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AWC UPDATE:

A message from the Executive Director, Cherie Northon



Posted on Facebook recently by The Alaska Life

The image above appeared on my Facebook page this week. It pretty much says it all. But for those of you who have forgotten what that cold white stuff is, here is just a little reminder of how our neighborhoods looked a few years ago compared to this week.



Snow height in March 2012 (photo by C. Northon)



**Snow height in January 2016
(photo by C. Northon)**

Snow in Anchorage--and lots of it--is not a figment of our imaginations. We have seen it, shoveled it, skied and snowboarded on it, mushed through it, and watched it evaporate (really known as "sublimation") and melt during our "normal" spring breakups--not to mention about 3 times this winter. So, where is it now? This last week my neighbors were ice skating on our street, while ice skaters on some of the local lakes and lagoons were told to use "caution". Sled dog race organizers have serious and well-founded concerns about this year's races, and some routes are already being changed. The typical and most common answer is that this is an "El Niño" year.

Most of us have heard the terms "El Niño" and "La Niña" which have been attributed to Peruvian fishermen in the 19th century (although some claim the names may date back to

the 1600s). Because these extreme weather events occurred close to Christmas, the Spanish term "El Niño" is thought to have evolved from "The Little Boy" or the "Christ Child". "La Niña" is Spanish for "The Little Girl" and refers to an anti-El Niño period or a "cold event". Recognized in a short 1891 article from the *Lima Geographical Society Bulletin*, President Dr. Luis Carranza called attention to the fact that a countercurrent was found flowing from north to south by sailors near Paita, Peru. In the same article Dr. Carranza suggested a correlation between heavy rains in an area typically without them coincident with the countercurrent. He speculated that this phenomenon undoubtedly was having a significant influence on climatic conditions along the Peruvian coast.

Fast forward, and "El Niño" has been recorded as an intermittent large-scale interaction between the ocean and atmosphere when there are periodic warmings in sea surface temperatures (SST) in the region extending across the central and east-central areas of the Equatorial Pacific. On a map this would be roughly between the International Date Line (180°) to 120° West which is the meridian that runs north and south through western Canada, Washington, Oregon, and California until it exits North America and ends in Antarctica. The north-south boundaries are approximately 5° of latitude on either side of the Equator. While this discussion relates to a local phenomenon that is impacting North America's West coast including Alaska, "El Niño" has global implications and impacts. For the sake of brevity many of the aspects of "El Niño", commonly referred to as ENSO (El Niño Southern Oscillation), will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that it is a complex system with lots of variables. For more information, check out NOAA's many webpages devoted to it.

Fortunately the recognition that this situation has occurred multiple times led to some understanding of its episodic nature. The time between occurrences varies, but there is a general range of 2 to 7 years. The severity of the events differs as well. Some years are much stronger than others--most recently those have been 1976-1977, 1982-1983, 1986-1987, and 1991-1994. NOAA has synthesized the data into 3-month periods from 1950 which can be viewed in this [table](#). It is interesting to note that 2009-2010 had warmer SSTs, but they are considerably less than what have been recorded for 2015. The highest SST in the earlier period was 1.3° for two 3-month periods, while October, November and December in 2015 have hit 2.3° as a high--and it's not over yet.

What does this hold for us in Alaska and Anchorage? In October 2015, NOAA issued a forecast titled "Strong El Niño sets the stage for 2015-2016 winter weather". While much of this provides information for the continental U.S., there are also predictions for Alaska. For precipitation, it states that wetter-than-average conditions will most likely occur in southeastern Alaska. Drier-than-average conditions will prevail in central and western Alaska. Regarding temperature, above-average temperatures are favored in much of Alaska--which we have seen in many cases along with diminished precipitation. Conversely, this past week drought-stricken California has battled with extreme rains, snow, mudslides, floods, high surf advisories, and warnings about unsafe water conditions from stormwater runoff, while we sit here in relatively warm weather with little to no precipitation.

Clearly these changes in weather patterns have a variety of regional impacts. Locally, it's economically devastating for our ski resorts and ski facilities as well as for events such as Fur Rondy and the Iditarod. Mentally, it is trying as well. There is less light from the snow's reflection after dark during winter, freeze and melt cycles have resulted in horrific ice that is dangerous for drivers and pedestrians, and other than riding fat-tire bikes--our normal winter sports on Anchorage's trails are non-existent or downright treacherous if attempted.

