

HISTORY OF THE YACHATS COMMUNITY PARK AND WETLANDS

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For years, a hidden treasure lay behind the Yachats Commons—a natural wetlands once fed by streams and rainwater from the hillside east of Highway 101 until a manmade ditch drained it and left it to become a tangle of blackberry, salal, and willows, used as a garbage dump and by transients. Over the past ten years, a dedicated corps of volunteers reclaimed this environmental jewel and brought back a healthy, functioning wetlands. This is the story of how the Yachats wetlands was restored.

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When Jerry Kraft retired in 1997 from his position as an entomology professor at Western Washington University in Bellingham, he and his wife Cheryl moved to Yachats. Both began volunteering in the Yachats community. Jerry joined the Yachats Watershed Council and the Mid-Coast Watersheds Council of Lincoln County. He received a grant to monitor water quality in four watersheds in the county, including the Yachats River, and trained volunteers to do the monitoring. He joined the Yachats Parks & Commons Commission and was then elected to City Council where he began developing plans to restore the wetlands behind the Commons. Approximately 4.3 acres, the area was city property and the restoration project had been considered ever since the old elementary school was bought in 1989 to serve as the location for city government and a focus for community activities. Jerry developed a three-year plan for the project after City Council accepted a master plan for the Yachats Parks & Commons Commission.

Sadly, Jerry died of cancer in 2003. In his memory, a task force was formed by Cheryl Kraft and then-mayor, Lee Corbin. The task force included Don Niskanen, president of the Friends of the Yachats Commons; Cy Kauffman, chair of the Parks & Commons Commission; Leslie Carter, also on the Parks & Commons Commission; David Schlesinger, fish biologist; Paul Engelmeyer, National Audubon Society; Keith Kraft, Jerry's brother and also an entomologist; Chad Link, developer; Betty Bahn, Master Gardener; Jim Gerdemann, botanist; Jim Adler, water quality monitor; Ray Meehan, city council member; Mark Doyle, excavator; and Larry Lewis, Yachats city planner. Evelyn Everett joined the task force later.

In 2003, the wetlands appeared as an impenetrable wall of Himalayan blackberry, ivy, and other invasive species. On the west side of the wetlands was a spruce grove, shaped by years of wind and salt-laden air. The area had been used as an illegal dump, inhabited by transients and illegal drug users. In the seventies, when

Yachats fire chief Frankie Petrick took the students she home-schooled in the fire house into the wetlands for a botany lesson, she pointed out the gnarled spruce tree (Big Spruce) in the middle of the wetlands and told them to go there if they got separated—it was the only visible landmark they could see above the blackberries. It was hard to know that wetlands existed in the area, but people like Jerry and other members of the task force had the expertise to identify the treasure buried under the snarl of brush and garbage.

Historical evidence backed up the biological analysis. Sam Case, Farm Agent for the Alsea Sub-agency which managed the forced re-location of Indians during the years 1860-1875, noted in his annual report for 1869 that crops planted in a boggy area, even root vegetables, failed. That boggy area might well have been the wetlands west of the Commons. Betty Bahn's mother reported her own mother's accounts of seeing migratory fowl landing in the wetlands—including swans.

When enough of the blackberries had been removed, members of the task force discovered a deep ditch which had been excavated to drain the wetlands exiting at W. 6th Street. Bert Harley, who moved to Yachats in 1946, and Al Green who attended the Yachats School, also in 1946, remember a stream that they think may have been manmade. Al and his friends played with frogs and pulled skunk cabbage out of the waterway. He remembers it being muddy and he didn't venture too far into the water. Back in 1948, Judy (Carson) Kauffman and Sherri Hall were not supposed to play that far to the west of the elementary school. Sherri said her parents, Doris and Lester Hall, would have been upset if she came home with muddy shoes, although Judy also remembers that native plants provided a great place for hide-and-seek. The boys, more willing to venture into the brush, discovered the ditch. Elaine Harley also attended the Yachats School for 6th through 8th grade (1945-1948). Like Judy and Sherri, she doesn't recall going far into the area to play. The spruces on the west side of the wetlands were tiny, Elaine remembers. You could see the ocean from the school, which is no longer possible. Another classmate, Doris Gardenhire, remembers how wet the area was, from the back of the school all the way to the Adobe Resort, a memory corroborated by Al Green. By the early seventies, when Frankie Petrick and her students brushed out a trail for their botanizing expeditions, the area was already a blackberry jungle, although she does recall the ditch and the swampy conditions as well.

No one knows for sure why the ditch was excavated. Betty Bahn, who is a retired nurse, speculates that it was the polio scare of the 1930s and locals' fears that the wetlands could be a breeding ground for insects that could carry the virus. Elaine Harley, also a nurse, supports Betty's speculation. It's also possible that parents thought their children faced more danger from the wetlands than from the possibility of falling

into the ditch. One thing is certain: the mud was like glue, really difficult to wash off—which the task force members and other volunteers can attest to.

