

A Very Brief Overview
On The Histories of Some Marin County Creeks

Presentation to the Marin County Environmental Forum
Joshua N. Collins
San Francisco Estuary Institute
November 16, 1995

Introduction

I suggest that there are at least three kinds of history for creeks: (1) natural history, meaning the facts of geology, climate, stream hydrology, and ecology; (2) human history, meaning the factual accounts of human operations that have affected the creeks, and how the creeks have affected human operations; and (3) the fantastic history, meaning the stories and beliefs and myths that creeks nurture. The lengths of these histories is different. The natural history transcends eons. The human history goes back perhaps six thousand years, based upon the science of archeology and its finer disciplines. The fantastic history mostly reflects events since European contact, only because it has not included the creek stories by native cultures.

These kinds of histories have been written and published for some creeks in the Bay Area. There's a pretty good account of the human history of Petaluma Creek, now called the Petaluma River; of Strawberry Creek in Berkeley; of some creeks near the UC Santa Cruz Campus (but maybe this isn't the Bay Area), and a book about the creeks of Santa Clara Valley is in the making. I expect that there are other historical treatments. But I am not aware of any written account of any history of any creek in Marin. Some historical statements and art that refer to Marin creeks can be found. But is there a comprehensive account of any kind of history for any creek in Marin? I don't think so.

Certainly, I am not going to provide such an account at this time. But I can give you a taste of the natural history, the human history, and the fantastic history of Marin creeks that I expect is waiting to be written in detail by someone. Maybe you.

Let me end this introduction by saying that I am writing about some creeks in Marin that flow to San Francisco Bay. I am not going to talk about creeks that flow to Tomales Bay or the Pacific, although one of our most important creeks, Lagunitas Creek (including what I grew up calling Papermill Creek below the confluence of Lagunitas Creek and San Geronimo Creek) originates near the heart of Marin County, at the breast of the “Sleeping Maiden”, and returns the rains of Pacific storms back to the Pacific through Tomales Bay.

Natural History

The fundamental controls on the form and function of creeks are climate, geology, topography, and hydrology. These things interact, but their separate natures have not changed greatly since historical times. In the absence of human operations, or if they were not at all in conflict with the nature of creeks, then the historical picture resembles what would still exist today, and what could be restored, approximately.

An historical view of eastern marin shows that most creeks coming from the hills were small, incised (meaning they were cut into the plain), with narrow borders of creek-side vegetation, including some trees. Most of these trees were live oaks and bays, with some redwoods and ash. Willows were not so common here as in places further south in the Bay Area. Some exceptions are noteworthy. A fairly large stand of willows existed near the mouth of Mill Valley Creek. Many of the lesser creeks never made it to the bayshore, at least not above ground. These creeks dissipated into the permeable sediments that they carried down from places higher in their watersheds.

Runs of salmon and steelhead were mostly restricted to the perennial creeks that met the bayshore. But there is some evidence now that local populations of some of these fishes made use of some streams that were only connected to the bay during the wet seasons of very wet years. This means that the ecological functions of streams were naturally variable.

Human History

Now let's turn to Human History. I know very little about the details of this. Luckily, there isn't much room in this short article for details. So let's just sketch the main aspects of human history based upon the obvious. And let's assume that these obvious aspects are topics for careful study. And then somebody should go do that!

Pre-European creek history is about sustainability. The lower reaches of almost every perennial stream in Marin supported native peoples. For example, prominent towns existed where Mill Valley Creek, Corte Madera Creek, and Miller Creek entered the tidal marshlands. The number of people can only be estimated. But certainly tens of thousands of people lived upon the Marin piedmont and along the Marin bayshore for hundreds of centuries. Consider this: many intelligent people were living here for fifty or sixty centuries, and we should suppose that their past successful methods to deal with drought and deluge were fundamentally the same as what is done now. We should expect that the native peoples had reservoirs, that they diverted creek flows to make them more useful, and that they enhanced creeks as habitat for themselves and for desirable wildlife. Just this year, a discussion began of the possibility that the Laguna de San Antonio, and the "lake" at Lakeville, were actually reservoirs managed by native people. There is a growing interest to include native land use practices in the modern methodologies for land management. This should be encouraged.

When we think of the early use of our creeks by European settlers, we think of their having to locate themselves near permanent water for livestock and human consumption, and later for some kinds of agriculture. It is not by coincidence that early European settlements were associated with the towns of native peoples. Rather, it is evidence of their shared need for fresh water all year, the potential scarcity of that, and perhaps the basic social nature of all people, no matter where we come from.

