



Whither Willamette?

The urban river in the face of climate change

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

A HERON
CONTEMPLATES
THE RIVER AT
DELTA PONDS

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

It flows through the city; it flows past parks, gravel pits and buildings, but unless it's rising up in a winter flood or we happen to glance down while driving over the I-5 bridge, the Willamette River rarely seems to flow through our minds. Eugene is a river city; the Coast Fork Willamette and the Middle Fork come together to the south and the McKenzie River, the source of Eugene's drinking water, has its confluence with the Willamette to the north. The river goes through the heart of town, carrying our waste, our stormwater and sometimes ourselves — in fishing boats and on inner tubes. It winds its way northward past Corvallis and to Portland where it joins the Columbia and spills out to sea. The river, literally and figuratively, defines us, but the majority of us never think very much about it at all.

The Willamette River is both meticulously planned, permitted and controlled and yet never completely controllable. As we look to a future of climate change, what President Obama recently called “the destructive power of a warming planet,” Eugene is planning around the river, but like most cities, not necessarily planning for global warming's effect on the river such as wintertime flooding and summertime drought. Is the best way to love the urban river to try to make it natural again, or would the Willamette benefit if more urban dwellers had access to the river, even if that access was sitting in a restaurant rather than a park?

In the Eugene/Springfield area there are only three places someone can buy a drink and sit at a table by the river: McMenamans North Bank and Valley River Inn in Eugene and Roaring Rapids Pizza Company in Glenwood. “It's a catch-22,” says Joe Moll, executive director of the McKenzie River Trust. “Do we want concrete to the edge of the Willamette? Not really.” But he and other river advocates say at the same time in order to get people to understand how much the river matters they need to be

able to experience it, even if that experience for a city dweller is sitting at a table, under an umbrella, sipping a drink with a view of the water.

“People can get there and sit, listen to the water and watch the birds fly by,” Travis Williams of Willamette Riverkeeper says. “Part of that helps build that connection to the river — most people aren't boaters and aren't inner tubers.” Connecting to the river might be what saves what is left of the natural river in face of global warming and growing populations.



A MURKY INDUSTRIAL
“MIXING ZONE” IN
THE WILLAMETTE
NEAR HALSEY

PHOTO BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN • AERIAL SUPPORT BY LIGHTHAWK

WATER FLOWS

Fly over the river in a plane and what looks from the ground to be a fairly straight flow of water is actually a twisting snake of a river. Thanks to human engineering, the Willamette twists a lot less than it used to. “Our ability to manipulate the river far outstrips our ability to think ahead,” Moll says. An animal behaviorist before he became a river advocate, he points out that catastrophes tend to be what get our attention in terms of risk, and evolutionarily humans aren't necessarily hardwired to think about long-term consequences. Those consequences include impacts from industry, homes, pavement, natural disasters and gradually warming temperatures.

The historic manipulation of the river is one reason Eugene has the urban riverfront that it does today, says developer Hugh Prichard. The last of the Willamette's 13 dams was built in the 1960s, he says, and before that historical flooding meant that the riverfront through Eugene was not seen as developable. Much of the damming up the river and the zoning in towns down the river was done in the '40s and '50s, he says, adding that the feeling at the time was that areas along the river that could flood were not suitable for houses and restaurants but instead better as industrial sites. The dams, while bad for fish, were good for controlling the Willamette's flooding.

Before damming the river, the Army Corps of Engineers also removed side channels and islands to improve the river for navigation in the mid-to-late 1800s to allow steam-powered paddle-wheel boats and other large craft to ply the waters, sometimes as far south as Eugene. Later, towns and gravel mines concreted and rip-rapped the riverbanks to control the channel and the river's tendency to flood and to meander. Eugene, Springfield and other cities began to empty our industrial waste, sewage and stormwater into its flows, all of this leading to the urban river we now have.