



Thursday, November 05, 2009

Let's recognize good stewardship

Big Creek project sets the bar for others to follow

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Our area's pioneers weren't always richly endowed in marketing savvy when it came to naming geographical features: Big Creek and Gnat Creek are two nearby examples. But whatever they lack in promotional "zing," these watersheds make up for in local biological importance. It's good to see the latest efforts going into restoring Big Creek.

Most people shoot by on U.S. Highway 30 without more than a cursory glance from side to side. But take the time to scramble around these creeks and you'll encounter splendid little pools, rapids and mossy boulders.

Among the photographic treasures given to the city of Astoria by Bud Howell in 2003 were a number of glass-plate negatives showing what Big Creek was like a century ago. Taken by Elmer Coe, who went on to operate a general store in Svensen, they document a recreational fishing trip in a rocky vale that looks like it was salmon heaven. But then we started fiddling around with it...

In its own time, it was quite an achievement to blast a channel out of bare basalt to reroute Big Creek around an important mainline logging road. Conceived back in the same era that witnessed inception of so many monumental public-works projects on the Columbia River, countless small-scale changes in the landscape like that on Big Creek were designed to make a wild land more amenable to logging, farming, housing and other settler activities.

As described in our Tuesday story, this chute did its job of transporting water too well. The creek's velocity there was so high that migrating fish couldn't punch their way past it to reach extensive spawning grounds further inland.

This summer's restoration work reflects our more mature understanding of how the engineering decisions of past generations don't always fit with today's priorities.

In a tribute to Oregon's effective system of watershed councils and to the good land stewardship of local residents, the Nicolai-Wickiup Watershed Council and Hampton Affiliates recognized the issue. Together with the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce and several funding partners, they returned Big Creek to part of its historic channel this July for the first time in decades. Belying the urban caricature of loggers not caring about the environment, Hampton logging supervisor Bud Henderson was a key to this effort.

Big Creek amounts to a fine instance of smart multi-use watershed management that we can all be proud of.

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