

Creek Consciousness

by Carole d'Alessio

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“Every time it rains, the creek through my front yard foams up with several inches of soap-like suds. After the rain stops, the pools in the creek are covered with a shiny, oily film, and the water loses its clarity to become an unhealthy black color. The mosquito fish gasp for air and sometimes die,” says Ross resident, Joyce Konigsberg. “Our pools are catch basins for all the sediment and toxins that are washed into the storm drains and surface creek through happenstance, ignorance, carelessness and bad manners.”

How many know there are at least 27 creeks running through the towns of our watershed? The main creeks are named after towns and subdivisions such as Fairfax, San Anselmo, Sleepy Hollow, Corte Madera, Ross and Larkspur. They wend their way through our neighborhoods largely hidden from traffic traveling the roads.

Corte Madera Creek collects the flows from all other creeks, emptying into San Francisco Bay by the ferry terminal, and contributing its pollutants to the Bay. The pollutants most prevalent in the Bay are copper, mercury, nickel, PCBs, diazinon, pathogens and sediment, and because of these, most fish that live in the Bay are no longer fit for eating.

Nature has ways of reducing or neutralizing some pollutants, but when creekside vegetation is eliminated, or drains run directly from paved areas into the creek, these mechanisms are negated. An active urban creek restoration movement in the Bay Area is attempting to make up for losses caused by urban development. Restored creeks can mitigate pollution, stabilize creek banks and reduce the quantity of sediment washing into the Bay, offer a refuge for wildlife, control flooding, and increase property values. Native vegetation is always planted along restored banks; some of these plants can completely eliminate some toxics such as copper.

A restoration effort often begins with a concerned group of neighbors who get support from public agencies and non-profit groups. In our watershed, Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed has been working with agencies, non-profits, and homeowner groups to protect and enhance the health of the creek for nine years. Friends CreekWatchers have been monitoring the creek regularly and have several times found broken sewer lines leaking into San Anselmo Creek. The Ross Valley Sanitary District has acted quickly to see that repairs are made.

Here are other things that can be done to help clean up our creeks:

Be aware that storm drains in our towns empty into our creeks. Prevent waste from construction jobs getting into gutters and stormdrains. Paint, cement, solvents and other products poison aquatic life.

- Take your car to a commercial car wash. Even biodegradable soaps harm wildlife. Commercial car washes use filters and have water recycling systems, so soaps never reach the creek.
- Instead of hosing down your driveway, sweep it clean, to lessen sedimentation of the creek.
- Keep your tires and brakes in good condition, as they shed pollutants when worn.
- Use pesticides and fertilizers judiciously or not at all. Eighty-five tons of the insecticide diazinon, now being phased out due to its extreme toxicity, is used in the Bay Area each year.
- Urge your town or city council to require adequate setbacks from the creek for new construction. Setbacks provide for space between the top of creek banks and buildings or paved portions of property. These areas allow for some of the natural functions of a creek to be retained: filtration of pollutants, flood control, and provision of wildlife habitat. If construction is permitted close to a near-vertical eroded bank, restoration of a more gently sloped and vegetated bank is permanently precluded.

It is up to each of us to help make the Bay Area a healthier place to live. We can do this by living more consciously, by being aware that we can individually lessen harmful impacts on our planet.

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