

Tuleyome Tales

A Creek Runs through It

By Lisa A. Baker

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Resource conservation and green house gas emissions are subjects on everyone's mind these days. We increasingly know that we, as a society, must change our lifestyle or be threatened with continued and accelerated loss of resources, reduced biodiversity and continued climate change.

What is less clear is what types of activities we can undertake that will help best preserve our resources and provide habitat for diverse species of plants and animals native to our area. For one neighborhood in Yolo County, the changes they have undertaken have been both large and small and have been directed at land use, habitat and education.

Driving on Russell from Davis to Winters, it's easy to pass by the tall green hedges on the left side of the road before the I-505 Interchange, oblivious to the housing development nestled behind those hedges and tucked into a wide bend of Putah Creek. Situated between the road and the creek and adjacent to orchards, it is a small community of 124 family rental units, owned and operated by Yolo County Housing, and which 445 people call home.

Over the past four years, the residents, working with a long list of partners that includes the Lower Putah Creek Council, the California Audubon Society and the John Muir Institute at U C Davis, have remade this section of the creek. This has improved the natural beauty of their surroundings, while also improving habitat for native plants, animals and fish in the area. Over three years, the residents and their partners cleared creek banks of garbage, debris, massive thickets of non-native blackberries and arundo and removed 60 Eucalyptus trees, which were milled and reused as terraces along the creek banks. Native grasses and plants were replanted, along with native Oak trees. In the creek itself, rock weirs were constructed that narrowed the channel and improved salmon spawning conditions. Residents and their children participated in all phases of the project and learned about the fish, wildlife and native vegetation of the area. As they became active stewards of the land, there was a desire to continue to learn more and to pass on that knowledge to their children for future generations.

Because of this desire, Yolo County Housing approached the John Muir Institute for the Environment and the University of California, Davis, Cooperative Extension 4-H Program to continue educational programming and to expand that education into other areas, which last year culminated in the development of a local 4-H chapter for the community. In its first year, the local 4-H chapter had 46

enrollees between the ages of 5 and 16. This 4-H Chapter focuses on academic success, environmental education and, of course, fun.

The first club activity was the Nature Club. The Nature Club meets weekly on Mondays from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. The Nature Club focuses on environmental education and activities that center around the portion of the creek located where the club members live. With the completion of the creek project, this is a truly beautiful section of Putah Creek with wild grasses, native flowering shrubs, hiking trail and large overhanging trees.

Notable Club projects have been the creation of a butterfly garden and the building and installation of bird feeders along the creek banks. To understand how Putah Creek is part of a larger ecosystem, 4-H members have also continued to participate in Coastal Clean-Up days. Future activities include the development of a sustainable community garden project on the property.

In order to meet the other objectives of the 4-H Chapter, namely academic success and fun, there is the after-school Homework Club and the Soccer Skills Club. Last year, the Homework Club met on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. The Soccer Skills Club began this spring and the Chapter plans to continue their activities throughout the year.

Natural habitat, biodiversity, resources and open space preservation will not just happen. Focus on positive changes, improved environmental conditions and education are just some of the things that can contribute to resource management, better conservation and improved biodiversity while improving our surroundings and increasing the opportunities of success for our children in this amazing region of ours.

Lisa Baker is Executive Director of Yolo County Housing (YCH). YCH is an agency dedicated to providing quality affordable housing and community development services for all and is a member of the Yolo County Climate Change Compact. The Yolo County Climate Change Compact is a group of local governments and organizations resolved to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in their operations. Ms. Baker has been with YCH for 2 years and before that was President of Baker Street Associates, LLC a full service consulting firm for local governments and housing agencies.