What about our snow pack? Snow pack typically is not something that is a topic of conversation in Alaska. California, yes, but not here. The Chugach Mountains, which are the headwaters for many of our urban creeks, have not really had a decent cover of snow yet this

winter. Two of our primary sources for drinking water are Eklutna Lake and Ship Creek--both fed from the snow pack in the Chugach. Many residents are on wells that depend on groundwater replenishment, which is important for the refilling of aquifers. Several of our waterways depend on groundwater as part of their normal flow. How will they fare with possibly less snow pack this year? Will our creeks run lower than normal? Will some dry up intermittently? Will water temperatures rise? All of these conditions affect our migrating, spawning, and rearing salmon as well as our recreation opportunities in creeks and lakes.

Earth's water is limited--it is a closed system. If we waste or pollute it, there is no more. This became critically clear in California over the past few years as the drought in the West continued until the current El Niño conditions have finally brought some relief. And, while there is much rain and snow helping to refill reservoirs, aquifers, and the snow pack as I write this, there are also warnings for the state's residents to not abandon water conservation. According to climatologist [Mike Anderson](#) of California's Department of Water Resources, "California's water deficit is so deep after four years of drought that a steady parade of storms will be needed for years to come."

Let's celebrate our good fortune as a state that has not been prone to drought (yet). We have valuable water resources in our city that need to be cared for, and that is the mission of the [Anchorage Waterways Council](#). As we head into Spring, AWC will provide tips on how each of us can save and protect our precious water. If we all pitch in, we will make a difference.

The December Trash Survey Results

In our last e-newsletter, I invited readers to take a short survey on attitudes towards trash. Thanks to all who participated.

The majority of the respondents prefer to keep trash cans nearby where they recreate, but if they were removed the same number would be willing to pack their trash out. Everyone recycles! Half the respondents have dogs, and most of them scoop the poop ALWAYS while a few do SOMETIMES. Poop bag disposal is usually at the nearest trash can or they take it home, which is most easily accomplished if you are walking. An interesting comment may have answered one of the most burning questions many of us have about unattended bags of poop that are left hanging in trees, bushes, or on the ground. A respondent said, "***The one situation where I have a hard time is with my dog's poop bags. I have yet to find a convenient and pleasant way to pack those for long distances, especially during activities like skiing and running. I've tried different solutions, like tying it to my ski pole, but it flops around, smells, and I'm afraid I'm going to fall on it and break it open and get smelly germy dog poop all over me.***" So, now we know. Someone needs to invent a poop bag carrier that allows easy and safe transport of the poop until it can be disposed of properly.

How can you help AWC maintain healthier creeks?

Donate to AWC with Pick Click Give (PCG)

Anchorage Waterways Council is part of the Pick Click Give program, and has received several thousands of dollars from generous Alaskans who select us as one of their charity choices when filing for their PFD. You can read more about how your donations help our creeks on the PCG site under [Anchorage Waterways Council](#). Thank you for considering us and all the other great charities in our state. And, PCG has just announced that 10 lucky donors will be chosen to receive double their dividend. Details are on the [Pick Click Give site](#).

Volunteer

There are many ways to help AWC as a volunteer. We have fantastic volunteers who donate hundreds of hours annually to monitor our creeks each month, hundreds of participants take to the creeks every May to pull tons of trash out during our Annual Creek Cleanup, and many of you are "eyes on the creek"--reporting things that are disturbing--and we do our best to respond or help people find the right place to "complain". Consider becoming an AWC board member! AWC is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit and memberships and donations (monetary or items) are tax deductible.

AWC Membership--Renew or Join!

Being a member of AWC means that you care passionately about the well-being of your own environment. We work to keep the waterways clean, clear, and of value to all. From clean water and recreation to creating a general feeling of well-being, our waterways need protecting for our own benefit, as well as for the countless other species that rely on them. Adding your name to our membership means we can make a stronger stand when it comes to the issues that can affect us all--use your vote and become a member today!

It's easy, you can go online at www.anchoragecreeks.org and click the "**JOIN**" button, to join, renew or donate, or click the "**Join Now**" button at the top of this email. We are now set up to do recurring payments as well! This can be as simple as \$5 or \$10 a month, but it adds up BIG for us. If you have a question about your membership and when it expires, please contact us at awc@anchoragecreeks.org. If you know someone who wants to help support our great waterways, please forward this email to them, or if you want to provide a gift membership--contact us. Does your employer have a volunteer match program? Thanks to all for your continuing support and especially to our sponsors and volunteers who watch the waterways, monitor the creeks, and help this great organization--the ONLY one in Anchorage dedicated to protecting our creeks, wetlands, and watersheds.

Reminder: Follow us on **Facebook** at "Anchorage Waterways Council" and "Scoop the Poop Anchorage"



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