

Green Scene: Celebrate our Rivers on BC Rivers Day

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The Coquitlam River runs high during a water release by BC Hydro. When the rains return, creeks and rivers will return to their normal level, making life easier for fish. I. McArthur photo.

The last Sunday in September marks World Rivers Day with events scheduled around BC including a number in the Tri-Cities area. Started in 1980 by Mark Angelo from BCIT when he organized a garbage cleanup on the Thompson River, what came to be called BC Rivers Day has been celebrated since 2005 as World Rivers Day. Whenever I stand on the bank of a river, I can't help but ponder where its waters have come from, the life it sustains and, yes, the pollution that is likely being carried downstream to unknown destinations. Rivers are truly critical for all life on earth and, like many people, I have always been drawn to them regardless of whether they are tiny trickling streams or awesome rivers with roiling waters.

Right now our wonderful weather, seemingly stalled in late August mode, is posing a challenge for the survival of young salmon in urban streams. Without rains to replenish them, most of these streams are now suffering from much diminished flows. This poses an especially difficult time for young coho which must find deeper pools of water where they can safely hold until the rains arrive. This late summer dry period, so typical of weather patterns on this coast, is the main reason some of our urban salmon streams do not support coho salmon. Coho require water year-round because they spend their first year in fresh water streams. In this regard, chum salmon are much better adapted for streams that are prone to drying during the summer as young chum immediately swim downstream to salt water when they emerge from the gravel in the spring.

I have always thought the Coquitlam River, the last major river to enter the magnificent Fraser before it discharges into the Salish Sea, is a perfect example of the essential role that rivers play in our lives. The flow in the Coquitlam River is partitioned among several important uses. For approximately a century, some of its waters have been diverted into a tunnel which flows into Buntzen Lake and is used by BC Hydro to generate the electricity which lights our homes, powers industry and heats our meals. We also rely on the Coquitlam River as one of the three main sources of drinking water in Metro Vancouver. And, of course, we use this “drinking” water for many purposes including cooking, cleaning, watering our lawns, supplying businesses and flushing our wastes to sewage plants.

Below Coquitlam Lake where a dam has raised the level of the Lake, the lower Coquitlam River now flows as a mere fraction of its former self but it remains a beautiful river which slowly transforms from a boulder-strewn stream near the Patricia Street pedestrian bridge in Port Coquitlam to a meandering river through Colony Farm Regional Park. Along the way, the River provides a beautiful backdrop to our community. The forested areas along the River provide critical wildlife habitat and contain delightful trails enjoyed by thousands of people. Right now, our continuing demands for drinking water are drawing down the water level in the Coquitlam Lake. However, we can rest assured that the changing season will eventually bring rains to replenish our lakes, refill our streams, recharge ground water and provide spawning habitat for adult salmon.

I have just returned from a month long trip to Peru where I was reminded of how lucky we are to live in a place where the rains fall on such a reliable basis and keep us supplied with ample amounts of water. Peru's capital city, Lima, is in a much more precarious situation. Lima, a city of over 8 million people, is located on the coastal desert where rain seldom falls. For many years, the City obtained drinking water from the Rimac River which flows from glaciers in the Central Cordillera of the high Andes. Sadly, the Rimac River is now mostly a dry stream bed more full of garbage than water where it once flowed through Lima. With the onset of global warming, the glaciers which supplied the Rimac are disappearing at a shocking rate. Engineers in Lima are scrambling to construct tunnels through mountains and build dams to augment their vanishing water supply; these are costly (and hazardous) solutions for a poor and earthquake-prone country.

So, I have to admit, as much as I enjoy the sunshine, once the fall rains arrive, like the salmon in the streams, I will be rejoicing at the return of our rainy season with its abundance of water and the renewal of life in our streams which it will bring. Surely, it's a blessing to be living in a rain forest.