

Reflections on the Creek Restoration Workday 2018

In early June, at Dionondehowa Wildlife Sanctuary, I had the most informative, intriguing lesson in river bank restoration. Led by David Hunt, a team of volunteers participated in an invasives-removal day along *Bonnie Brook*, technically known as first to second order class C stream T-28. This sweet little rivulet drains south from the hills of Shushan into the stalwart Battenkill. As the tech-name suggests she is not offered much priority in the hierarchy of streams – in fact she was all but forgotten until holistic ecologist David Hunt made a commitment 16 years ago to bring her back to health.

Why, you say, do I make this sound so personal? It was. For anyone who knows the ferocity that takes place at least biannually on a home landscape clearing the unwanted flora and dead vegetative matter, you know how “getting the job done in as little time possible” reigns supreme. One rips and tears at various shrubs, cuts and bends back what stands in the way of the desired yard. For the stubbornly entrenched plants asserting their territory, one may pull the Brush-B-Gone® or Monsanto’s Round-Up® from the shed. A very heavy handed approach – indeed.

David’s mechanics to riverbank restoration brings to the work a level of mindfulness where the removal of invasive plants is rooted in the knowledge of place. The day’s work was slow, methodical, and thoughtful. He had already tagged and meticulously mapped all the plants in question (this year: non-native Honeysuckle shrubs). The next step was to visually survey the selected plant for the best approach, then lop down the branches with the exception of a larger caliber branch that could be used as leverage. The team formed a chain to drag the cuttings as far from the edge of the wetlands as possible. Where this was not possible the branches were stacked at least 30 feet away from the stream bank. Wetlands are delicate, and it is easy to overlook a woodland geranium, or to stomp over the massive leaves of the skunk cabbage. The chain technique minimized the ground disturbance. Once the plant had been prepped, the stronger members of the group (not me, I was most useful as a strategic “dragger”) used leverage and brawn to wrest the plant and its roots from the ground. If the shrub’s root system was too large the plant was left in place with branches strategically cut back so that its seeds would not easily fall into the waterway and be carried downstream to root. When a plant was successfully pulled, we were instructed to use leaves and soil to cover the disturbed spot to minimize opportunity for more unwanted plants to take root.

Yes, the work that day was vigorous, but seeing this stream trailing through the most inspiring patches of skunk cabbage, Alders, ferns and sedge you ever did see, rose above any complaints of sore muscles. Freed of the choking presence of aggressive Tatarian Honeysuckle and Multiflora Rose that had overwhelmed the corridor, this delicate creek looked graceful, sparkling in the new light that could now reach the previously darkened understory. My movements throughout the day were slow, precise and measured. This rhythm was such that I was free to absorb my surroundings. Conscious effort was made to mind my steps through the brush. The tufts of sedge created uneven ground. When mixed with roots and mud (which claimed a shoe on four occasions) they could easily have caught an ankle or caused a fall if one moved too quickly.

I was able to be in the work, not just 'doing' the work. I felt a relationship with the landscape's flora and fauna; and none the least the little Bonnie Brook. In preparing this reflection I came across a term called "Spiritual Ecology". I think I came away from this experience knowing that the work to heal the stream was reciprocal in its healing of me.

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