As European people increased in number, and replaced the native peoples, the tendency to modify the landscape for human purposes also increased. The small seasonal streams were impounded as stock ponds.

There is abundant evidence of early flood control and creek bank stabilization, even before this century. I have a picture of a channelized creek somewhere between upper Ross and Fairfax, at about 1906.

Then came the capture of springs as little water districts, and the capture of the small districts by large ones, and so forth, to create a system of water distribution to meet the demands of a growing community of people, and which later became the infrastructure of the first public water district in California. The capabilities of the water districts were greatly expanded, with abundant public support, through construction of dams, mostly on Mt. Tam.

Through logging and grazing and water diversion and impoundment, some streams incised, abandoning their flood plains, lowering the local water table, affecting some local wells, and changing the creek-side vegetation. Other streams aggraded, being choked with sediments eroded from wrongful upstream land uses. Stream aggradation causes more frequent flooding, and the conversion of downstream reaches from perennial to seasonal features, as the permeable sediments pile up above the former creek bed. Some kinds of dams also increase flooding, when overflows during wet years encounter channels that have become smaller due to less flow in average years. Whether a stream becomes incised or aggraded depends upon the upstream interactions between people and the land. But no creek in Marin has been unaffected.

Since WWII, the decline in the ecological health of creeks has accelerated, due to point source and non-point source chemical pollution, due to thermal pollution (the loss of shade), due to disturbed hydrology, and due to the introduction of exotic species of plants and animals that tend to replace numerous native species and reduce the resilience of creek ecosystems.

Now there is a growing sense of loss, as more and more people enter the league of long-time residents, become native, learn the gossip of wildlife, and become aware of what is missing. There is a growing public desire to bring the creeks back, and to restore their health. And there is a growing response of government to meet these public desires and expectations.

Fantastic History

This kind of history is definitely fun. I bet most of us here can tell stories about creeks that celebrate them somehow, although our stories may not be completely factual. I want to leave you with a few of my favorites.

I grew up in San Anselmo, upstream from the Legion of Honor and Memorial Park, a stone's throw from the Sorich Dairy. In other words, I lived on a small tributary of San Anselmo Creek, on the East side of its upper watershed. The creek was the highway for kids. There were about a million of us, and almost everything we did, besides play baseball, depended on our little creek. We knew it perfectly. We knew where to be, relative to this or that tree, or the banktop, to hear our mothers call us home for lunch or supper. We knew where to cross without getting wet, and without getting into trouble. We knew where to find the wildlife.

Toad Hallow was especially important. In spring, there seemed to be an endless supply of toads and strings of toad eggs. I swear, you could close your eyes and catch a toad. One time, when I was wearing some new shoes, a big toad lured me in deep. To make matters worse, I was real late getting home. I hid my wet shoes under my bed. I put the toad in the toe of one shoe, and put the other shoe kind of on top, so the toad would stay wet and cold. But he got out, and found my Mom in the hall, half way between the kitchen and the bathroom. When she tried to catch him, he lead her back to my shoes. After that, I hardly ever wore shoes, especially when I was trying to catch toads.

When I was much older, I was standing on the balcony of Pop' Dunshee's top floor apartment at Dr. Siemen's fancy retirement home in Terra Linda. Pop was the husband of Verna. Maybe you've heard about her. The trail around the top of Mt. Tam is named in her honor. Pop was no slough, either. He was a great historian who equally loved people and the land. Pop was an engineer with PG&E. The great span of electricity across Carquinez Strait is his fault. But that's another story. We stood there on his balcony, hands against the iron railing, with light from the setting sun on our faces. Pop must have been about 92 years old. He moved like a different species. His thin hands were wrapped around the railing like the feet of a humming bird gripping a pine twig. Looking up the valley, I said: "Gee Pop, I remember when my brother and I would cross over the hill from San Anselmo to hunt quail along the creek up there. Those were pretty good times." "HuH!", said Pop. He had this habit of verbalizing exclamation points

with a loud, melodious, but sudden HuH!, which he put at the start of sentences. "HuH!", said Pop. "I remember a Miwok man and his wife who lived up there, right where the creek came out of the trees. He had a little necklace made from the tail feathers of red-shafted flickers, and the top notch feathers from valley quail. I can tell you, it was purdy-near perfect."