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Allowing people and fish to flourish

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When the Bush administration announced a new approach for dams and salmon habitat, the usual battle lines applauded and denounced it with threats of lawsuits on the way. Some things never change.

Federal politics can affect significantly the support of some groups for salmon recovery, but the biggest influence on the success of saving fish in Puget Sound is public will.

The rhetoric and polarized perspectives that people read about in the news can confuse the issues and leads the public to ask a very basic question: What is happening to salmon and should we care anymore?

All of us living in the Puget Sound region know firsthand its stunning beauty, the unique role it plays in our culture and the abundant resources it provides. But the truth is that Puget Sound salmon -- and our region -- is in real trouble and the pressures continue to mount. If you look beyond the picture-postcard scenery you will find the Sound's health is rapidly declining.

We humans have been remarkably successful in shaping the environment for our prosperity. Poorly planned human actions continue to erode natural areas, threaten working farms and forests, increase pollution and decrease water supplies. It's projected that the Puget Sound region will add another million people by 2010 -- this is like adding a city the size of Portland. How will we accommodate this growth and save not just salmon but our quality of life?

It's ultimately up to us who live in, work in and love this region to meet the challenges to both the human and natural environments.

The good news is that most people in the Puget Sound area and other parts of the state are committed to protect and restore the land and waters that support our high quality of life.

Fortunately, leaders in the Puget Sound area created an initiative three years ago -- the Shared Strategy for Puget Sound -- to build on restoration efforts in local communities. Across the 14 major river basins that drain into Puget Sound, hundreds of people, tribes, local officials, scientists and planners are working on salmon recovery plans and improving regulations so people and fish can flourish. This is the first time ever in the history of the Endangered Species Act that a large community is developing its own plan to save a species from extinction.

Beginning this winter, the separate plans for each local river basin will come together as part of an overall salmon recovery plan for Puget Sound. It is vitally important that this work continue. We are on the threshold of proving that people and salmon can co-exist.

It's also important to see that restoring Puget Sound is about more than fish. Many of our region's most prominent companies could be headquartered anywhere on the globe. They are not dependent on a natural resource or specific condition to thrive. What they need are bright, talented employees who want a high quality of life. It's imperative we keep the Sound and our landscapes vital to attract and maintain these businesses. Salmon are the indicator of our success to prosper as people and have a healthy environment.

Federal policies may change, but improving and restoring Puget Sound and its watersheds will take a sustained commitment by people and communities. Shared Strategy partners are working with others on solutions and providing leadership to stay the course.

Over the next year we have an opportunity to come together in a focused effort to protect and restore the Puget Sound for people and fish. Saving salmon does matter -- now more than ever.

Jim Kramer is executive director of Shared Strategy for Puget Sound, based in Seattle.

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