

More Than Fish: Since Restoration Began, Wildlife Is Moving Back Into Centralia Waterway; College Students Will Seek Source of Sediment Preventing Water Flow

Life in China Creek

Critters Get Cozy in Centralia's China Creek By Dameon Pesanti

China Creek has changed a lot since people moved into Centralia, and that is likely to continue.

What was once thought of as a drainage ditch to purge the city of water during heavy rains has been getting treated much more holistically.

"Now people are much more interested in urban creeks and urban wild spaces," said Centralia College associate professor Dr. Stephen Norton.

Before the college and the Centralia Stream Team took the initiative to revitalize the creek, anyone who walked by could see it was in rough shape in a lot of places. Since the creation of the Kiser Natural Outdoor Learning Lab, things have really started to change. Although much of the creek is dry this time of year, lots of critters can still be seen in the upper parts of the waterway.

Frogs, muskrats, a beaver and more have been seen regularly throughout the summer.

Shortly after the KNOLL was created, all kinds of new insect life started appearing, much to the joy of local nesting birds. But most exciting for Norton were the dozen or so coho salmon that spawned in the stream.

That was two years ago, but with a little luck, they could be coming back either this year or next.

However, there's an unknown source of sediment that threatens the spawning grounds.

Nelson said college students will track down the source of the sediment, since swift water won't come through.

"It's going to have to be managed, because it's not a natural environment subject to the full cleansing and we don't want it to be," Nelson said. "It's going to be a constant project. There's certain things we can do now that'd make big impacts, but urban environment is constantly changing."

Somewhere along the waterway, even a beaver has moved in, which is mostly a good sign minus the cottonwoods it has taken out from the campus.

"When it comes to wildlife within a city there's wildlife you like and wildlife you don't like," said Centralia College professor Dr. Lisa Carlson. "In theory, I love having beaver around, but I don't want them cutting down our trees."

Carlson said the creek is in much better shape than it used to be, but at high flows there are signs of phosphates and nitrogen from things such as detergents and fertilizers.

Those substances can affect aquatic life.

Right now, the city of Centralia and the college are looking at ways to keep the stream clean and water levels more consistent year round.

"It'll never be what it was before settlement, but we can make it as functional with the kinds of activities as we do," said Nelson.