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Tracking a Voracious Invasive Predator

Washington Sea Grant deploys a volunteer force to monitor Puget Sound beaches for European green crabs

Seattle – The European green crab, a small but highly efficient and adaptable predator, has colonized waters and threatened native shellfish from South Africa and Australia to America’s Pacific and Atlantic coasts. In 2012, the first known green crab colony in the inland Salish Sea was discovered near Victoria, sounding an alarm for Puget Sound’s valuable shellfish beds.

Washington Sea Grant (WSG) responded with a new, carefully targeted monitoring effort to catch infestations before they become problems. This summer, working with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and other partners, WSG deployed the first trained volunteers in its proactive European Green Crab Volunteer Monitoring Program. “Our goal,” says WSG marine water quality specialist Jeff Adams, who manages the project, “is to find a green crab population as early as possible to increase our chances of controlling its spread.”

Why the urgency?

The European green crab has been blamed for the collapse of the soft-shell clam industry in Maine and could affect clams, oysters, and Dungeness crab in Puget Sound. Green crabs were first found on the West Coast in 1989, in San Francisco Bay. They soon spread south to

Monterey Bay and north to Humboldt Bay, California, and Coos Bay, Oregon. They appeared in Washington's Willapa Bay and Grays Harbor and on the west coast of Vancouver Island in the late 1990s. They may find plenty of suitable habitat in Puget Sound.

How do volunteers know where to look?

“This program enhances a previous volunteer monitoring effort by taking advantage of University of Washington expertise to target the most suitable habitats for the invasive crab,” says Adams. UW scientists identify the beaches and bays where green crabs would most likely thrive. Volunteers set traps provided by the monitoring program along these shores at regular intervals, then collect them and assess the catches. They also systematically search the shoreline for molted green crab shells.

This summer, WSG trained 49 volunteers in the protocols for new program and gave them hands-on experience in citizen-science data collection. The volunteers deployed the first test traps in July, and have continued monitoring since. Among the sites they're watching are the Swinomish Channel, Dungeness River, West Bay in South Sound, and Saratoga Passage.

What if volunteers don't find any green crabs?

Whether or not the volunteer monitors find invasive crabs, they tally the other animals that are drawn to their traps. “Volunteers can contribute significantly to our overall understanding of common native species through this program,” says Adams. They record the numbers, sex ratios, and sizes of all the animals trapped, valuable data that's scarce even for common species such as shore crabs and sculpin. Adams recalls one trap, baited with mackerel at Whidbey Island's Deer Lagoon, that came up teeming with 500 shore crabs “packed shoulder to shoulder.”

The volunteers also help educate the public. The sight of monitors on the tideflats, baiting and gathering their traps, draws questions from beach walkers and other onlookers, who then learn more about the threat of green crabs and other invasive species. They may even become informal monitors themselves.

“You don't have to be a trained monitor to help,” says Adams. “We also want anyone who enjoys our beaches to learn about the invasive green crab and know how to report it. We encourage everyone to get involved, learn what a green crab looks like, and report what they find.”

For more information visit Washington Sea Grant's [website](#). To report a finding, contact Jeff Adams at jaws@uw.edu. This project has been funded wholly or in part by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under assistance agreement PC 00J29801 with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Environmental Protection Agency, nor does mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.

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