



Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

Forest FEATURES

Estuary Soup – A recipe for environmental learning Padilla Bay Earth week celebrates migratory birds

Getting people outside to experience nature up-close requires a bit of ingenuity, determination, and a dose of estuary soup. And although the day started in typical Seattle fashion, rainy and overcast, more than a 100 people visited the first Migratory Bird Festival at Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve last April.



Chef Glen Alexander demonstrates how to make the perfect estuary to Alma Dea Michelena from the International District Housing Authority.

Several natural resource agencies sponsored an outing for elders and youth from the International District in downtown Seattle and youth with the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Kids program, which exposes Hispanic kids to the outdoors and careers in natural sciences. “The appreciation of nature is the connection I want them to go home with,” said Jim Chu, international programs specialist with the Forest Service and one of the sponsors.

To help make those connections, festival workers set up three stations for visitors to learn about the estuary and wildlife, showing different aspects of a healthy ecosystem. Festival goers viewed shorebirds at the dike trail and learned about the importance of a healthy forest for migrating birds at the forest trail. The migration station was a hit, with

water, salt, detritus, eel grass, and the remaining ingredients crowded onto a chefs cart to create “Estuary Soup.”

But the recipe is only as good as the ingredients, according to the head chef, Glen Alexander, education director of the Padilla Bay Interpretive Center. “Every estuary needs three things: salt water, fresh water, and land partially surrounding it. The water has to be healthy. Forests act as a natural filter for water entering. But you need to be careful about what goes down the drain. We all want healthy shrimp, clams and salmon to eat,” he said.

Alexander described how the bottom of Padilla Bay is very shallow, flat and muddy from sediments deposited by the Skagit River, making for the perfect growing environment for eelgrass. Nearly 8,000



Festival goers handle a banana slug

acres of it grows in the bay, providing a home and nursery for many forms of wildlife such as salmon, crabs, perch and herring. Millions of worms, shrimp, clams and other invertebrates fill the bay and become food for a variety of predators like blue herons, eagles, otters, humans and more.

The forest trail gave families a small glimpse of how the forest ecosystem provides food and habitat for animals. “Birds play a key role in keeping our forests free from insect infestations,” said Libby Mills, festival instructor. “If trees leaf out before birds arrive, insects can damage the leaves, harming and killing the trees,” she said.

Walking along the trail kids spotted coyote scat, a banana slug and signs of bird habitat. One young man shouted, “It smells so outside!” producing a group laugh. One youth commented that he learned more about estuaries in 10 minutes then sitting through an entire classroom in school.

“It is very nice in the forest,” said Irene Situ, a student from the International District. “I enjoyed the stories and won’t forget how to spot western hemlocks or the fire-resistant qualities of the Douglas fir,” she said.

Jeff Giesen, education director with North Cascades Institute, said he wants the festival to build that type of awareness. “We want them to transfer what they see up here to their homes and communities,” he said.

Multiple agencies developed and conducted the festival: North Cascades Institute, US Forest Service, National Parks Service, Washington State Department of Ecology, National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, the City of Mt. Vernon, International District Housing Alliance, and Seattle Parks and Recreation.



Sokam Tom points out an eagle to Libby Mills, Irene Situ and Jim Chu of the Forest Service.



Alma Dea examines sweet sticky sap along the forest trail. She is the program coordinator of the Wilderness Innerscity Leadership Development.

*Story and photos by Kelly Sprute
April 2010*