

One back yard at a time, students work to save salmon

Goal is to track salmon upstream

By SHARON SALTER
The Daily Herald

EDMONDS, Wash. — Every year, Ruth Blaikie waits for the visitors to return to Shell Creek.

“Like clockwork, they come — between Halloween and Thanksgiving,” she said. “When the salmon return, they spawn in our back yard.”

The creek has a natural run of chum salmon, and coho have been seen there, too.

Members of the Students Saving Salmon club at Edmonds-Woodway High School wanted to know more about the creek’s salmon runs and began their work in the fall. Some of it involved going door to door to 28 homes, talking to Blaikie and her neighbors about the types of

fish that could be seen in the creek.

They handed out information sheets to homeowners to identify what kinds of salmon were in the stream and what they could do to protect the habitat. They also asked for reports back on how many fish they’d seen.

“They all cared quite a bit about the salmon in their back yards,” said Malia Clark, the club’s vice president. Some were worried about the decline in salmon populations, she said.

One of the club’s goals is to find out how far upstream the salmon go and where they spawn, said Joe Scordino, a retired deputy regional administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and a club adviser.

“There’s really a lack of information on when the fish do arrive, when the spawning period is, and how that varies year to year,” Scordino said.

The information gathered

will go into a database compiled by the students so people will know more about potential future effects on salmon runs, he said.

Some homeowners already are aware, telling students they don’t use fertilizer on their lawns because of the problems it could create for the creek and the salmon, club member Jared Yu said.

Students asked people who lived along the creek if they’d be willing to have native plants added to their yard to improve the habitat.

“I said, ‘Yes, of course,’” Blaikie said. “I think we might want to plant some things to create more shade.”

The names of 13 people interested in the project were given to Sound Salmon Solutions, which has a grant for obtaining native trees and plants. The students might help plant them in the future.

Blaikie invited the students into her back yard to see the creek. “They were taking film

of the salmon under water,” she said.

The group got a first-hand look at one of the creek’s biggest barriers to salmon migration: a 5-foot-high wall with shallow water on the other side.

“It’s sort of a waterfall that comes out of a culvert and prevents a lot of salmon from going over it and extending their run,” Clark said.

Coho probably could work their way upstream, “but with real shallow water they don’t have any room to propel themselves,” Scordino said.

The homeowner whose property surrounds the wall is willing to work with the students on making improvements to ease salmon passage, “but I think the process will be pretty complicated,” Clark said.

Eventually, the group hopes to submit grant requests for a restoration project to create a passage for fish to navigate farther upstream. But that is not as easy as it sounds. Some grants require the property owner to

be involved, while others will only work with government agencies, Scordino said.

So far now, the students are compiling information to determine where and when there are problems.

That provides the basics “so you can start planning restoration where necessary,” Scordino said. “It provides a solid base to assess how well your local environment is doing for salmon.”

In December, the students conducted monitoring of three creeks — Shell, Shellabarger and Willow — as well as in Edmonds Marsh.

They tested for indicators of the water’s health, such as the levels of dissolved oxygen, acidity and salinity. That testing is planned to continue monthly.

Results showed the oxygen levels in Shell Creek were good for spawning, Scordino said. Students used a sophisticated meter provided by the Hubbard Foundation to do the work.

A grant from Sound Salmon Solutions will pay for quarterly tests for petroleum compounds and heavy metals in the same three creeks and the marsh next year.

The information will be shared with the city of Edmonds. Students plan to make a presentation to the Edmonds City Council early next year.

Clark, a senior, said she’s always liked science but never before had been involved in hands-on field work.

“I enjoyed it,” she said. “I wish we could see more salmon running in the creeks.”

Yu, a senior pursuing an International Baccalaureate diploma, said he became interested in joining Students Saving Salmon during his junior year, after hearing about it from his biology teacher.

“This project has really been an opportunity to have an active role in the community and help out — that’s what makes the club so great,” he said.

Radioactive contamination spreading in closed Hanford plant

No one has entered the main part of processing plant since 1997

Associated Press

RICHLAND, Wash. — Radioactive contamination is spreading inside a deteriorating processing plant on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation last used in the 1950s and 1960s to process plutonium for the U.S. nuclear weapons program.

The Tri-City Herald newspaper reported Monday that the facility is known as REDOX. It is located deep within the sprawling and heavily guarded Hanford site, which is half the size of Rhode Island, and the contamination poses no threat to the general public.

A new report recommends spending \$181 million on interim cleanup and maintenance of the abandoned plant. REDOX is not scheduled to be demolished until about 2032, or possibly later.

The report said doing some work on the building soon could reduce the threat of contamination spreading outside the building. Animals that get inside could spread the contamination, or it could spread if a fire breaks out in the building or its utility pipes break, the report said.

REDOX was used from 1952 to 1967 to process about 24,000 tons of irradiated uranium fuel rods to remove plutonium for the nation’s nuclear weapons program.

The report by the U.S. Department of Energy, which owns Hanford, said annual inspections of the highly contaminated plant from 2012-15 found that radioactive contamination was spreading, including by precipitation that leaked into the building through its roof and joints.

Signs of animal intrusion and deteriorating asbestos were also found in several areas, the report said.

No one has entered the main part of the plant since 1997.

Contamination could be slowed and contained by demolishing a contaminated nearby building plus the main plant’s attached annexes, the report said.

Two underground storage tanks that contained the chemical hexone that was used to make plutonium should also be removed, the report said.

The report suggested that doing the work to limit the spread of contamination would help officials retain workers with experience in decommissioning nuclear facilities at Hanford.

They will be needed as more federal money becomes available in the future for environmental cleanup, the report said.



AP Photo/Jackie Johnston

The Hanford nuclear reservation is seen near Richland, Wash., in 2000. Scientists working in secret created the atomic bomb that ended World War II and ushered the world into the nuclear age.

Oldest Puget Sound orca, ‘Granny,’ missing, considered likely dead

Associated Press

FRIDAY HARBOR, Wash. — Researchers say the oldest of the endangered Puget Sound orcas has been missing for months and is now considered dead.

The Center for Whale Research, which conducts orca surveys for the federal government, says J2, known as Granny, has not been seen since October and is likely dead.

Researcher Ken Balcomb wrote on the center’s website that Granny has been seen thousands of times over 40 years of surveys. She is typically seen at the head of the J pod, one of three family groups of whales.

Howard Garrett of the Orca Network says a 1987 published study estimated that J2 was born in 1911 putting her at 105,

though there’s a 12-year margin of error.

Despite a baby boom in 2015, the closely tracked pop-

ulation of southern resident killer whales is now down to 78. Seven were declared missing or dead in 2016.

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