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Guest Column: Opportunity to protect Oregon's coastal habitats

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The Oregon Coast rocks. More than 41% of the Oregon's coastline is rocky habitat - but little of it is protected.

Our state leaders did a great job of providing public access to the coast with the Oregon Beach Bill. But this designation does not protect the rich diversity of fish and wildlife habitat along our rocky shores - lush tide pools, nearshore reefs, underwater kelp forests, and offshore rocks and islands.

Some of Oregon's most spectacular rocky habitats are right here in Lincoln County - Rocky Creek State Park, Cape Foulweather, Yaquina Head, Cape Perpetua - and more. Here breakers crash into cliffs and rocky shorelines, creating spectacular displays during fall and winter storms. Colonies of seabirds nest in the cliffs each spring as gray whales swim below on their

northward migration. Pelicans swoop over kelp beds in the summer, and seals and their pups rest on offshore rocks. These sites, and many like them, capture the wild spirit of the Oregon Coast.

Cape Foulweather is one of my favorite Rocky Habitat sites, and I visit it frequently. I park my car on Otter Crest Loop and walk the bike path up to the scenic lookout and back, about a two-mile stretch. The path skirts 500-foot cliffs and leads through a forest of Sitka Spruce and Western Hemlock.

I'm rarely alone. Cars driving the loop often pull over to take in the view. Birders patiently search for seabirds on the cliffs and offshore rocks. Photographers angle to capture the best shot. One photographer I met on a sunny afternoon told me this was his second trip to the Cape in a week. "Be sure to come back tomorrow," I replied, "because a storm is coming in and the Cape and the ocean are sure to be in a very different mood." The next week, I met an elderly gentleman coming up the hill to the scenic viewpoint as I was coming down. "Do you live nearby?" I asked him. "Nope," he replied. "I drive over from Siletz. I like this walk."

For the first time in 25 years the state of Oregon has provided the opportunity for individuals and community groups to submit proposals requesting rocky habitat designations for special places like Cape Foulweather -- places that both visitors and coastal residents treasure.

What can be designated? First, rocky intertidal zones from extreme high water to extreme low water. Second, rocky upland from the extreme high-water line to the vegetation line or, in unvegetated areas, to the sixteen-foot elevation mark. And third, offshore rocks and reefs.

Community groups may submit proposals requesting that a rocky habitat site be designated as a marine education area, a marine research area, or a marine conservation area.

A marine education area, also known as a marine garden, is for public enjoyment. Easily accessible, these sites are intended to protect rocky habitat resources so that the public can learn about tide-pool ecology and the creatures that inhabit them.

A marine research area is an intact ecosystem. The goal of this designation is to support scientific research and monitoring while maintaining the rocky habitat in its natural state. At these sites, scientists will be able to study the impact of climate change on ocean resources, including fish and invertebrate species our fishing economy depends on.

A marine conservation area has high ecological value. The goal of this designation is to conserve the natural ecosystem by limiting adverse impacts to habitat and wildlife.

All of these designations will help achieve Oregon's Nearshore Strategy goal to protect rocky habitat resources in order to provide "long-term ecological, economic, and social benefits for current and future generations of Oregonians."

You can't beat that!

The Audubon Society of Lincoln City, invites you to support our efforts to conserve Oregon's iconic rocky habitats. By working together to propose new protective designations, we can create more awareness of rocky habitats and support important research to better understand our changing ocean -- all the while keeping these amazing areas safe and open to the public.

For more information, check out our website (<http://www.lincolncityaudubon.org>) and Facebook pages. We will keep you informed about the sites - one in Tillamook County and one in Lincoln County - we will be proposing for conservation area designation.

Steve Griffiths,

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Society of Lincoln City

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

