

Concrete Debris in the Creek

by Gerhard Epke

After 150 years of dumping, it is time to start pulling concrete debris out of San Anselmo's creeks. Obviously not all of the concrete can come out, as much of it supports buildings and bridges, but a lot of the creek is littered with derelict junk ranging from cobble size to automobile size.

Over the years, a lot of junk has made its way into Corte Madera Creek. I don't just mean lacrosse balls, lawn flamingos, and spray cans. I mean everything—including the kitchen sink. Back before municipal garbage service, whatever couldn't be burned or stuck in the latrine, probably went into the creek. Like self-cleaning ovens, creeks carried most of this junk out to the ocean during a winter storm. The junk that endures is the big heavy stuff: cinder blocks, fence post foundations, water heaters, rocks imported for bank slope protection, and concrete.

Wild creeks move around laterally quite a bit, even in a narrow valley like ours. Eroding sediment here, depositing it there. Trees grow up, fall down, break, get buried, start over. The heterogeneity and chaos creates the structures that form deep pools for fish and big bars of nicely sorted gravels for bugs and spawning. Much of the big heavy debris enters the creek as bank slope protection. People have tried using all manner of things to prevent their yards from eroding into the creek, but by far the cheapest and most common material used was blocks of concrete rubble discarded from construction projects. These structures often fall apart a little bit at a time and the material ends up rolling hundreds of yards downstream and getting lodged somewhere.

A habitat assessment done by A.A. Rich and Associates in 2000 identifies reaches of San Anselmo and Sleepy Hollow creeks where concrete slabs and chunks create stagnant pools and degrade aquatic habitat.

Another problem with concrete debris in the creek is that it reduces the capacity of the channel and contributes to our flooding woes. Concrete debris embedded in the creek bottom reduces both the channel cross section and the gradient. This results in less room for water and it slows the water down.

Is there concrete on your property? Did your retaining wall collapse and stay in the creek? Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed might have resources or ideas for how to help you get it removed and restored. Some of these situations will require heavy equipment, but others could be improved by a few strong bodies. Instead of paying for pilates or crossfit at the gym next week, consider bush-whacking your way down into the creek and looking for some appropriately sized concrete debris to haul out.



Old water heaters were often placed on the creek bank in an attempt to reduce erosion. Subsequently, some rolled into the creek. Photo by Charles Kennard



Concrete debris in the creek in downtown San Anselmo. Photo by Gerhard Epke

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