

Where a wandering stream has led us

Reflections on 20 years of F5C's varied volunteering

by Susan Schwartz, President, Friends of Five Creeks

In 1995, the City of Albany hired an Americorps intern, Sonja Wadman, to do something about creeks and watersheds. "Friends of" creek- and watershed groups were springing up all around the Bay Area, in a confluence of citizen enthusiasm, government funding, and dynamic leadership. Sonja (left, now as program director for the Waltham, MA, Land Trust) founded Friends of Five Creeks (F5C). The name came from the five creeks that border or run through Albany - Codornices, Marin, Village (a remnant of buried Marin), Middle (a remnant of Blackberry), and Cerrito.



Twenty-odd years later, few creek groups are still active, although the remnants tend to be strong. Friends of Sausal Creek in Oakland, also celebrating 20 years, is an example. Public environmental interest has broadened to urban gardening, bicycling, and environmental justice, among others. Global warming, rising seas, and uncertain water supplies loom.

This short article is not a history, evaluation of the effects of the "creeks movement," or analysis of the reasons for change. Rather, it dips briefly into the varied channels F5C has followed as we have explored what it means that "we all live downstream" - that is, we all are affected by how we and others treat the area where we live.

Starting with Monitoring: F5C chose early to remain an all-volunteer group, supporting what members wanted to pursue without major government support. Its first big success was a pioneer water-quality-monitoring program put together by Keith Alcock, then a grad student. Testing Cerrito and Codornices Creek monthly, we learned, for example, that while basic water quality was OK, Codornices Creek was cold enough for trout and salmon, while Cerrito was not.

Monitoring meant being out on the creek. Keith spotted cloudy water that turned out to be from EB MUD's cleaning water filters at its plant upstream. He objected. The discharges stopped. Later, F5C evidence of large discharges of untreated water into Codornices Creek led EB MUD to change its practices when water-mains broke. Through the years, mostly acting quietly, F5C has succeeded with many other watchdog efforts, from sewage pollution to permit violations to serious invaders like Japanese dodder. We also work with school groups doing monitoring as an educational activity (right).



Moving on to Hands-on restoration: The group's emphasis on hands-on restoration came from local architect Todd Jersey (right). In 1998-2000, he designed (for free), and F5C volunteers built, a handsome observation railing above Codornices Creek at the Ohlone Greenway. We also planted natives at what had been a fenced-off, ivy-choked creek. Todd spotted trout in the creek - something environmental professionals strongly doubted. We found someone with a permit to briefly stun and photograph a fish, proving that they were rainbow trout or steelhead (same species). This became a major factor promoting millions of dollars in professional restoration downstream.



More hands-on projects followed, eventually developing our pattern of monthly work parties, more work parties for interest groups from youth to businesses, and weekly "weed warriors" to try to care for the growing number of projects.

What F5C gives volunteers: Sonja Wadman left for graduate school, and Susan Schwartz (below) took over, first with co-chairs such as Jessica Hamburger Davenport, now a program manager at the Delta Stewardship Council. Other F5C volunteers have gone on to become successful environmental professionals at the San Francisco Estuary Institute, Coastal Conservancy, East Bay Regional Parks District, and similar agencies. Giving them a hand in their careers, and perhaps some useful experience, is another way F5C's effects have rippled outward.



Of course, we can't know the effect our hundreds of work parties have had on thousands of volunteers of all ages. Along with understanding nature and being inspired to care for it, we hope they learn many things. Lessons may range from how to use tools safely and effectively (many young people have had no experience with tools) to local history

that gives depth of understanding. Satisfactions vary, too: from getting rid of hostilities as you slay invasive weeds to the joys of achieving concrete, visible results and working as a team with strangers of different backgrounds.

Citizen science: Revitalizing urban creeks requires keeping nature in cities. That effort led to projects now dubbed citizen science. Our popular frog surveys from 2001 to 2007 took people outdoors at dusk and told us where these amphibians survived, another clue to what was worth protecting. More recently, our years of recruiting volunteers for annual surveys of Sudden Oak Death (right) may someday help slow this killer of magnificent trees.



