ALL TOGETHER NOW

HOW ONE MAN INSPIRED A MOVEMENT OF DIVERS THAT TRANSFORMED A SAND PATCH INTO A BELOVED SEATTLE-AREA UNDERWATER PARK
Life teems everywhere: abundant, vibrant and gloriously defiant of the gun-metal-gray surface on the area’s 226 cloudy days each year.

The popular Edmonds Underwater Park, 17 miles north of Seattle’s downtown, might just be sand, rocks and an old shingle mill’s cedar bark and debris, if not for one man. For 43 years, Bruce Higgins has led teams that sculpted this patch of ocean floor and submerged glacial moraine into a dive wonderland. Today the 27-acre site and marine sanctuary boasts 2.5 miles of trails, populated by some of the region’s densest marine life.

Since 1970, the EUP has sprawled outward from the open-air park of Brackett’s Landing North, beside the Edmonds-Kingston Ferry Terminal. “The underwater park was originally a commercial site,” Higgins recalls. “When I first dove there, it had an anchor for a log boom plus a couple of shopping carts. At first we were jockeying that stuff around. But then we started putting in features that made sense for the parks department, like a jungle gym. Everybody knows what a jungle gym is—it’s not a hard sell!”

That approach appealed to Tro Rex Ota, a PADI dive instructor who became a park steward. “Initially I’d been interested in helping out at the Seattle Aquarium, but I wanted something more hands-on and community-oriented.” She took the plunge at EUP around 18 months ago and has done almost 300 descents, primarily building features and rockfish habitats.

“I get to observe different animals and interactions each time. Not only do I see every single part of the park, but I get to watch firsthand how fast and abundantly life moves in when we make changes,” Ota says. “We were connecting a section of trail and had put up some structure, and within the week, what had been a relatively uninhabited patch was now teeming with perch and juvenile rockfish and hermit crabs. It’s magical!”

Shaylin Higgins—a park steward who is Bruce Higgins’ niece—got involved in 2016. “The natural topography is sand by weekend for more than four decades, all in an understated Pacific Northwest way. “Let’s do stuff instead of yak about it,” says the park’s long-time impresario. “No one needs to sit in a lab and talk about how to place a buoy. Get on a boat, put the shackles together, throw the anchor over the side and do it! Then you’ll understand what it’s all about!”

Bruce Higgins dives the Edmonds Underwater Park year-round, rain or shine, leading a dedicated team of volunteers who build and maintain the park’s ever-expanding features.

**NEED TO KNOW**

**WHEN TO GO**
Brackett’s Landing North park is open for shore diving 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. May to September and 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. October to April. It has restrooms, a dry-changing area, a shower and a foot-wash station. Park steward dives are 9 a.m. to noon every Saturday and Sunday.

**DIVE CONDITIONS**
Water temps climb from 44°F in February and March to 58°F from July to September. Locals prefer well-fitting 7/7 mm wetsuits or drysuits with fleece undergarments. The 27-acre park has a max depth of 40 feet and a very shallow slope. Navigation is done by compass and naturally by using the park’s features.

**OPERATOR**
For a tour of the park or to purchase a map, contact Underwater Sports’ Edmonds shop at underwatersports.com.
“Bruce is a force of nature, and his commitment is contagious. It is never about himself...which is why we are happy to help.”
The nutrient-rich inland waters of Puget Sound at Edmonds Underwater Park support a riot of subaquatic flora and fauna.

EYE SPY

Top, from left: A male red rock crab protects a small female while she is molting before they mate; golden eggs of the whitespotted greenling reveal tiny eyes; a spotted ratfish glides through the water; a black-eyed hermit crab carries its home on its back; the purple ochre sea star is a keystone species.

Center, from left: Red rock crabs feed on the carcass of a dead lingcod; the lion’s mane jellyfish is one of the largest jellyfish species in the world; lingcod are top predators of the park; hooded nudibranchs filter-feed in eelgrass; a sailfin sculpin comes out at night.

Bottom, from left: A burrowing green anemone sits in the sand; a cabezon rests atop eggs; a predatory moon snail has drilled a hole through this butter clam’s shell; the giant plumose anemone looks like a flower but is a voracious predator; a white-lined dirona nudibranch on red algae.
which can wind divers new to the EUP. But the main safety consideration is avoiding the Edmonds Ferry Terminal. Volunteers have made that easy, building trails and enticing features leading north, away from it.

Expect a workout if you rock up for a park steward dive—they’re not unoffi - cial tours. Volunteers lug lift equipment and materials down to the shore, in addition to their own kit. Afterward they must kick all the gear back to the beach and re-verse that odyssey. “Those rock piles, rail ties, culvert pipes, cement blocks and ropeways don’t get there by themselves,” Schacher says. “I dive a drysuit, but lots of times my undergarments get wet. It’s not because I have a leak; it’s because I work so hard that I sweat!”

Fancy a descent that burns fewer cal - ories? Schacher recommends exploring the EUP as the sun descends. “All the structures make night diving special, and the trails make navigation easier.” (A per - mit is required for night diving but is easi - ly obtained from the city of Edmonds.)

As a dive volunteer at Edmonds Underwater Park for the past 43 years, Bruce Higgins has overseen numerous projects, such as helping to restore the site’s native kelp beds.

Eventually Higgins shifted into a dive- safety officer role for the Great Lakes Research Division. He went on to grad school at Oregon State in the ocean en - gineering department.

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structural components work and roped him in. Tragically, as the planning moved forward, the underwater park had a couple of fatalities, so the mayor formed a safety committee.

Dive training and gear were still in their nascent stages, Higgins explains. Fortunately he knew how to help make diving in the area safer—and had willing hands to start making that happen. Together they strung buoys to better separate boaters from divers, and helped install rest floats funded by the scuba community.

Since then, hundreds have joined his push to improve the park. They’ve taken a variety of approaches: structures that attract marine life, mitigation reefs that restore habitat, and diver reefs for the sheer joy of exploration. “One size doesn’t fit all,” he says. “It’s kinda like when you go to an art museum and say, ‘I don’t like that photo or painting, but I like this one.’ We’ve tried to do a wide range of stuff.”

Higgins has taken a hyper-focused—some might even say “Zen hermit”—approach to the EUP. “I’m getting worse,” the recent retiree laughs. “I dive the park—every day and pretty much only dive the park, aside from an annual trip to Salt Creek Recreation Area in Port Angeles,” 85 miles northwest of Seattle.

“In 2020, I did the math and discovered I only made 351 dives in the park. I got aced out for almost two weeks. My truck didn’t have snow tires on it, so I couldn’t drive anywhere. But I did walk to the park so I could see what was going on!”

Once he finally got underwater, he discovered that a 40-foot tree had whooshed down the Snohomish River, its giant root ball wiping out one of the buoys. That type of damage is routine in the Pacific Northwest—he’s also seen boats and their detached equipment land in the EUP during rough storms. Higgins and his team return the gear and overlook emergency encroachments on the marine sanctuary, where possible. “I never want to punish people who are trying to be safe and do the right thing,” he says. “Plus, we already have a 500-pound Danforth anchor. We don’t need two!”

In 2007, the city renamed the path system the “Bruce Higgins Underwater Trails” to honor the work of the man it acknowledged as the “main force behind the ever-expanding list of submerged features and trails.”

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