

### Mythbusting Part 3: The Who, What, Why, and How of the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau

True or False: the Visitors Bureau's mission centers solely on marketing business growth. False!

This four-part, quarterly series will dispel this and other myths by going behind the scenes and uncovering the intricacies of our day-to-day work, differentiating us from the notable Chambers of Commerce, and diving into our involvement with the San Juan Islands Destination Management Plan.

The Visitors Bureau, like many destination marketing and management organizations (DMMOs) in desirable vacation spots throughout the world, acknowledges the need to put resources towards reducing visitor impacts. As a result, over the past 20 years we have evolved from a destination marketing organization to focusing more time and resources on destination management and stewardship. We know that our quality of life and economy depend on our beautiful environment, and we work hard to balance economic development with stewardship ethics.

We agree that *"We have to be more careful with an Island."* This is why the Visitors Bureau has had a Stewardship Manager on staff since 2004. We created and promoted a "Leave Only Footprints" message in our brochure and on our website in 2004 with a dozen island organizations. We replaced it with the County's adopted "Leave No Trace" message in 2015 and continue to adapt messaging as conditions change.

We recognize that tourism impacts many island organizations' missions, and as a result, we are a member of several groups, including the Stewardship Network of the San Juans and the Ag Guild. As Lincoln Bormann from the County Conservation Land Bank commented, "The San Juan Islands are a magnet for people looking for unusual and magical experiences and we've seen a dramatic increase in visitors since the beginning of the COVID era. I feel like the Visitor's Bureau has really stepped up to help people who come here to better understand what defines the islands – predominantly our natural heritage, and to encourage them to care about this place just as much as do the people who live here. This is in no small way due to your tireless individual efforts to reach out to conservation land managers and environmental organizations to get a sense of what their challenges are, and how we all might better address them."

From conversations with these partners, we add, remove, or refresh website content to reflect local stewardship principles. Identifying common grievances on public lands gave rise to the San Juan Islands Pledge, which visitors are encouraged to sign before or during their visit. We've also created a stewardship "hub" known as "Love it Like a Local" that incorporates Leave No Trace principles and includes other webpages like Be Whale Wise, How You Can Help the Southern Resident Orcas, Responsible Wildlife Watching, and Green Getaways.

One focus of our spring campaign is on volunteer vacations and alternative spring breaks. Visitors to the San Juan Islands, like most travelers, are seeking new and unusual experiences. A volunteer vacation doubles that by giving back to the communities that welcome them. Efforts in the San Juans are often centered on beach and road cleanups – a golden opportunity to get locals' and visitors' hands dirty and their hearts invested in taking care of the Islands. As writer Andrea Zimmerman said when she came for the spring cleanup at Moran State Park a few years ago, "...having a first-hand conversation allowed me to both confirm and shatter any illusions I may have had coming in. I got the real story and SPOILER ALERT: It's a good one; the folks who call Orcas home love their island and are fiercely protective of it." Encouraging this kind of connection turns visitors into stewards — ones who will pass the message along after they return home.

As we start work on recommended actions from the draft San Juan Islands Destination Management Plan, we'll be expanding stewardship messaging to visitors and tour operators, not only through our website and printed materials but also potentially through new signage and social marketing campaigns.

Part 4 coming in December!