Members of the task force divided into committees to tackle several tasks. The biggest were grant-writing and fundraising. Planner Larry Lewis took on the search for grant money. Leslie Carter and Cheryl Kraft led the quest for private donations.

Phase 1 was a challenging learning curve for the task force. Permits and approvals had to be obtained from a variety of agencies, even after the Yachats City Council approved the project. Planning, hiring consultants, and complying with State and Federal regulations for wetland restoration work were ongoing tasks. Public hearings were held to get input from local citizens and groups about what they wanted in the wetlands area. Students in the Yachats Youth and Family Activities Program (YYFAP) had some strong desires, including a skate park and a swimming pool. Despite some strong lobbying on behalf of the skate park, neither idea became part of the wetlands restoration project, but other valuable additions came out of the students' input, discussed below.

Larry Lewis, with the assistance of Don Niskanen, wrote a grant application to the Oregon Parks & Recreation Department for \$75,000. The task force met the 40% match requirement, for a total budget of \$125,000.

The task force hired retired OSU professor and landscape architect John Stewart, who created a conceptual master plan. His fee was \$4,000; however, he never sent in a bill for his work, in essence donating his contribution to this project.

In December, 2003 a boardwalk was constructed between the Big Spruce in the middle of the property to West Sixth Street, connecting to the Yachats Library on Seventh Street. The boardwalk was built by Lake Price, contractor, from Reedsport. The treated wood was environmentally safe; but careful attention was paid to make sure that no treated wood would touch the ground and the wetlands themselves. Concrete pilings supported the framing and decking. One part of the boardwalk is removable, and it was removed temporarily when the west pond was graded in 2006.

Initiated by Leslie Carter, a Peace Garden was constructed in 2004, fulfilling one of the wishes of the YYFAP kids. They continue to tend the garden, producing vegetables and beautiful flowers in raised boxes shaped like a peace symbol. An arbor and trellis were designed and built by Syri Hamilton, bordering the parking lot behind the Commons and creating a separation between the cars and the children's playground to the west.

Before any further wetlands restoration work could begin, a permit was needed from the Department of State Lands (DSL). One of the permit requirements was a

wetland delineation report. Loverna Wilson, an environmental consultant, prepared a report which documented four separate wetlands areas. Both John Stewart and Loverna Wilson visited the site several times in order to complete their reports. Paul Adamus, a wetland scientist, and Nancy Holzhauser, a wetlands consultant, prepared the final report on which the DSL application was based, with a detailed plan for restoration of a fresh-water wetlands.

While DSL is vigilant about approving restoration plans, they may have been “kinder” to the Yachats task force, since it was obvious that the task force was proceeding with persistence and incredible attention to detail to reverse the damage this fragile landscape. It took some time, but DSL finally approved the project.

Approval was also needed from the Army Corps of Engineers. However, since the project was small, DSL and the Army Corps of Engineers agreed that no additional permit was needed. The task force also contacted the State Water Board to make sure no additional permits or other requirements would be imposed. They were assured that none was.

While approval of the DSL permit was pending, David Schlesinger, on behalf of the City of Yachats, prepared a grant application to the state Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) for a supplemental grant for wetland restoration. The guidelines for the grant included improvement of access to coastal resources. Of course, that is not what the project intended. The access was there; money was needed to improve the wetlands (coastal resources). Despite not fitting the guidelines, a grant of \$27,000 was awarded with no match requirements. The task force speculated that the reviewers were impressed with the project goals, the objectives already met, and the honesty of the task force.

In 2006, Phase 2 began. Bill Bodewig, a local tree cutter and invasive species remover, and Calder Bell, arborist, were hired to clear out the invasive plants so that others could access the property and start restoration work. The first project was to remove the blackberries and other invasive species covering the four wetland areas, grade those areas, and fill in the drainage ditch that had been there for decades. Steve Trask, a fisheries biologist from Alsea, was hired as the project manager. Terry Duman from Florence, who had done similar work for the Forest Service, was hired to do the grading.

It was determined that additional boardwalks were needed. Application was made to LCDC to re-direct funds still remaining in the grant to finish the boardwalk project. They readily approved, since the boardwalk additions clearly met the application guidelines for enhancing access. Doug Thompson from Roseburg was hired to construct the boardwalk from the Big Spruce to Fourth Street. An additional extension

was built from the main boardwalk into the spruce forest. Later, an additional path was built along the east side of the wetlands, with volunteer labor as usual.

