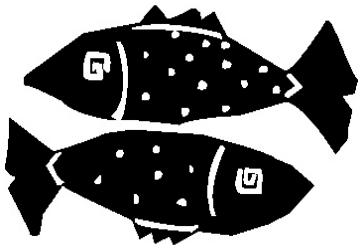


FOCUS: IN AND OUT OF THE COMMUNITIES AND FORESTS-TO-BE OF SALMON HABITAT RESTORATION

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I recently completed a small survey of volunteers who offered their time and energy on two cool and drizzly Saturday mornings to plant ocean spray, mooseberry, Nootka rose and other native trees and shrubs on the banks of the Skagit River, the largest river draining from the Cascade Mountains to the Puget Sound, located in the northwest corner of Washington State. The volunteers' good-natured work constitutes one of the more participatory pieces of the enormously complex and passionately contested effort to restore the hydrological and ecological functions of river systems – and thereby salmon habitat – currently taking place in the Pacific Northwest. The replacement of domesticated crops and invasive species with native plants (often including spruce and cedar saplings) along rivers and stream banks has multiple intended effects: among them, to control erosion, provide food and shelter for wildlife, shade and cool the water, and, eventually, topple in and create pools and other hiding places for fish. This particular planting took place at one of the most visible sites in the County, at a large public park in the middle of Mount Vernon, the County's largest, centrally-located town. It is in plain sight of anybody who crosses the bridge that spans the river and connects the most urban area of the County across the river with the farmland to the West, farmland that earns its reputation as some of the best agricultural property in the world due in part to its former life as an estuary. The location was strategically chosen to demonstrate to a wider audience that habitat restoration can be nice to look at, that it can be enjoyable, and that it works. The broadest purpose of these plantings is to build community and political support for salmon-recovery efforts in the Valley. The organizers have their fingers crossed, tightly, that the new plants keep growing.

While community forestry is ideally concerned with sustaining forest-based livelihoods and the alleviation of poverty and injustice (Glasmeier and Farrigan 2004), the irony with writing an article about my research on the social dimensions of salmon habitat restoration for the CFRF newsletter is that few livelihoods directly dependent on forests are implicated in the reforestation of riparian habitat deemed critical for the recovery of fish. Furthermore, the major land use in the lower Skagit basin is, in fact, still conventional forestry. Yet while in the 1990s debates here raged around spotted owls and logging, today they center on salmon. And salmon habitat restoration does implicate two other resource-based livelihoods: namely, fishing and farming. Many people in the Valley fish for sport, but those who fish in the river for a living tend to be members of one of the three local Indian tribes: the Swinomish, Upper Skagit and Sauk-Suiattle. This is because in 1974 a supreme court decision upheld treaties signed in 1855 that reserved the rights of Western Washington tribal members to fish in all “usual and accustomed fishing places”, which generally meant in the rivers or at the rivers' mouths, and “in common with the citizens of the United States”, which was interpreted to mean that Native Americans here are entitled to fifty percent of the harvestable fish returning to these places. A little known but remarkable fact is that in order to ensure that these rights were maintained, in 1974 Western Washington tribes were made co-managers with Washington State of the State's fisheries. Hence, another rationale sometimes cited for salmon habitat

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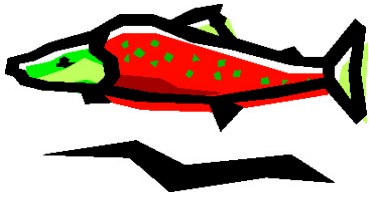
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restoration is to protect the resources that tribal livelihoods and fishing rights depend on. Tribes are themselves rehabilitating streams and estuarine areas on reservations and the neighboring river systems that bear their names, such as the Skagit, Stillaguamish, Snohomish, and Nooksack rivers.

Farmers, however, tend to be skeptical of salmon habitat restoration efforts. With a current population of about 109,000 Skagit County is facing a projected 40 to 50 % increase in population in the next 20 years, spelling disaster for the open spaces of farmland that have earned the Valley a reputation as the Shire between the gathering forces of Mordor – i.e. Vancouver, BC to the north and Seattle to the south – if aggressive growth management is not effected quickly. In addition to the pressures of development and globalization, farmers worry that increasing environmental regulations and efforts to restore “fish habitat” – on what farmers consider to be private, arable land - will threaten the economic viability of farming in the Valley, and end a way of life that some families have known here for more than four generations. Resentment toward habitat restoration among agricultural landowners likely began about 10 years ago when the county was attempting to meet the State’s growth management requirement to institute protection plans for areas critical to wildlife, such as the 6 runs of Skagit Chinook salmon currently listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Ever since then the County has battled local tribes in court, over if, and how wide, reforested buffers along fish-bearing streams should be for the protection of salmon.

While the County’s buffers plans are being debated and therefore neither implemented nor enforced, the focus of restoration efforts in the County has shifted to the estuaries, which most fisheries scientists and restorationists here view as the limiting factor in the river’s potential production of Chinook salmon. Estuarine restoration entails the breaching or setback of dikes and levees and the modification of tidegates to allow the regeneration of estuarine habitat behind the dikes. Farmers tend to be less than happy with these plans for delta restoration, however. As one farmer puts it, there is a line in the sand, and the line is the dike. Some farmers fear that estuarine restoration projects will compromise their century-long work to keep salt and unwanted water out of their fields and drainage systems. Some fish advocates, on the other hand, are still hoping to revegetate fish habitat along the banks of some of the drainage ditches and sloughs, home to recently discovered populations of Chinook fry. Farmers argue, however, that vegetation would make it difficult to manipulate the dredging machinery used to clear debris and buffers would therefore compromise the ditches’ drainage function and the arability of the land. Thus, in contrast to more conventional community forestry case studies, in this lowland, largely agricultural part of the County, the question is not how to sustain and equitably distribute forest resources; it is how forests-to-be might impact the livelihoods of fishermen and farmers, not to mention the intrinsic “health” of the fish, river and watershed.

