

Natural Currents

“To provide education and leadership in the conservation and sustainable use of soil- and water- related resources through cooperative programs that protect, restore and improve our environment.”



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- Matt Steffy
Invasive Plant
Coordinator
- Karyn Noyes
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Technician
- Devony Lehner,
Special Projects

HOMER’S FIRST SCHOOL YARD HABITAT



Students learn plant identification and the difference between native and non-native plants. The students will also complete a plant collection for future students.

Taking a lesson from Henry David Thoreau, students at West Homer Elementary (WHE) School are learning that it’s possible to take a field trip in your own back yard. With funding from the US Fish & Wildlife Service School Yard Habitat program, the Homer District has been working with WHE faculty and students to plan and construct an interpretative trail on the undeveloped property behind the school’s playground. This part of Homer has been growing steadily since the school opened over a decade ago. The time seemed right to focus on

the habitat values this parcel can provide in a suburban environment and at the same time engage students in lessons on ecology, conservation, and life sciences.

BOARD NOMINATIONS & ELECTIONS

The Homer Soil and Water Conservation District is calling for nominations and holding the annual election to its 5-member District Board of Supervisors. This newsletter includes an official nomination form for anyone interested in running for a seat on the Board. To be eligible, an individual must be signed up as a District “cooperator” and be nominated by at least three other District cooperators. Please note: **nomination forms must be submitted to the DNR Commissioner’s office (Attention NRCDB Executive Director) no later than 5:00 p.m., Friday, November 8, 2013.** Nominations may be faxed to 907-269-5605.

Soil and Water Conservation Districts work as a grassroots form of local governance authorized under state law. They create bridges between individual cooperators—landowners committed to sustainable use of the natural resources they manage—and other partners, including non-governmental organizations and all levels of government. The aim is to combine and coordinate resources to achieve shared conservation goals. The District model was established in the 1930s by Congress as a way to

DISTRICT NOMINATIONS and ELECTIONS (continued from page 1)

promote coordinated conservation approaches to healing soils during the “Dust Bowl” of the 1930s.

Alaska’s first District was established in 1947. Districts now serve in an advisory capacity to the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, helping set conservation priorities at the local level, and representing local land users in partnerships with state, federal, and non-profit agencies working together to manage, conserve, and sustainably develop natural resources.

For more information on serving on the Board please contact our office at 235-8177 ext 5 or send us an email at info@homerswcd.org. Visit our website at www.homerswcd.org to see our programs and activities.

OH NO! NOT KNOTWEED!

BY MATT STEFFY, DISTRICT INVASIVE PLANT COORDINATOR

Having moved back to the southern peninsula last fall to become the Invasive Plant Coordinator with the Homer District, I’m getting familiar with invasive plants in our region. Orange hawkweed, fall dandelion, and hemp nettle are obvious, but we’re not just looking for invasives already known around town. We’re also looking for unexpected invaders from a silent army of potentially troublesome plants infiltrating our neighborhoods. These are often planted as ornamentals, without understanding of the harm these plants can do.

I was surprised one evening when my wife looked over at the corner of our house and asked, “Isn’t that a knotweed plant?” Japanese knotweed, also known as false bamboo, grows as a segmented stalk resembling bamboo but with a large spear-shaped leaf branching from each node along the stalk. Along with Bohemian knotweed—with which it can hybridize—Japanese knotweed occurs throughout Southeast Alaska and Kodiak Island. Knotweed is one of the top three invasive plants of concern in our region. Its control consumes much of the funding available for terrestrial invasive plants. The state of Alaska spent \$1.4 million between 2007 and 2011 just on white sweetclover, Japanese knotweed, and Reed canarygrass.

Knotweed is native to Japanese volcanoes, but it can survive in most environments. Its primary root produces massive annual shoots that can reach 12 ft in height in a single growing season. Aboveground shoots die back completely in the winter but return with vigor in the spring.

The root system can grow 20 ft down and 45 ft in every direction. (In Alaska’s cold soils, roots don’t grow this deep). New shoots have punched through 2 inches of concrete.

Once established, Knotweed is very hard to remove. Cutting existing stalks just causes the plant to send up new growth. Trying to dig it up triggers new shoots across a huge area, sometimes bigger than half an acre. The preferred method of eradication is injecting herbicide directly into EVERY SINGLE STEM of the plant. This carries the poison into the root system and kills the plant from the bottom up. This is what I will be doing to my knotweed in the spring. My only concern is that neighboring plants have been reported to die off after treatment of a knotweed infestation. Maybe the herbicide is released into adjacent plants, or maybe the death of such a monopolizing plant in a localized area triggers adjacent, short-term ecological impacts.

