

The Trouble with Tributaries

Restoring the urban Amazon

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Amazon Creek. Photo by Todd Cooper.

Walking through downtown, it's easy to miss Eugene's wayward waterway, hidden in culverts and secreted away behind swathes of pavement and sidewalk. Though Amazon Creek shares its name with a mighty South American river, the comparisons stop there. It once provided a connective pathway for fish and other wildlife traveling from its headwaters near Spencer Butte to the Long Tom River, which further connects to the Willamette River and drains all the way to the Pacific Ocean. But after heavy restructuring in the 1940s and '50s to mitigate stormwater flooding, Amazon Creek took on an entirely different persona.

Over the decades, the creek has succumbed to the pressures of its urban lifestyle. Stormwater drains directly into this tributary of the Willamette, carrying with it pesticides, heavy metals from parking lots and motor oil from leaky cars. Algae grows in the stagnant waters near South

Eugene High School, forming a thick layer of slime during the summer, and the canals that redirect Amazon Creek's flow seem more like stagnant moats than a corridor in a healthy ecosystem.

Amazon Creek has its flaws, but like a delinquent child, it also has a number of people interested in its welfare. One of those people was Erin Noble, whose parents live close to the Amazon headwaters. Before his death in a 2012 airplane crash in Veneta, Erin used to hike from his parents' house near the headwaters all the way to Spencer Butte several times a week.

"He felt very attracted and drawn to this place," says Deborah Noble, his mother, who has been actively involved in acquiring the Amazon headwaters for preservation.

Erin's friends say that he was a true adventurer, and not a moment of his 27 years was wasted. He traveled to England, France and Peru, hiked along the Pacific Crest Trail and always made friends along the way. His passion for people and the environment was a source of inspiration.

Erin Noble's love of Eugene and its natural areas came to the surface in June 2012, when he approached his dad about helping out with the Southeast Neighbors of Eugene in their goal to protect the headwaters. "Erin came to me and said, 'Let's save the Amazon headwaters, Dad,'" says Peter Noble, a longtime businessman in the timber industry and founder of West Wind Forest Products.

Erin intended to join the conservation efforts after he finished volunteering for the Oregon Country Fair, but the plane crash prevented him from carrying out his goal.

"I was really excited about the things he was saying," says Kevin Matthews, former longtime president of the Southeast Neighbors. "His energy would have been a huge asset to getting people involved. He had an honest enthusiasm and an infectious light that could really connect with a lot of people."

In his honor, Erin's parents launched the Be Noble Foundation, a nonprofit devoted to raising enough money to acquire the Amazon headwaters and protect them from development. Erin's friends and family say they are committed to carrying on his spirit and legacy by saving the land he loved. They want to see a change in the way Eugene's natural resources are treated.

So far, the Amazon headwaters have avoided major restructuring from development, and the Nobles want to keep it that way. Nestled in the south hills of Eugene just above Martin Street, the headwaters carry water from the upper reaches of Amazon Creek to the lower portions, including those that run through town. The Ridgeline Trail follows segments of the creek, surrounded by towering oak trees and Douglas firs. Glimpses of Spencer Butte loom through the tree-shrouded sky, and the quietness that comes with a natural area prevails, save for the gentle tumbling of the stream. As water flows down from this area, it carries food, nutrients and debris to the ecosystems farther down, although right now, there's not much of a functioning ecosystem directly below.



Deborah Noble in the forest where her son Erin used to hike.
Photo by Trask Bedortha.



Kevin Matthews. Photo by Trask Bedortha.

But for Amazon Creek, change is happening. The Long Tom Watershed Council (LTWC) works with local businesses to improve water quality through simple measures such as landscape alteration. By building rain gardens and bioswales, areas of vegetation and soil that slow the entry of water into the stormwater system, businesses along the creek can reduce their impact on the creek's water quality. Already, the LTWC has partnered with In Shape Athletic Club to

remove excess asphalt from their property and replace it with soil and native plants, allowing stormwater to filter through instead of draining directly into the creek.

“We have to increase the demand for those kinds of landscapes,” says Dana Dedrick, executive director of the LTWC. “We’d love to have more Amazon Creek champions, and now that we know a lot of our vision is possible, much more possible than we thought, we want to keep building the community support.”

Dedrick says that the LTWC envisions an Amazon Creek that allows safe passage for trout and other wildlife, and with each improvement to the land surrounding Amazon Creek, the prospect of a healthy habitat draws a little closer. “Imagine angling for trout from Fern Ridge Trail,” Dedrick says. “There are people who remember playing in Amazon Creek when they were little. It’s not that far off — we’ve got a lot of potential.”

Last year, the LTWC discovered three native cutthroat trout in the lower reaches of Amazon Creek all the way near Junction City, further confirming the creek’s capacity for harboring native species as it once did. Dedrick says the fish were all around one foot long and were found about a quarter mile from where Amazon Creek connects to Long Tom River. “What they’re likely doing is exploring,” Dedrick says. “Some experts firmly believe that trout can successfully inhabit Amazon Creek.”

It will take some time and effort, possibly including modifications to the concrete sections of the creek. But Jason Schmidt, the LTWC’s urban watershed restoration specialist, says that controlling water pollution is a big step in the right direction. If local businesses continue making adjustments to their landscapes, Amazon Creek could be well on its way to a state of remission.

