

Restoring Watershed Health, One Tree at a Time: Volunteers Work Toward a Future for People and Salmon in the Green-Duwamish Basin

By Shelby Smith, Shared Strategy for Puget Sound



It's gray and misty as the busses roll up to the Auburn Narrows restoration site on the banks of the Green River. Seventy tenth graders from the Northwest School pile out bundled up against the cold November morning, and begin to don work gloves and galoshes. Seven hundred native shrubs and trees—their planting goal for the morning—stretch out before them in pots arranged on swaths of black fabric staked to the ground.

This morning these student volunteers join the ranks of thousands of families, community groups, schools, and concerned citizens from the Green-Duwamish River watershed and around the Sound who give a little of their personal time to make our region better for people, salmon, and all living things. For many of the students it's the first time they've ever planted a tree. "I know salmon are an important part of the ecosystem, and besides, they taste good," says one tenth grader. "Plus, it's cool to get out of school for a day!"

EarthCorps members wearing reflective yellow vests rally the teams of student volunteers and lead them out for an intense morning of power planting. The students begin to dig into their work; several hundred yards away, the Green River rolls by on its way from the rural upper watershed and farmlands of the Green River Valley, toward the industrialized Duwamish estuary and metropolitan Seattle.

The Auburn Narrows, a stretch of the Green River just upstream from the city of Auburn, provides habitat that supports both hatchery and wild Chinook during several life stages, as well as steelhead and a multitude of other wildlife. This multi-phase restoration project on 65 acres of land owned by King County includes expansion and enhancement of wetlands, construction of important side-channel habitat, and the addition of over 5000 native plants. The trees and shrubs the volunteers are planting today will improve storm water runoff and water quality, suppress invasive plant species, and enhance wildlife habitat. Overall changes made to the site will add Chinook and steelhead spawning and rearing habitat and increase net ecological function that will benefit all residents of the Green-Duwamish River watershed.

Newly created side channel habitat will benefit Chinook and other fish by providing refuge during high river flows.



As the students from the Northwest School plug away at their task, EarthCorps crew member Alexis Brandow coaches them in good planting techniques, answers questions, and conducts quality control. EarthCorps is an AmeriCorps affiliate, and its members restore salmon streams, plant native trees, remove invasive plants, restore wetlands and shorelines, and construct trails throughout the Puget Sound Region. The EarthCorps crew on site this morning has invested many hours at Auburn Narrows, preparing the site for restoration, planting trees and shrubs, and directing community volunteers.

“This EarthCorps crew alone has done three volunteer events here this fall,” Brandow says. “It’s especially successful with community groups; families get to work together for the day and experience the satisfaction of getting a lot accomplished. We love to bring people out so they have a direct experience of the outdoors—it really works!”

EarthCorps crewmember Scott Andrews adds, “It’s great to work with volunteers, especially from urban areas. As humans we spend a lot of time separating ourselves from nature, but we’re just as much a part of the earth ecosystem as all other living things. It’s important for people to experience that connection, especially if they’re from the city.”



Student volunteers from the Northwest School brave the rain to plant native trees and shrubs at Auburn Narrows.

Dennis Clark, Public Outreach & Stewardship Coordinator for the Green/Duwamish and Central Puget Sound Watershed, agrees with

Brandow and Andrews. “People need a tangible connection to the environment, especially if they come from urban areas. This kind of opportunity gives them a meaningful way to contribute to the community as well as the natural environment. Also, people don’t pay money for things they don’t value; doing this kind of work in their own watershed builds constituents who support these priorities across the region. And it’s important to remember that restoration is not simply about salmon—it’s also about watershed function and the health of people too.”

People, like salmon, need a healthy environment. We benefit from the water filtration services provided by healthy ecosystems, and reduced flooding when sections of floodplain can be reconnected to our rivers. We enjoy green spaces in our communities and the high quality of life offered by having natural areas near our cities. When diverse plants and animals are healthy, we know the environment is healthy for humans too.

After about an hour of work, it begins to rain in earnest; but, the volunteers from the Northwest School are determined to accomplish as much as possible before packing it in for the day. By the time they make their way back to the bus, dripping wet and covered in mud, they haven’t quite hit their goal of planting all 700 shrubs and trees, but they’ve managed to give a couple hundred native plants new homes. According to Josh Kahan,

Green & Duwamish River Basin Steward, about 300 people total have volunteered at the Auburn Narrows, and they have planted close to 3000 native trees and shrubs at this site.

“With the help of volunteers,” Kahan says, “we get quite a few trees planted.”



As the students board the bus to go home, the crew gathers up shovels, work gloves, and empty pots. Dennis Clark pauses for a moment to reflect. “Actually doing something changes people’s perception of who they are and what’s important to them. Once they’ve done something like this, it belongs to them.”

Dennis Clark, Public Outreach & Stewardship Coordinator for the Green/Duwamish and Central Puget Sound Watershed, stands by a pile of empty pots—evidence of a productive day of volunteer planting.