

## Sophia Cassam

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**From:** Shaun Hubbard <shaunalice@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Friday, October 1, 2021 2:11 PM  
**To:** Sophia Cassam; Christine Minney; Cindy Wolf; Jamie Stephens  
**Subject:** Letter in Support of Protection for Garry Oak Trees  
**Attachments:** SJ\_County\_Garry\_Oak\_Protection\_Hubbard\_Letter\_Oct1\_2021.docx

October 1, 2021

**San Juan County Council**

c/o Sophia Cassam [sophiac@sanjuanco.com](mailto:sophiac@sanjuanco.com)

County Council District 1: Christine Minney [christinem@sanjuanco.com](mailto:christinem@sanjuanco.com)

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**Dear Council Members,**

As San Juan County considers new tree protection standards for our islands, I would like to add my voice advocating for more formal, rigorous and enforceable protection of the Garry oak tree, *Quercus garryana* (also known as “Oregon White Oak”, but mostly by Oregonians).

My partner and I have happily spent the past 19 years working to restore and manage the Garry oak habitat on our property on Cady Mountain on San Juan Island, having first learned about its uniqueness and scarcity from the knowledgeable folks at the San Juan County Land Bank, San Juan Preservation Trust, Kwiaht, and the Garry Oak Ecosystem Recovery Team on Vancouver Island, Canada.

What inspired us to take on this project was learning that the Garry oak is our region’s only native oak, its range is a tiny coastal sliver that runs from south Vancouver Island to central California, and on average less than 3% of its original habitat remains.

Habitat loss is primarily a result of European settlers who suppressed fires (allowing the more fast-growing Douglas fir to advance and shade out the oaks), altered land use, and introduced non-native species and heavy grazing.<sup>1</sup>

The Garry oak is not a lone oak, it is home to hundreds of species of plants and wildlife, making its habitat high in biological diversity. The more diverse a habitat, the better its chances of survival, especially with increasing global warming. Garry oaks and their ecosystems evolved when the climate was warmer, about 10,000 years ago. They are resilient to, and actually thrive in, fire regimes and they are more adapted to a warmer climate with longer summer droughts than is the Douglas fir. It is important to protect a species – and all species within its ecosystem – which we know is better suited to the climate-changing future of our islands.<sup>2</sup>

We are not the first humans to realize the importance of the Garry oak tree. The oaks were valued by the indigenous people in our region as habitat for hunting and for medicinal and edible plant cultivation and gathering. The First People regularly used fire to keep the oak woodlands and prairies open for deer hunting and for growing the camas lily, an important food staple. The Nisqually Tribe and the University of Washington have teamed up to study the oak habitat, on Nisqually tribal land, with cultural restoration in mind. Other studies have looked at how partner plant and wildlife species are affected by the altered and fragmented Garry oak

ecosystem, but this particular study takes the importance of the history of human and oak interaction into account.<sup>3</sup>

The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife has designated the Garry oak woodlands as a “Priority Habitat”. Here is an excerpt from their Management Recommendations:

*“Oregon white oak (Quercus garryana) is Washington's only native oak. Although limited and declining, oaks and their associated floras comprise distinct woodland ecosystems. The various plant communities and stand age mixtures within oak forests provide valuable habitat that contributes to wildlife diversity statewide. In conjunction with other forest types, oak woodlands provide a mix of feeding, resting, and breeding habitat for many wildlife species. More than 200 vertebrate and a profusion of invertebrate species use Washington's oak woodlands. Some species occur in especially high densities, whereas others are not typically found in Washington. Oaks provide habitat for species that are state listed as Sensitive, Threatened, Endangered, or candidates for these listings.”*

Management recommendations for Garry oak woodlands include:

- *Do not cut Oregon white oak woodlands except for habitat enhancement.*
- *Allow only early spring, low-impact cattle grazing.*
- *Thin encroaching conifers in oak woodlands west of the Cascades*
- *Retain large, dominant oaks and standing dead and dying trees.*
- *Create snags when thinning oaks or conifers instead of removing trees.*
- *Leave fallen trees, limbs, and leaf litter for foraging, nesting, and denning sites.*
- *Retain contiguous aerial pathways.*
- *Conduct prescribed burns where appropriate.*<sup>4</sup>

The San Juan Islands share the same climate zone, the same bedrock, and the same species of oak trees with the Southern Salish Sea region of British Columbia, Canada. Our islands are actually the peaks of a submerged mountain range that connects Vancouver Island with the mainland – only a strip of water and a dotted boundary line separate us.<sup>5</sup> The Canadian government has listed nearly 100 species under the Species at Risk Act (the Canadian version of our Endangered Species Act) associated with the Garry oak habitat and has issued a *Recovery Strategy for Garry Oak and Associated Ecosystems and their Associated Species at Risk in Canada: 2001-2006*.

Citing in their report the need for a recovery plan:

*“Garry oak (Quercus garryana) ecosystems, and the complex of closely related coastal bluff, maritime meadow, vernal pool, grassland, rock outcrop, and transitional forest ecosystems of southwest British Columbia, are important for their great beauty and their biological diversity. The ecosystems have provided the foundation for physical, aesthetic, and spiritual sustenance for human occupants since earliest times. The ecosystems are also home to an exceptional diversity of non-human organisms. The number of species that use Garry oak habitats rivals that of virtually any other ecosystem in Canada. The biological and other*

*values vested in Garry oak ecosystems were treasured by early First Peoples and European settlers, and continue to be cherished by modern-day residents and visitors alike.”*<sup>6</sup>

Our island oaks share the same story.

