

Finding Our Way Towards Stewardship

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This watershed in which we live is truly magnificent: from the cathedral redwood groves on the serpentine western hills, across the teeming marshes of the lowlands, all the way to the pine ridge of sandstone that separates our valleys from the Laguna de Santa Rosa. This morning, I sat, watched and listened as sharp-shin hawks marked out their territory with their screams. I walked beside crystal-clear streams dancing from the cool forest shade out into the meadows.

This land is home for many communities. Steelhead spawn in the upland creeks. California freshwater shrimp hide out beneath the vegetation overhanging the banks. Though I've never seen them, there are Coho salmon in Green Valley Creek. And our dog once got her nose full of quills during a chance encounter with a porcupine.

And there are people too. We Europeans have been drawn to this land of the Pomo and the Miwok: the Irish and Italian farmers of the 19th century whose family memory lives on in the names of our school districts, back roads, and local bars; the back-to-the-land hippies of the 20th century who brought organic farming to the area; and now the retirees of the 21st century who bring their life experience and time to do good work here.

Yet we humans have had an enormous impact on this land. Many plants, animals, birds and insects that were here two hundred years ago are no more. The beaver dams have gone. Thankfully, large-scale clearing of the land has ended. Foresters no longer use the creek beds as skid-trails. But our impact continues, often times despite our best intentions. Many are the well-meaning farmers who hauled the limbs of fallen trees from their creeks, thinking that an unobstructed creek was a good creek, before it was known that such large woody debris helps create and maintain the deep pools that provide refuge for fish on hot summer days. When others removed the shading trees and bushes from the creek banks, no one knew how narrow the water temperature range is for fish to thrive. As we water our lawns, run our evening bath and flush our toilets, few of us are aware of how the groundwater is being sucked down by all of our wells.

Fortunately, a consciousness of these things is re-emerging. We are beginning to relearn the awesome complexity of a living watershed. We are finding the will to halt the deterioration and begin the many needed tasks of restoration.

We cannot return this watershed to the pristine state it was in two hundred years ago. However, we can, with consciousness, reverence, understanding and guidance, live upon this land in such a way that we may share the space with all the other creatures for whom this is home. This change cannot be mandated by regulation alone; the change for the good will occur only when we understand where we live and how to live here. We see the change happening now, as our children learn the names of their creeks and know how these creeks connect upstream with the winter rains and downstream with the Russian River and, eventually, the ocean.

So this is our task as humans in this watershed: to watch, to listen, to learn, and to be here for many generations to come, humbly and joyfully living in reverent community with all other plants and creatures in our Atascadero/Green Valley Watershed. May we all help this come to pass.