

Restoration and outreach at Howard Miller Steelhead Park

By Kara Bloch

At the recent Skagit River Family Fest held at Howard Miller Steelhead Park, local storyteller Jim Harris talked about growing up along the Skagit River. He recalled how he used to walk down to the river and see it so full of salmon he could nearly grab them with his hands. During the evenings he would float out on a log, close his eyes and listen to the salmon as they were swimming up the river.

These images are much different than what we see today, yet there is still a unique value to this area. Over the past few years, SFEG has been working to restore native habitat by controlling invasive plants and planting native trees and shrubs on the banks of the river and the off-channel slough. This area has been colonized by invasive species such as reed canary grass, Himalayan blackberry and morning glory, and lacks the woody riparian vegetation needed for salmon habitat. Lack of bank stabilizing vegetation has resulted in erosion and excessive sediment to the salmon bearing waters of the Skagit River. This area also provides critical rearing habitat for Chinook and coho and spawning habitat for chum. SFEG hopes that over the years these restoration efforts will restore native riparian vegetation, combat against invasive species and reduce the erosion of sediments along the Skagit River.

The proximity of the restored area to the parks' camp ground and the community of Rockport opens up opportunities for outreach and education. As part of this outreach effort, SFEG installed three educational signs along the river side path. These signs teach about the importance of salmon to the ecosystem and how they supply food to wildlife, such as the bald eagle, as well as nutrients for the soil. Visiting campers and locals alike can walk the path and learn why a healthy salmon population is so crucial to the river and how imperative it is to protect and restore their habitat.

Howard Miller Steelhead Park is a focal point for local history, community involvement, public education, wildlife viewing, implementation of riparian restoration and important salmon habitat. It encompasses the memory of what used to be, the reality of what exists today and the possibility of the future. This is an ideal setting to practice restoration techniques and to raise awareness about the importance of salmon to wildlife, the Skagit River and to the entire Skagit River community.