will be joining them and continuing to look after Island County and another 38 counties as the Extension Program Director for Natural Resources. I am lucky the technology of today will allow me to work mostly from Whidbey Island. Again thank you all for being so wonderful to me and to our community.

- Don Meehan

*To view archived copies of past Island County Shore Stewards Newsletters, go to [www.shorestewards.org/island/newsletter/](http://www.shorestewards.org/island/newsletter/)*

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