



SCOUTING the Northwest

By Scout Arnone

Stream health

I stood waders-deep in an urban stream, running my net back and forth through the water, squinting and studying the sparkling ripples that blinded me. I felt eyes on me; curious park-goers who hoped to interact with me in some way.

“Hey, you look like you’d know! Is that a nutria or a muskrat over there?” A man shouted to me and pointed. His granddaughter stared at me blankly and continued to lick her ice cream cone.

“Over where?” I looked around.

“Over there! What is it, do ya think?”

I scanned the neatly manicured landscape attempting to spot any movement amongst the willow thickets.

“Oh yeah! Definitely a nutria!” I called back to him. I didn’t see it; I was trying to focus on the task at hand, but a nutria was very probable for that area.

“Really? Looked like a muskrat to me,” he replied skeptically. The kid had mint chocolate chip on her nose.

“Ha! Definitely nutria!” I said without looking up from the streambed.

“How can you tell?”

“Because of — uh — the way it is...” My answer surely didn’t satisfy them, but they dropped the subject and stared at me in the creek. The sand forming

neat, wavy lines was lustroously golden. Nothing moved. I check my net for any sign of benthic macroinvertebrates (the tiny snails, beetles, and fly larvae that indicate stream health).

The man piped up again, this time to his granddaughter, “Look at how clean it is!” The kid stopped licking her ice cream just long enough to glance at the water, “Doesn’t it look nice and cool?” The girl shrugged.

I didn’t have the heart to tell them that it wasn’t nice and was far from cool. The water was warm (by stream standards) without the shade of trees to chill it, no plants sprang up in its muddy banks to cool the rocks that would serve as homes for the macroinvertebrates I sought. Not to mention the stream was quietly swallowing the runoff of nearby streets, the moss killer of nearby roofs, and the gum someone spit out in a fit of laughter. The strategic placement of a few large cobbles might have worked to churn oxygen into the water, but all I could see was soft, golden sand.

My initial intent was to secure evidence of the presence of pollution-intolerant benthic (“bottom-dwelling”) macroinvertebrates (“large and spineless”) like the caddisflies and dobsonflies, the beloved scorpionesque mayflies and their fascinating subaquatic



PHOTO BY SCOUT ARNONE

A successful benthic macroinvertebrate survey complete with high-tech ice cube tray.

cocoon-mastering friends, the stoneflies. Hell, I’d even have settled for a gilled snail.

My net turned up nothing.

Readjusting my expectations, I readied my heart to find any sign of the moderately pollution-tolerant indicators of stream health: My fishflies, crane flies, crawdads, skuds, clams, beetles, dragon and damselfies. Still, nothing.

“Okay,” I resigned myself. “We’ll at least hunt for any living thing, even if it’s the pollution tolerant creatures that don’t rely on dissolved oxygen in streams.” I skimmed and skimmed and waded for water striders, midges,

worms and leeches. Even in the filthiest streams, these small players can survive. All I retrieved was a solitary leech, sucking the rubber on my boots.

A righteous fury and abiding sadness bubbled inside me. Ice cream girl looked on and the melted sugar ran down her hands. Her grandfather wiped her face with a napkin as she squirmed and writhed trying to lick the sugary residue on

her cheeks.

I wanted to tell her grandfather that clean was not good, a blank slate is not natural. There is so little to be gained by wiping ice cream from dirty faces and enjoying streams without bugs. The river was clean by his standards because he lived by what he could see. But the water is toxic to those of us who live by what we taste: me, Ice Cream Girl, and the fish.



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For the well-being of our staff and clients we are heeding CDC guidelines for social distancing and masks are required.

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