A GPS survey of pepperweed along the East Bay shoreline failed to stimulate agencies to act against this invasive. We hope that our current mapping of invasives with cell-phone apps (right) will inspire the East Bay Regional Park District, which controls the future of nature in the East Bay.

Teaching and outreach: Helping the environment requires helping people learn about it. For F5C, this has meant many things. We design and install interpretive signs. We publish handouts on the history and geology of our sites, along with bookmarks with “fascinating facts” about our local creeks and a flyer and slideshows on local wildflowers.



Light-hearted teaching includes giving out fennel pollen with a handout on invasives, and “rot score” (left) and “paint a fish” festival activities for kids. Wonderful local experts have partnered with us - for example, bug hunts with Eddie Dunbar and making art with natural materials with Zach Pine. As global warming, sea level rise, and drought became salient, our information sheets, talks at work parties, and events like King Tides walks and “Hands Across the Sand” encourage dealing with those threats realistically and positively.

Since 2013, our Bay Currents lecture series has drawn top experts and frequent full houses to talks on Bay Area-wide natural history and environmental issues. Our monthly e-news has a broad reach, with Bay-wide environmental news highlights and action opportunities, wrap-ups on issues, and a profile of a “species of the month.”

Helping other groups: F5C chose early to remain small and local. Although our projects have stretched north into Richmond, south to Aquatic Park in Berkeley, and east to Tilden Regional Park, we seek mainly to help grow other local efforts.

Mainly through Berkeley Partners for Parks, our 501(c)3 fiscal sponsor, we recruited large numbers of UC Berkeley students to volunteer at other groups’ projects improving paths, parks, and creeks. Besides referring groups of volunteers to other projects and publicizing their work days, we lend tools and minor financial support - for example, supplying gloves or bags. This has strengthened projects from controlling invasives along the Bay Trail in Richmond to rebuilding paths in the Berkeley Hills to reviving Friends of Albany Hill (right).

Just exchanging information can be priceless for small organizations. Over the years F5C has taken leading roles organizing meetings of our sister groups, most recently through Shoreline Advocates. Three coordinators of other groups currently are members of our board.



Revitalizing nature in cities: Our greatest efforts are the most visible: hands-on transformation of neglected areas, and creating urban oases that welcome people and wildlife. The largest projects have created beauty and habitat along almost a half mile of formerly brush- and trash-choked Cerrito Creek at Albany Hill (right), and curbing invasive, fire-prone French broom in 75 acres at the El Cerrito Hillside Natural Area and large parts of Tilden Regional Park.



Smaller ones are keystones: for example, removing the wall of French broom that greeted Berkeley schoolchildren in Shorebird Park's "Nature Study Area," and rescuing Berkeley's Mortar and Grotto Rock Parks (left), islands of fascinating history and geology, from choking ivy and other weeds.

Some projects have been political - for example, a partnership with Berkeley Path Wanderers to make the Santa Fe Right of Way attractive and safe, so that neighbors and the city would accept taking down

blocking fences and completing the trail. Not every project has succeeded.

And the future? Maintenance is the weak point for keeping nature in cities. Cities do not have funds or staffs to maintain their natural areas. Especially on lower Codornices, we struggle with creations of consultants and agencies who were unrealistic about how their projects could be maintained as attractive urban amenities.

For 17 years, we have worked to make large parts of what is now Eastshore State Park "non-creepy" -- from removing trash and a forest of broom to controlling major invasives like yellow star thistle and pepperweed. Gradually, the East Bay Regional Park District is taking hold; this long-term partnership in upkeep may eventually be unneeded. But for now, as weeds burgeon each spring, F5C is stretched thin - our own fault, for taking on so many orphaned green islands in our sea of concrete.



Labor in nature remains a joy, with water, waving grasses, groves, and birds. With enough effort at a given site, the workload lightens over time. The future is unknown, but for now F5C will go on exploring what citizen volunteers can do. We hope some of you will join us.