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Gorge cleanup started small, but delivered big

Back in 1994, when John Roe and his nine-year-old son started hauling shopping carts, rusted metal and other garbage out of the Gorge waterway, the few people who noticed greeted the effort with a mixture of admiration and bewilderment. It did have a noble but doomed quality. Who would think that two people in a rowboat could clean a waterway that had been used as a dumping ground for at least 70 years and was still flooded with pollution from storm drains any time it rained?

But others — from scuba diving volunteers to businesses to governments — joined in the effort. Roe, whose personal sacrifices drove the initial cleanup, championed the formation of the Veins of Life Watershed Society. Grants paid for bigger workforces.

And by 2000, a symbolic milestone he had set was reached. The Gorge was the site, for the first time in 65 years, of a swimming race.

Today, the transformation is remarkable. Salmon have returned, eelgrass beds wave gently in the tides, eagles and cormorants perch in trees along the waterway and seals sometimes play in the reversing falls beneath the Tillicum Bridge, where the Gorge narrows.

The Gorge isn't the only success story. Last month supporters of the Bowker Creek Initiative celebrated the fourth anniversary of efforts to restore the creek, which originates near the University of Victoria and winds through Saanich and Oak Bay into the sea.

Most of the creek is now underground, captured in drain channels to allow development or to deal with the storm surges that development brought. Rainfall that had once moved through grasslands and forest and wetlands before reaching the creek began pouring in as surfaces were cleared and paved.

Controlling the flow and burying it seemed a good idea right up into the 1960s.

Now the three kilometres of Bowker Creek that remain above ground are being rehabilitated, with natural vegetation being replanted. Efforts to manage runoff — and especially contaminants — are underway. And at least in some places, there is the prospect of freeing the creek from its underground culverts. That's already happened in some locations in the region. In Esquimalt, for example, the final half-kilometre of Esquimalt Gorge Creek, which runs into the Gorge waterway, was freed from its underground culverts after some 30 years in darkness. The creek bed was restored; settlement ponds and wetlands created to improve water quality flowing into the Gorge; and walking trails created beside the newly visible waterway.

That \$1.2-million project, too, started as an improbable idea from one of the students working with Roe on the Gorge cleanup more than a decade ago.

Not every creek can be restored. And the costs can be daunting. But the benefits can be impressive.

Not just in terms of the ecological diversity regained or the beautiful walking trails or the new appreciation children gain for the natural cycle when a creek is as close as the neighbourhood park.

Not just in the soul-restoring opportunity to sit and watch a blue heron wade the shallows as the sun sets, and the sounds of water moving over rocks soothe.

These restored creeks and streams offer a way to improve the quality of the water that is flowing into the ocean and an incentive to do much more.

The Gorge cleanup seemed close to a lost cause when Roe and his son set out in their rowboat. The waterway's beauty today shows just how much we can accomplish when we are willing to just start working.

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