Japanese knotweed (photo from
<http://eattheinvaders.org/japanese-knotweed/>)



SCHOOL YARD HABITAT (continued from page 1)

The project began with student input: When asked what they'd like in an outdoor classroom, they came up with a long list. Not every suggestion made it into the master plan (no underground tunnels or elaborate tree houses), but lots of the kids' ideas were worked into the design. Along with a trail system, these include: a quiet place to sit and observe, an outdoor amphitheater, benches where you can draw or write, and a native flower gardens. District staff visited each class to find out what the students knew about the wildlife they might find living in their school yard—and what was needed to maintain healthy habitats. Ideas such as brush piles for small mammals and bird-houses were quickly incorporated into the plan. At the end of the school year, each classroom, along with several parent volunteers, spent time with rakes, shovels, and wheelbarrows to work on the trail and identify unique sites that could serve as “learning stations”—areas to be incorporated as interpretative sites.

The goal of US Fish & Wildlife's School Yard Habitat Program is to help teachers and students create wildlife habitats at their own schools. A schoolyard habitat becomes an outdoor classroom for field studies and observations. A well-designed project that is integrated into the curriculum will foster ecological stewardship in students and encourage natural curiosity about science. This year promises to be full of habitat lessons for the students of West Homer, including outdoor activities that teachers and kids will appreciate all the more for having helped make them possible.

KNOTWEED (continued from page 3)

It's an odd blessing that one of the state's most destructive ornamental invasives was discovered growing at the newly purchased home of the new Invasive Plant Coordinator for the District. I wonder how many of my neighbors and community members have invaders in their yards without even knowing it. It makes sense to inventory the vegetation around your house. Whether you've lived there for years or just bought your home, take the time to look around and become familiar with your vegetative tenants. You may be able to stop a dangerous invasion.

LOCAL WORKING GROUP – A CHANCE TO GIVE US INPUT

On December 12, Homer Soil and Water will be facilitating a “Local Working Group” (LWG) meeting. These meetings occur every 5 years and provide individuals and organizations with an opportunity to tell the District which natural resource issues and concerns are of highest priority to them. Meetings also enable participants to identify how best to coordinate their mutual efforts to address priorities. We look forward to getting community input. As Chris Rainwater, District Chair, commented: *“I hope we get blindsided by brand new ideas about unmet needs.”*

UPDATE ON TWO DISTRICT PROJECTS: WETLANDS AND PEOPLE'S GARDENS

HELPING WETLANDS DO THEIR JOBS

Homer Soil and Water is now in Phase 2 of a two-phase EPA-funded project to improve wetland management on the Kenai Peninsula. During Phase 1 (2010-2012), the District led a collaborative effort to identify and assess 16 functions and values of Kenai Peninsula wetlands. Functions are things wetlands do, like storing storm-water or maintaining streamflows; values are things that society cares about, like clean water, healthy fish populations, and open space for recreation. The two are closely interrelated. Phase 1 resulted in the publication: *Kenai Peninsula Wetlands – A Guide for Everyone*, which can be downloaded at www.homerswcd.org. During Phase 2, we're working with partners to identify management strategies and practices that can be used to maintain the functions/values of particular wetlands.

PEOPLE'S GARDENS

The District's People's Garden project has finished its second growing season. The 20 gardens established through this program have continued to enrich the lives of many gardeners—big and small, young and old—from Ninilchik on the north to Nanwalek on the south. More information is available on the District website.

Left: All ages planting at Haven House. Right: Wheelchair accessible garden boxes at South Peninsula Hospital Long-term Care.



To find out more about Homer Soil and Water Conservation District programs and projects, visit our website at www.homerswcd.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS & DEADLINES

- October 17-18: Alaska Association of Conservation Districts Fall Conference – Anchorage
- November 5-6: Annual Invasive Species Conference – Fairbanks @ Princess Riverside Lodge
- November 13: HSWCD Board Meeting 5:00 pm @ USDA Service Center
- December 11: HSWCD Board Meeting 5:00 pm @ USDA Service Center
- December 12: HSWCD Local Working Group Meeting (location to be determined)

In partnership with USDA NRCS, the HSWCD is an Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer



4014 Lake Street, Suite 201
Homer, Alaska 99603

Phone: 907-235-8177 x 5
Fax: 907-235-2364
Email: hswcd@xyz.net
www.homerswcd.org