But the Nobles’ vision of a healthy Amazon isn’t yet a sure thing. While groups like the LTWC are helping the creek revert to a more natural state through town, the waterway’s point of origin might go in the opposite direction. The Amazon headwaters area is currently slated for development by Leslie and Martin Beverly, who own a 26-acre parcel of land that includes a portion of the headwaters. The Beverlys did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

For more than 10 years, the Southeast Neighbors have worked together to block development of the headwaters, a partially successful effort on their part. In 2008, the city worked with the Southeast Neighbors to purchase 40 acres of land from Joe Green for \$1.4 million. At this time, the Beverlys also offered to sell their land, but at a price of \$4 million, and the city decided not to purchase. The land known as the Beverly property is the last parcel of the Amazon headwaters with its fate undecided.

If the city of Eugene were to purchase the Beverly property, as it did with the Green property, it would most likely use funds from the 2006 Parks and Open Space bond measure, which is set aside specifically for acquiring or improving parks and natural areas and cannot be used for other purposes. The Southeast Neighbors estimate that a portion of land called the Deerbrook PUD property is worth approximately \$1 million, and while the property has not been appraised since before the housing crash, Matthews says that the Southeast Neighbors have offered to partner with the Beverlys for re-appraisal, which has not yet happened.

With Amazon Creek's already dilapidated condition, paving the headwaters and building houses will impact the water quality further down. Proponents of conserving the Amazon headwaters argue that the headwaters represent a keystone area, crucial to retaining connectivity between watersheds and providing habitat to native plant and animal species.

Matthews, who is planning to run for the East Lane County commissioner position next year, says about 60 percent of water runoff in Eugene drains into Amazon Creek. "It really is the dominant native watershed of Eugene," he says. "This is the last place where we could actually complete a habitat corridor between other preserved headwaters land and this greenway."

In the 2003 Rivers to Ridges Vision plan, which lays out a framework for future parks and open spaces in the Eugene metro area, the headwaters are identified as a possible park and open space area, and the report lists their importance in terms of scenic quality, connectivity and habitat. Jeff Krueger, a principal member of the team responsible for the Rivers to Ridges plan, says that the closeness of the headwaters to the Ridgeline Trail System makes them a desirable candidate for preservation. "In general, the headwaters area was one of those key areas in that open space vision," he says.

Building houses on the headwaters will be a big change for a landscape that has so far avoided urbanization. Over the years, the city has denied several attempts to build on the land due to the steepness of the parcel, but in March 2012, developers proposed to build 75 single-family houses on the Beverly property in the segment known as the Deerbrook PUD property. This would involve the clearing away of habitat and soil and the introduction of pavement. And troubled Amazon Creek, already smothered down by development where it runs through the city, takes a hit if the waters that feed the creek are modified to accommodate buildings. Everything flows downstream from the headwaters, meaning that soil disturbance and pollutants caused by construction can impact the entire creek farther down.

The LTWC's work in town to install rain gardens and bioswales reduces the negative impacts of too much pavement. While river lovers are hoping to remove concrete downtown, developers of the Beverly property plan to add more of it upstream. "As with any development that takes place, the impacts of impervious surface can lead to erosion in the creek channel and the carrying of other pollutants into the waters," Schmidt says.

According to Tom Pringle, a biochemist and researcher who has been actively involved in the restoration of a portion of Amazon Creek, an increase in impervious surfaces can lead to more flooding. Impervious services like concrete prevent stormwater from properly draining. Instead of soaking into the ground and seeping through a natural filtration system of soil, which removes contaminants along the way, water slides off of impervious surfaces and into storm drains, dumping the water into Amazon Creek unfiltered. Pringle says that runoff from Amazon Creek below 24th Avenue could create costly flooding without proper management. When the creek experiences a spike in peak flow after heavy rainfall, the headwaters play an important part in mitigating that flow.

"In a sense, property owners wanting to develop the last of the upper watershed have to pass off the downside costs of development to people, nature and businesses below them in the watershed," Pringle wrote in an email.

Development also presents a problem to native plant and animal species, some of which are considered by the state of Oregon as rare or threatened. The Mayor's 2008 Ad Hoc Committee report on the Amazon headwaters said that professional biologist Dave Konfrank discovered

several species of rare mosses and lichen on the former Green property, while biologist Tom Titus found the state-listed sensitive northern red-legged frog in the headwaters area.

“It’s really special,” Matthews says. “So much of those timber acres have been logged and re-logged, but these little untouched pockets are kind of priceless.”

The 2012 development project was initially rejected, but the Eugene Planning Commission voted in December to approve the PUD with a reduced number of houses. The Southeast Neighbors then appealed the reversal to the Land Use Board of Appeals (LUBA), and they’re currently raising money to cover the legal costs of their appeal. Matthews says that the Southeast Neighbors have already raised \$27,000, but they are in need of \$13,000 more to continue paying their legal defense bill. What happens next depends on LUBA’s decision.

When Erin Noble walked through the forested areas of Amazon Creek, eyes set on the outline of Spencer Butte, he felt a connection to the natural landscape. Before he died, he expressed his love for the headwaters and his desire to keep them free of development.

His friends and family carry on his dream now, but so do organizations like the LTWC, which seek collaborative solutions to improve water quality and restore some of Amazon Creek’s original functions. At this point, when the creek is drawing ever closer to its natural state, a step in the wrong direction could be a huge setback, further stalling the appearance of cutthroat trout and other wildlife.

Amazon Creek isn’t a shining beacon of health. It weaves its way through the heart of Eugene, but it’s been neglected for a long time, molded into practical uses instead of ecological ones. Dedrick says she wants to help restore the creek to a more youthful state of health, but she needs participation from the entire community to move forward. “People look at Amazon Creek and they might underestimate the kind of fish and wildlife corridor it can be,” Dedrick says. “It’s a hidden gem that comes from Spencer Butte down to where we grow our food. It connects us all.”