Here are some examples of protective measures which other communities in our region have enacted for the Garry oak:

**Victoria, BC** has a Tree Protection Bylaw, as of July 2021, which applies to trees on private property. The Garry oak is considered a “protected tree” in Victoria and fines for harming a protected tree can be \$10,000 CD.

*“...it is a violation of this Bylaw to cut, prune, or remove a protected tree or the limb of a protected tree before applying for a tree permit if the tree or limb is not in imminent danger of failing as described in subsection.”*

<https://www.victoria.ca/assets/Departments/Legislative~Services/Documents/21-035%20Tree%20Protection%20Bylaw.pdf>

**Thurston County**’s Critical Area’s Ordinance includes an “Oregon White Oak and Inspection Policy” which prohibits building within 5 feet of the canopy dripline of a Garry oak tree.

<https://www.thurstoncountywa.gov/planning/planningdocuments/2020-prairie-flyer-oregon-white-oak.pdf>

**Oak Bay, BC** has a hefty 28-page “Bylaws to Regulate the Cutting and Protection of Trees” in which Garry oaks are designated as “Protected Trees” and the minimum fine for damaging, cutting or pruning an oak is \$2,500 CD. (Not enough in my opinion, especially for a tree for which your community is named.)

<https://oakbay.civicweb.net/document/42544/Tree%20Protection%20Bylaw%204742%20Final.pdf?handle=9DE75791B7424031A4B14277754BB43B>

**Lakewood** (south of Tacoma) citizens convinced officials to revise their tree cutting policies for the preservation of Garry oaks, with an amendment to the city’s 2022 Comprehensive Plan protecting oaks in industrial zones.

<https://www.tahomaaudubon.org/committee>

**Tacoma**’s Critical Area Protection Ordinance protects Garry oaks by incorporating Washington State’s Priority Habitat designation and recommendations, prohibiting removal of remaining oak stands.

<https://www.thenewstribune.com/outdoors/article172374247.html>

**Oak Harbor** on Whidbey Island has a city ordinance protecting its namesake oak:

*“No person shall remove, top, damage, destroy, break, injure, mutilate or kill any Garry oak tree or permit any animal under his control to do so, or allow ivy or other invasive vines to takeover any Garry oak tree, or to permit any toxic chemicals to seep, drain or empty onto or about any Garry oak tree, except as allowed by this chapter.”*

<https://www.codepublishing.com/WA/OakHarbor/html/OakHarbor20/OakHarbor2016.html>

Whereas San Juan County has included recommended protection for the Garry oaks in the 2003 Unified Development Code<sup>7</sup>, I urge the County to consider more robust protections. This is more than just about a tree – when you say “Garry oak tree” you are actually including hundreds of insects, birds, bugs, reptiles, mammals and other plant life in the picture. This biodiversity and natural beauty are exactly what we island people need to protect as we plan and prepare for the ecological changes that we know are coming.

Thank you for your serious consideration of this matter. Go, Oaks!

Sincerely,  
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#### **Footnotes**

1. U.S. Fire Service Fire Effects Information System  
<https://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/tree/quegar/all.html>
2. Woodland Fish and Wildlife Group: *Oregon White Oak and Wildlife. Tools for Family Forestland Owners*  
<https://knowyourforest.org/sites/default/files/documents/Oregon%20White%20Oak%20and%20Wildlife.pdf>
3. U.S. Department of Agriculture: *Nisqually Garry Oak Habitat: Cultural and Ecological Considerations for Successful Restoration in the Nisqually Tribal Reservation*  
<https://portal.nifa.usda.gov/web/crisprojectpages/1009084-nisqually-garry-oak-habitat-cultural-and-ecological-considerations-for-successful-restoration-in-the-nisqually-tribal-reservation.html>
4. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. *Management Recommendations for Washington's Priority Habitats: Oregon White Oak Woodlands*  
<https://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/00030>
5. *The Geology of the San Juan Islands* by Roy Davidson McLellan  
[https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/geology/publications/state/wa/uw-1927-2/index.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/geology/publications/state/wa/uw-1927-2/index.htm)

6. Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team: *Recovery Strategy for Garry Oak and Associated Ecosystems and their Associated Species at Risk in Canada: 2001-2006.*

[https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/invertebrates/island\\_marble\\_butterfly/pdfs/RSDrFeb02.pdf](https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/invertebrates/island_marble_butterfly/pdfs/RSDrFeb02.pdf)

7. San Juan County, Washington: *“Additional Protection Recommendations for Habitats of Local Importance Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas, SJCC 18.30.160, Table 3.12.”*

<https://www.sanjuanco.com/DocumentCenter/View/1112/Additional-Protection-Recommendations-for-Habitats-of-Local-Importance>

### **Additional reading and viewing about Garry oaks trees and their friends:**

The Counter: *“Can a whiskey save Washington’s only native oak tree species?”*

<https://thecounter.org/washington-endangered-garry-oak-tree-species-whiskey/>

San Juan Island National Historical Park: *Garry Oak*

<https://www.nps.gov/sajh/learn/nature/garry-oak-trees.htm>

Video: San Juan Preservation Trust: *“What’s So Great About Garry Oaks?”*

<https://sjpt.org/see-garry-oak-directors-cut/>

San Juan Preservation Trust’s Western Bluebird Reintroduction Project

[https://sjpt.org/news/western\\_bluebird/](https://sjpt.org/news/western_bluebird/)

*“The Western bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*) was formerly common in grasslands and savannas of southwestern British Columbia and western Washington, including Vancouver Island and the San Juan Islands. Seasonal populations of the migratory songbird declined over the last 50 years due, in large part, to loss of its Garry oak savanna habitat. Since 2007, the Preservation Trust has been involved in a regional effort to reintroduce self-sustaining populations of Western bluebirds to their northern range.”*