

Riparian Notes

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Ribbons of Gold

For many centuries, gold has been an enduring symbol of value and worth.

Dad retired a few years ago after serving 48 years with the same company. Prior to his retirement, his boss held a fancy dinner to honor Dad's service, and gave him a rare Double Eagle, gold coin in mint condition dated the year of his birth. Although the one-ounce coin had a face value of only \$20, it has an actual value many, many times greater. It was a way to tell everyone that Dad's service had been valuable, reliable and much appreciated. It is the sort of thing that is cherished and kept and protected indefinitely. In all likelihood, it will be passed along to a child or grandchild some day and its value will continue to increase.

In a similar way, the narrow bands of land that lay alongside of creeks and rivers also have a value much greater than their face value. Although these riparian areas make up only one or two percent of the total land area, the contributions and values they provide are far in excess of their rather small acreage.

No right-minded person in possession of a gold coin would dream of spending it at its face value. That would be an absurd and foolish waste. Likewise, the loss or degradation of riparian areas is also an unfortunate waste of a precious and valuable natural resource.

We could list a number of important values that creeks and riparian areas provide. Natural beauty, extraordinary fish and wildlife habitat, recreational value, livestock forage, real estate value just to name a few. But possibly the value that exceeds all of these is the very real value of the water itself and the way that riparian areas function to process that water.

Restoring creeks and riparian areas to their functional potential cannot increase the total supply of water, but it can make a big difference in the distribution of that water across the landscape and over time. In fact, many would agree that the total supply of water that we get from rainfall each year is sufficient to meet the demands, but the timing of the water supply and the location of that water is often the problem. Sometimes we see a years worth of water flushing down the creek all in one day only to find a dry creekbed, small trickles, or scattered puddles a short time later.

A properly functioning creek, along with its riparian floodplain area can help ameliorate and buffer those wild pulses of water over space and time and can help keep water more evenly distributed on the land longer. In fact, the essence of riparian function is to efficiently catch, store and release floodwaters. At the same time, a healthy riparian area captures sediment and stabilizes that sediment to improve water quality while continually building a bigger riparian sponge. The sustained release of that stored water from the banks and floodplains and from shallow water tables after rainfall events, is the way that riparian areas process water. Good, dense riparian vegetation across the entire floodplain is the key to the proper function of riparian areas. Proper riparian vegetation dissipates the destructive energy of floodwater, slows water velocity, allows sediment to drop, protects banks, and helps build floodplains.

Like gold coins that we treasure and protect, let us do everything in our power to encourage and promote the proper husbandry and stewardship of these valuable ribbons of riparian gold. The dividends are enormous.