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Creek restoration--the water's half-full and rising

by Susan Schwartz

The dams are about to come down on Alameda Creek and Dimond Creek.

Endangered coho salmon now have a way to swim past a dam on Lagunitas Creek in Marin. Martinez is converting downtown parking lots into green floodway for Alhambra Creek. In San Francisco, on Mission Creek, 17 acres of wetlands and related habitat will be preserved and restored in the midst of the posh Mission Bay redevelopment.

Around the Bay, dozens of creek-restoration groups and scores of school classes are working on hundreds of creek-restoration projects, from removing litter to removing culverts. Conservation corps employing disadvantaged youth provide more strong hands. Collectively, they are restoring significant amounts of habitat. They are also providing priceless urban oases, and education in the value of nature.

Money is (relatively) flush; grants are available from a few hundred to a few hundred thousand dollars, and passage this year of Propositions 12 and 13 promises \$35 million for stream restoration in coming years. Central Coast steelhead, listed as threatened in 1997 yet still struggling up Bay tributaries from San Jose's Guadalupe River to Marin's Corte Madera Creek, provide potent symbolism and leverage for change.

Individual projects are usually quite local and may take years or decades. But creek restoration, probably the most hands-on of environmental efforts, is bit by bit significantly improving both the human and natural environments of the Bay Area.

Alameda Creek-an emblematic success

If all goes according to plan, within a year the East Bay Regional Park District will remove two small concrete dams from Alameda Creek in Sunol Regional Wilderness to provide cooler water for rainbow trout and, eventually, migrating steelhead and salmon. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission has promised to remove or modify two more small dams.

Credit goes to the Alameda Creek Alliance, founded in 1997 by Jeff Miller, an activist fresh from work on Headwaters Forest. For three years the group has astutely publicized the drama of steelhead hopelessly fighting their way up concrete channels, and wielded the carrot of coalitions and interagency cooperation along with the stick of threatened lawsuits over steelhead.

It is a striking, and emblematic, success--the first concrete (in both senses) action to restore fish runs on the creek that the California Department of Water Resources named as the East Bay's top restoration priority--back in the 1970s. The long haul Leaders of creek groups caution that creek restoration remains a long-term commitment. As with Alameda Creek, many if not most of the major restoration projects being pursued today were proposed a generation ago. And large-scale successes--daylighting creeks from culverts, or restoring longer reaches--remain few.

A cautionary and characteristic tale is told by graphic artist Valerie Winemiller, who with the Piedmont Avenue Neighborhood Improvement League began defending Oakland's Glen Echo Creek in 1974. The city at that time planned to bury the creek in a pipe and sell the land above for development. The group's efforts have involved literally standing in front of bulldozers and hugging trees. They have seen promised funding snatched away twice--first by Proposition 13, and then by the Oakland Hills fire. Only now, after 26 years, Winemiller says, do they feel relatively satisfied with one block of the neighborhood creekside park. Now they can begin long-term planning for another block.

"There is no instant gratification in this," Winemiller warns—a sentiment echoed by many volunteers who have spent more than a decade on creek restoration. "You've just got to hang in and outlast the naysayers and the bureaucrats. You've got to enjoy the process." On the positive side, she adds, "You learn a lot, about ecology and how streams work. They're living, evolving systems. You meet some of the most interesting people in your neighborhood. You find this whole community of people with common interests who can work on a common goal and enjoy each other in the process."

Why it's hard

There are some simple reasons why creek restoration is hard. "Daylighting" a creek from a culvert, giving it room to meander naturally, is costly in both land and dollars. Carole Schemmerling of the Urban Creeks Council of California points out that despite the financial success of projects like San Luis Obispo's downtown creek and Riverwalk in San Antonio, TX, commercial developers rarely look at creeks as potentially profitable amenities. Thus El Cerrito's dreams of daylighting Cerrito Creek along the full length of the El Cerrito Plaza shopping center shrank to a hard-won agreement that the city can restore, at its own expense, the portion already above ground.

Creek restoration also is peculiar among environmental efforts in that almost every creek or watershed has its own group. This probably is good for grassroots involvement and knowledge of local conditions. It may not be best for political clout or the ability to organize large projects—despite help from umbrella and coalition groups like the Urban Creeks Council of California and Friends of the River.

Another difficulty is the complex coalitions that restoration often requires. For example, plans to restore a half mile of Codornices Creek, on the Berkeley-Albany border, are currently stalled in discussions among the two cities, the University of California Berkeley, residents of UC's student housing next to the creek, users of creekside sports fields, and creek-restoration groups. A mile farther north, restoration of Cerrito Creek will require cooperation among the cities of El Cerrito, Albany, Richmond, and Berkeley (which has a sewer main along the creek); residential neighbors; BART; two shopping centers, and the State Orientation Center for the Blind.

Counterbalancing these challenges is the widespread popularity of creek restoration. This popularity springs from nostalgia and from the desire to keep in the urban fabric a thread of wildness represented by flowing water, trees, and wildlife. Further, almost no other environmental "cause" is easier to participate in—from kids cleaning litter out of creeks to the willingness of private citizens to organize local efforts and keep at them year after year.

Such energy has put creek restoration into the political mainstream. If around our city-rimmed Bay we can walk beside water sparkling in and out of dappled shade, if steelhead some day teem up rain-swollen creeks, and we hear frogs sing at night, all these local efforts together will have made the success.

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