To make matters more complicated, and painful, the fact that the fishermen at stake are largely descendants of the Valley’s original native inhabitants, and the farmers at stake are largely the descendants of white settlers, is not lost in this debate. In my interviews I consistently hear references to the settlement era; to the back-breaking labor of great grandparents who cleared the land, dug the ditches and hand-built the dikes; to the sighting of the strange white fence that signified the presence of the new concept of private property; to disparaging comments about “primitive” Indian fishing methods and how they would have limited the historical catch; to proud remarks about Indian precursors to modern gillnetting technology, etc. Some have urged me to analyze the debate in terms of race: to what extent is farmers’ resistance to habitat restoration efforts a racist response to the growing power of the tribes to reclaim management of local resources?



On its surface, salmon recovery in Washington State looks like a poster child for community forestry principles. In contrast to the typically prescriptive federal approach to endangered species protection, the State is currently implementing a “groundbreaking”, bottom-up strategy to address its ESA listings of various fish species through collaboration with agency, tribal, and community entities. The group coordinating efforts in the Puget Sound region is careful to point out that their strategy is about “more than fish” and includes “supporting sustainable growth and prosperous timber, fishing, recreation and agricultural economies”. Several legislative acts empowered and funded watershed groups composed of local stakeholders to spend the last five years drafting ESA recovery plans that will be handed to the responsible federal agencies next month. Due to local hostilities, however, the Skagit Valley never developed a community-based recovery plan. Instead, biologists at the local State fish and wildlife agency and tribal research center made a last-minute stab to quietly draft a Skagit plan in time for the June deadline.

Despite the ongoing conflict over salmon habitat restoration, the largely urban volunteers at the Mount Vernon park planting parties seemed surprisingly unaware of the historical, social or political contexts in which their work was taking place. One of the survey questions on the questionnaire that nearly all of the 60 volunteers completed asked, “What do you think are the main ways salmon habitat restoration affects society, if you think it does?” Most responses explained, rather broadly, that restoring the health of the river would benefit the health of humans, or that restoration raised awareness in society about environmental problems. Only three respondents had more specific things to say: “it has many conflicts with development”, “important for tribes”, and “keeps the fishermen happy.”

While I have tried to explain how watershed restoration stretches the meaning of “forestry” relative to conventional understandings of “community forestry”, the heterogeneity and mutual incomprehension among social groups implicated in restoration here makes the idea of “community” seem naïve if not counterproductive. A basic goal of my research is therefore to raise awareness among multiple communities about the very existence of each other and why they may hold divergent perspectives about restoration. One of the “groups” that I have made a particular effort to reach out to in this respect is the one I consider closest to home: other researchers. In contrast to the way that we are often differentiated from a “community” vested with “local knowledge”, in the Skagit case I think it is more realistic to view researchers as members of the local or at least regional social context. One of the most noticeable characteristics of the salmon habitat restoration movement in the Puget Sound region is its heavy reliance on research in the natural sciences. Fisheries scientists and hydrogeomorphologists constitute an epistemic network of sorts, and their conclusions are repeated in such mantra-like phrases in meetings and conferences that at times the movement exhibits a scientific quality. The minimal attention to the social complexity of salmon recovery at these “expert” events has been striking. Therefore, when it was my turn to present my work to roomfuls of fisheries students and climate scientists, I decided to introduce the ideas of community forestry and participatory research rather than deliver the usual research talk. You could say that in striving toward local empowerment and sustainability, I have been trying to work both in, in consultation with local Skagit residents, but also out, by engaging researchers, whose future work will impact this place and these people, in discussions about expert elitism, the validity of local knowledge, and the relationships between social inequality and environmental problems.

In addition to the pressures of development and globalization, farmers worry that increasing environmental regulations and efforts to restore “fish habitat” – on what farmers consider to be private, arable land - will threaten the economic viability of farming in the Valley, and end a way of life that some families have known here for more than four generations.

Yet while I feel it is important, working “out” takes time away from working more deeply “in” and like other CFRF fellows, I am typically anxious about whether I am sufficiently practicing the principles of community forestry and participatory research in my own field work. After reviewing these principles for this article, I am reminded that I am not particularly focused on questions of poverty and injustice. And I am not primarily working with the most marginalized communities in the Skagit Valley. Just by the numbers, Native Americans fare far worse than the average Skagitonian, with an on-reservation Indian poverty rate of 36% compared to a county-wide rate of 11% in 1999. Yet as Brinda Sarathay puts it so aptly in her Winter 2003 Focus article, “There are people at stake and there are stakeholders...” While tribal fishermen are at stake, here the tribes are also clearly powerful stakeholders. The most marginalized Skagit community is likely one I have had no professional interaction with: the migrant farm workers who I occasionally see bundled up and bent over between rows of tulips and nursery trees near a tell-tale row of small, colorful cars parked along the country roads. They are also planters, and also indigenous, but in their case far from their homes in Chiapas and Oaxaca, Mexico. I and others wonder what these Zapotec and Triqui speakers think about the conflict over salmon habitat restoration. Are they aware of the controversy? Could they be the people truly at stake, but with little to hold onto, in decisions about fishing, farming, forestry and development in the Valley? After writing this article and posing these questions, I wonder if I should now redirect my research toward listening in particular to their concerns.

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Northwest Area Foundation Indicator Website
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