

Guest Column: The Faces of Hospitality & Tourism

Like it or not, tourism is a top economic driver for San Juan County. Visitors “import” new dollars, which benefit small businesses, non-profits, and residents as these dollars circulate throughout our island communities. This series of columns will help put faces to this industry – innkeepers, tour captains, and other entrepreneurs who make our communities so unique and vibrant.

In honor of Earth Month, we wanted to highlight River Augenstein from Doe Bay Resort and Retreat on Orcas, well-known for its ecofriendly ethos. Originally from Indiana, River met his wife Shandra during college in California. They went on to manage an educational interdisciplinary retreat center, Far Horizons in the Sierra, before being asked to be managers at Far Horizon’s sister facility, Indralaya, on Orcas Island, in 2006. River and Shandra became Resident Managers at Doe Bay in 2010, and Shandra is now the Events Coordinator alongside River as General Manager. River’s favorite part of living on Orcas is being surrounded by nature and beauty everywhere you turn.

River is a semi-amateur naturalist who has been immersed in the study of nature and ecology all his life. He spends time in the forest, almost every day, and enjoys kayaking in Rosario Strait. River can often be found with daughter Julia out in Otter’s Cove at low tide, gently lifting rocks to look for marine invertebrates. Guests at Doe Bay can partake in a guided ecology hike with River, and depending on the season, the theme is anything from fungi and wildflowers to tidepooling. River loves sharing the beauty and peace of the islands with visitors and helping them relax and enjoy themselves. When asked why sustainable practices are important for businesses, he said, “This planet sustains all of us and we need to be stewards and change our habits of consumption and extraction or we will create ecological imbalances that affect our climate and ways of life.”

How does tourism benefit the Islands?

Having visitors from other places helps keep things interesting and we get to share our paradise with many who will appreciate and love the islands. Doe Bay is trying to build more international business, and River is excited to share the island with visitors from other countries. As the Islands continue to recover from the COVID pandemic and navigate the challenges presented by the ferry system, he thinks the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau is one the greatest resources for business owners in the Islands for the support provided.

River thinks the island community is pretty special, and it’s the interconnectedness of islanders that have helped us through uncharted waters before and will get us through again.