

Health of creeks is everyone's concern

By CHERIE NORTON

(Published: September 4, 2006)

Just west of the Seward Highway and Homer Drive, a watercourse emerges from a culvert, and for the next 800 feet it passes through two more culverts and makes three 90-degree turns while running straight as an arrow between them. It is barely three feet wide and typically a foot deep.

It may sound like a ditch, but in fact it is the North Fork of Little Campbell Creek. Fish and other critters are trying to live in it.

There are small fish, such as sticklebacks and sculpins, that form the basis of many food chains, as well as the more charismatic fish species of silver, chinook and red salmon, Dolly Varden and rainbow trout. A 2005 survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service documents hundreds of live, dead and dying juvenile salmon and other fish in Little Campbell Creek.

Most Anchorage residents could easily name Ship, Chester and Campbell creeks. But the Municipality of Anchorage has hundreds of miles of waterways that range from the Eklutna River in the north to the Placer River in the south. We have dozens of creeks and rivers with considerable breadth and meanders, and several others that now more closely resemble ditches. Some of the smallest creeks go dry seasonally or transport such minimal amounts of water that they tend to be overlooked. Few people could ignore how the rains of the past few weeks have turned many of these little waterways into raging, brown torrents of swiftly moving water -- several of which are the homes to a variety of important fish species.

As Anchorage spread from its "Tent City" beginnings along Ship Creek in 1915, the surrounding creeks were soon dammed, straightened, put into culverts, or diverted from their natural courses and flood plains. It is no wonder that many people assume some of the smaller waterways are ditches.

Even the smallest of Anchorage creeks, though, are full of life. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has underwater video that is compelling evidence of the life in these streams. However, the creeks are being impaired by our habits and practices. Anchorage's waterways are the primary conveyance for our city's storm water. Trash, animal waste, fertilizers, silt, chemicals and other polluting items that move with storm runoff can travel quite a distance before being discharged, often without any filtering, into Cook Inlet.

Many of the things we all do to our waterways happen without us realizing the impacts. Simple



A rainbow trout found tangled in a gardening mesh in Little Campbell Creek. (Photo courtesy of MARK SCHROEDER via the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)



CHERIE NORTON ()

changes in our ways could begin to improve the health of our creeks and their inhabitants. Cleaning up after our pets is one. Limiting the amount of water that empties into our storm drains and keeping it as clean as possible is another. Becoming a "Waterways Watcher" is another. Anyone can provide valuable information on problems in all of our creeks by using our new online citizen reporting form at the Anchorage Waterways Council's Web site, www.anchoragewaterways.org. Check us out. And, the next time you see a small waterway, please treat it like a creek, not a ditch.

Cherie Northon, Ph.D., is a geographer who works with the Anchorage Waterways Council as the Little Campbell Creek rescue coordinator.

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