

Trash in creeks more than an eyesore

By CHERIE NORTON

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"I swear, anything movable ends up in the creeks."

Such was the lament from a superintendent in the municipality's Parks and Rec Department when I reported that a large metal picnic table with attached benches had been tossed into Campbell Creek at Bancroft Park.

I know this bench well. When I walk my dogs by the table, I seldom see the picnickers, fishermen and others who use it, but I know they've been there. I carry an array of plastic bags to clean up after my dogs, and often I decide to use one of the larger bags to carry discarded fishing line, beer and soda cans, plastic bags and packaging from fishing lures to the municipality's garbage can that is about 100 paces to the north. Why, I wonder, can't the park users make that short trek to the garbage can or even take their trash home with them?

I also ponder what compels people to use our waterways for waste disposal in general. In late September, the Anchorage Waterways Council organized a mini-creek cleanup on Little Campbell Creek near Homer and 70th Ave. A dozen volunteers, including residents and a local business owner, removed about a ton of discarded items from approximately 1,000 feet of creek. Included in the booty was a complete set of nonstudded tires, a 12-foot-by-20-foot piece of aluminum roofing, several large timbers, PVC pipe, car springs, plastic bags, bottles, laundry baskets and the like.

Are we an "out of sight, out of mind" society? It seems so. Most of us dutifully put our trash out and it "goes away" in the big green compacting truck. We flush a variety of items down our household drains and toilets and even our streets' storm drains with not a thought to where this waste goes.

Grass cuttings are dumped on creek banks because they are vegetative material -- so why not? Has anyone ever seen how slimy and disgusting discarded grass cuttings become? Do you know that grass cuttings are actually harmful to streams and fish because they deplete oxygen when they decompose in the water? People overtly or covertly throw trash down the banks of creeks without a thought to the damage it causes the environment, fish and wildlife.

There are many alternatives for disposing of our trash. Besides regular trash pickups, we have a transfer station in Midtown and a landfill in Eagle River. Recyclable materials can be taken to the recycling center off Dowling, and certain recyclable items can be left at bins located in several store parking lots around Anchorage.

We have a composting facility at Point Woronzof for cuttings, leaves and yard debris. Plastic grocery and newspaper bags, which can be recycled at most grocery stores, also fit easily into one's pocket and are a great resource for picking up after our pets. Not only is animal waste a huge ecological problem in our creeks, but I really hate stepping in it! Cigarette butts, the most littered item in the U.S., should not be thrown out windows or crushed on the ground. They, too,

end up in our ecosystem.

We all pay a price for stupid pranks like dumping the picnic table in Campbell Creek or for discarding trash in inappropriate places. Our property taxes cover the cost of sending a municipal team out to retrieve that picnic table, our fish and wildlife suffer from trash left in the environment and creeks and we lose the aesthetics of a beautiful city that is becoming more and more blighted with our discards.

Postscript: The picnic table has been retrieved from Campbell Creek and is now chained to a nearby tree. I guess that will show somebody!

Cherie Northon, Ph.D., is Little Campbell Creek project coordinator for the Anchorage Waterways Council.

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