The ball field was re-oriented from the northwest to the northeast section of the open area adjacent to the wetlands. Fencing was installed on the north border of the field and around home plate to prevent balls from hitting cars, people, and nearby buildings. Nine benches were constructed by Steve Kolstad of Yachats and placed around the wetlands area. All were donated by people to commemorate different individuals. The first plaque was in honor of Jerry Kraft.

An osprey platform was installed. This took some ingenuity. Ordinarily, utility poles are used. New poles, made of specially-raised Douglas fir from Canada, cost \$6,000. Some “retired” poles were located in the Central Lincoln PUD utility yard. The platforms themselves are usually built with a pallet or similar material. However, Betty Bahn and the task force decided they wanted something sturdier. A pallet plan was found online. PUD paid for the pallet. However, the task force paid to have all the nuts and bolts changed to stainless steel. Ray Meehan built it. The PUD brought the pole and augured a hole thirteen feet deep. While the PUD staff went to breakfast, task force volunteers attached the nesting platform to the top of the pole. When the pole was finally in place, it stood 60+ feet off the ground. To date, no ospreys have made a home there, but hope remains.

It was agreed that there would be no further alterations beyond the grading and removing the invasive species and planting native species. If the wetlands were to fill with water, nature needed to run its course. The task force agreed to wait and see—and as is obvious today, the wetlands did fill with water.

The next phase—planting—was crucial. The deep wetland soils are clay and highly acidic, which is why it takes a lot of scrubbing to get it off clothes and skin. However, certain plants thrive in this environment. Many wetland plants returned by themselves - testament to the seeds in the soil bank waiting for the right conditions to grow again. Much to the delight of the task force members, native plants started to show up almost immediately. Green Hellebore (*Veratrum viride*), *Boykinia elata*, and cat tails appeared.

Two major planting days were scheduled, one in the fall and the other the following spring. Volunteers put over 4,000 plants in the ground during those two planting days. *Rosa nutkana* (Alaska rose) was planted thirteen feet deep around the osprey pole to discourage people from trying to climb it.

Experimentation is continual to determine what will grow where. Kathleen Sand, co-owner of the Gerdemann Botanical Preserve, David Schlesinger, and Betty Bahn,

planted some *Lilium occidentale* (Western tiger lily) which was originally collected by Jim Gerdemann – a rare and endangered plant. This proved quite successful. All plantings are documented. A complete list of plants can be found in the Yachats Community Park brochure and on the GoYachats.com website.

Many wildlife species now make their home in the four wetlands areas. Red-legged frogs, an endangered species, are present, as are a variety of ducks, including mallards, scaups, and red phalarope. Green herons, great blue herons, and egrets frequent the wetlands. There are newts (rough-skinned salamander), and numerous songbirds, including red-winged blackbirds and marsh wrens whose calls ring out from their nests in the willows and cattails. In summer 2012, a muskrat was seen in the main pond, harvesting the cattails.

Another YYFAP wish was to have a tree house adjacent to the playground. The kids brainstormed the design features. Over the next several years, funds were raised, boosted by additional contributions from the Friends of the Commons and the Commons budget. However, when sufficient funds were in hand, the project stalled because a county permit was needed, including an engineering design. Several local engineers were approached and all declined—for liability reasons and probably lack of experience in designing tree houses. A year or so later, Charlie Greenwood at Treehouse Engineering, agreed to provide the plans at 10% of his standard fees. Bids were obtained from a local licensed builder, but the engineered design and the higher than expected labor costs left the project short of the necessary funds. Ultimately, Chris Graamans, a local wood artist who had served as chair of YYFAP for many years, offered to build the tree house for free. YYFAP scraped together some more money for materials. Construction began in October 2010 and was completed in December.

The covered picnic shelter behind the Commons had been completed several years earlier, sponsored by the Lions and the Parks & Commons Commission. However, the cold north winds that blow in the summer diminished its usability. In 2011, glass enclosures were installed under the direction of then city council member Dave Rieseck.

Maintenance of the wetlands is an ongoing project, undertaken by Betty Bahn, David Schlesinger, and Don Niskanen. Dylan McDowell, a high school student, monitored the area for a year, reporting on plant and wildlife in the wetlands to the Parks & Commons Commission. YIPS, the invasive plants subcommittee of the Yachats Trails Committee, has spent many hours in the wetlands park, pulling blackberry and ivy.

While oral reports from people who lived in Yachats in the mid-forties make it clear that the ditch that drained the wetlands went in before that time, their testimony

also attests to the persistence of the wet, boggy area, begging to come back as a functioning wetlands.

This was achieved, as is so much, in Yachats, by the competence, collaboration, tenacity, and vision of the local all-volunteer wetlands task force, and all the others who donated labor and expertise to achieve that vision. Yachats is a community that is proud of its achievements. As long as we continue in this tradition of volunteers and cooperation, our village will thrive and continue to meet its mission.

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