

Cordova Ranger District Movie Stars

By Ken Hodges, Fisheries Biologist, Cordova Ranger District

When the Cordova 7th grade science class investigated “The Mystery of Odiak Pond,” their Cordova Ranger District helpers didn’t plan on becoming movie stars.

The students wrapped up a year of studying the ecology and history of Odiak Pond by producing a mini-film festival of seven videos. The instructors and students had been documenting the studies with video cameras over the course of the year. This footage, along with graphics and new action to round out the story lines, were edited together to make the students’ videos. Opening night at the Forest Service meeting room didn’t have limousines pulling up to the front door, but there were pickups and plenty of proud parents and students.

One video traced the history of the pond from a free-flowing tidal

slough and wetland to the shrunken, filled, and culverted pond it is now. Other videos documented the water quality tests and fish sampling taken over the course of the school year. The final videos summed up the threats to the pond from street runoff and other pollutants.

Forest Service GIS specialist Samantha Greenwood helped the students with historic and current aerial photographs so they could track the changes to the pond and the development of the city around it. Fisheries technicians Brian Neilson and Sean Meade went out on multiple field trips leading the fish trapping and bug sampling efforts, testing the water, and helping the students map the bathymetry (depth) of the pond.

Maybe they’re not real movie stars, but Meade and Neilson got

several cameo appearances, and along with Greenwood, got their names prominently displayed in the credits with big thank-you’s. Who needs to be a star when you have fans like this?

So what’s the big “Mystery of Odiak Pond?”

Science teacher Cara Heitz explained, “The older residents said they remembered the time when salmon used to spawn in the small creeks that ran through town and into the slough.” Now that the creeks have been diverted or paved over, no one knew if there were any salmon left.

The fish trapping showed that there are juvenile coho salmon in the pond, and the discovery of an adult carcass



Fisheries technician Brian Neilson (wearing the striped hat) assists the students with the water quality tests in Odiak Pond. Photo by Kate Alexander.



A cold winter day doesn’t stop the students from taking water samples from under the ice, conducting the chemical tests, and recording the data. Photo by Kate Alexander.

in the fall showed at least a few fish return. Kate Alexander, project coordinator with the Copper River Watershed Project, said the students are now nominating Odiak Pond to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Anadromous Waters catalog. Designating the pond as salmon habitat will help to protect the pond from the effects of development or other threats in the future.

Alexander stressed that the take-home message of the project is “Remembering that salmon live here—how can we make sure that we are living as ‘salmon friendly’ neighbors in this watershed?” The students and the Copper River Watershed Project are now thinking of ways to restore the pond and perhaps improve fish access through the culverts. Maybe someday Cordova residents will see salmon spawning in the city streams again.