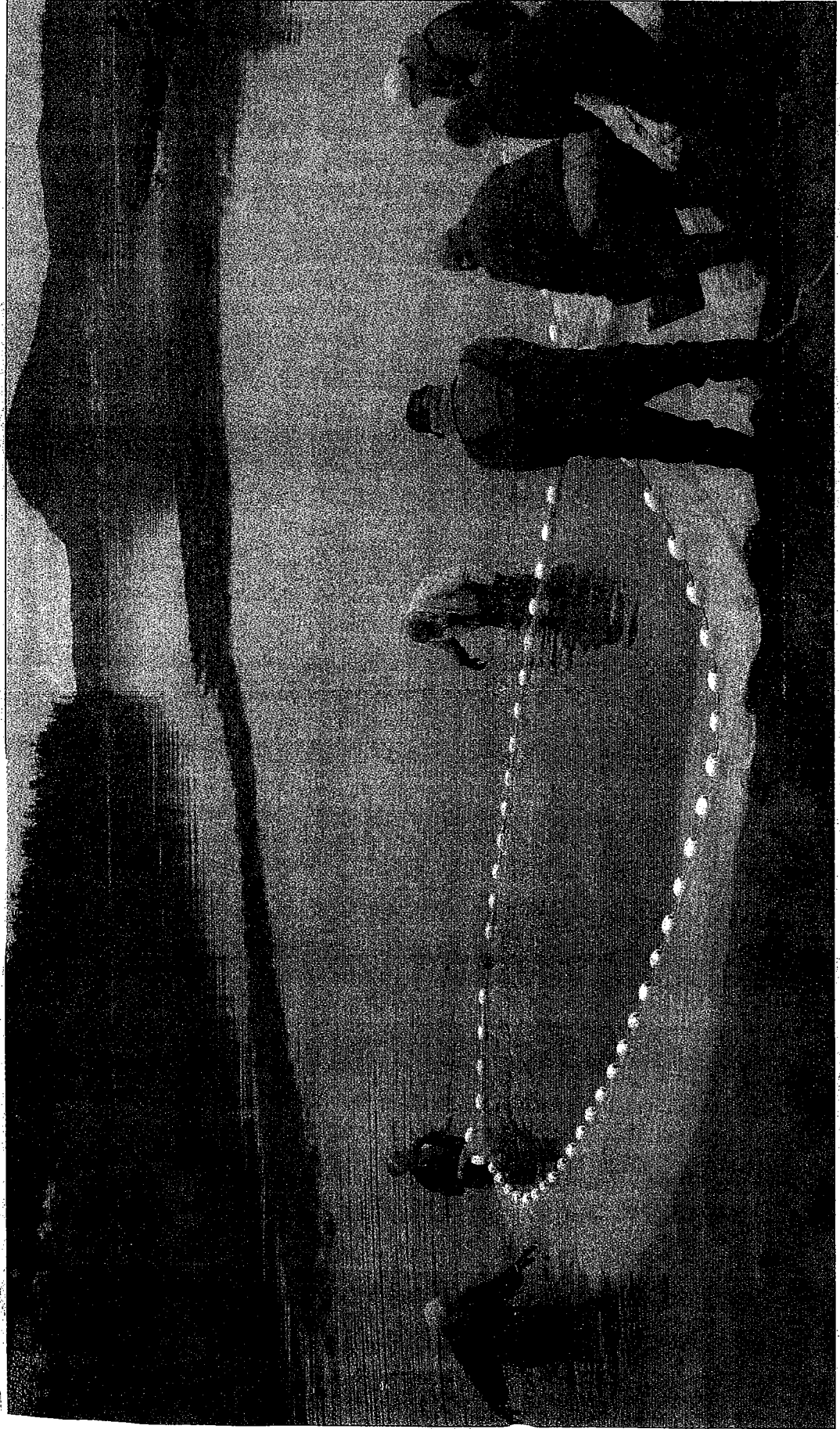


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Jessie Stensland / Whidbey News-Times

Beach Watchers and Eric Beamer from Skagit River Systems Cooperative use a seine net to catch and count fish at Ala Spit on North Whidbey.

Feb. 21, 2007

Whidbey News-Times

article:

Eroding spit raises concerns

Seen as threat to salmon, recreation

By JESSIE STENS LAND
Staff reporter

Ala Spit on the north end of Whidbey Island is in danger of becoming Ala Island.

A conglomeration of scientists, volunteers and government employees are working on a project aimed at stopping erosion at the small waterfront park owned by Island County. The first step is to figure out what kind of critters are around the sandspit, which is a narrow point of land jutting out into the water.

"The local community and local government all want to know what's there," said Eric Beamer, the research director for Skagit River Systems Cooperative, which is the fisheries management for two Skagit County tribes.

Accordingly, Beamer, county staff and volunteers with WSU / Island County Beach Watchers are testing the waters, so to speak. Last week, they seined the waters in spots all around the spit to catch and count the fish that live there. A seine is a fishing net that hangs vertically in the water.

They will repeat the process 10 times over four months to create a snapshot of underwater life at Ala Spit.

The data will help guide the restoration effort. The problem at the spit, Beamer said, could

be that manmade structures — including a jetty and bulkheads — on the beach are causing unnatural erosion at the neck of the formation.

"They are likely causing changes in how sediment is depositing on the shoreline," he said.

On the other hand, county officials say the erosion could be caused by other waterfront changes, perhaps as far away as Skagit County, that alter the current. Or it could be a natural process.

If left unchecked, the spit will someday turn into an island and may eventually be washed away completely. This problem wouldn't be popular with the many anglers, shellfish hunters and beachcombers who frequent the popular park.

Perhaps more importantly, the

degradation of Ala Spit is bad for salmon. The protected inner waters of the spit are very important salmon habitat.

"It makes a very good nursery area for juvenile salmon and other predatory fish," Beamer said.

The restoration project at Ala Spit is funded by the county from a \$150,000 Salmon Recovery Funding Board grant administered through the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation. The lead contractor is Herrera Environmental Consultants. Skagit River Systems Cooperative is a subcontractor.

Last Tuesday, Beamer and the Beach Watchers began the cold, wet work.

Beamer and Beach Watcher Bob Buck waded out into the water with the seine net. They

brought the two ends of the net together, catching dozens of tiny fish, and dumped them into the bucket with the help of a large crew of Beach Watcher volunteers.

Each little fishie was measured and recorded.

Beamer said he doesn't expect baby salmon and many other interesting kinds of fish to show up until later in the year, but they did catch six different species on the first day out. They are stickleback, starry flounder, buffalo sculpin, pacific staghorn sculpin, sand lance and shiner perch.

County officials say they won't know what the best way to fix the erosion problem will be until all the studying is complete, probably in May of 2008.