

Valuing the Columbia River Estuary: The Balancing Act

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The Northwest Region of the National Marine Fisheries Service conserves, protects, and manages Pacific salmon, groundfish, and marine mammals and their habitats under laws such as the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Our agency also works in the non-regulatory arena to provide technical assistance and facilitate conversations on how best to manage our trust resources.

Our Northwest Fisheries Science Center plays a key role in generating research that we rely upon, along with other best available science, to develop policy about how best to manage our trust resources and this important ecosystem. The targeted research being conducted by our Northwest Fisheries Science Center and others on fish use and ecosystem processes in the Columbia River estuary continues to be translated into on-the-ground restoration work and included in our “regulatory” documents NMFS produces (e.g., recovery plans, ESA Section 7 consultations).

Policy-related issues facing management of the Columbia River estuary include valuing the “ecosystem services¹” it provides and emphasizing the value of this estuary from the ecological and socio-economic standpoints in the context of the Columbia River Basin. This is increasingly important in the context of long-term environmental issues like climate change, continued actions like dredging, and the potential future development of liquefied natural gas plants, housing developments, and port development.

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Ecosystem services are goods and services are traditionally viewed as free benefits to society, or “public goods” – fish and wildlife habitat and diversity, watershed services, carbon storage, and scenic landscapes, for example. Lacking a formal market, these natural assets are traditionally absent from society’s balance sheet; their critical contributions are often overlooked in public, corporate, and individual decision-making.