

Harris River Watershed Restoration Celebration

By Carla Petersen from Prince of Wales Island and Sheila Jacobson, Tongass Fisheries Biologist
Photos by Jennifer Kane.

A day long celebration of the Harris River Restoration Project began the morning of August 25 as a large crowd of around 90 gathered in front of the Craig High School. The scheduled events for the day included a visit to the restored watershed area some 20 miles away; an evening dinner at the high school; Native dancing; awards; and a slide show.

Located in southern Southeast Alaska on the east coast of Prince of Wales Island about 50 air miles from Ketchikan, the Harris River Watershed encompasses over 19,000 acres. The Harris River flows from its headwaters in the Harris Peaks to the Harris River Bay, and has historically supported high-quality spawning and rearing grounds for three species of Pacific salmon (pink, coho and chum) as well as Dolly Varden char, cutthroat, rainbow and steelhead trout. Conditions in the watershed had deteriorated to the extent that large-scale restoration efforts were deemed necessary.

Beginning in the early 1960s, twenty-five percent of the Harris River watershed was clearcut, including nearly half of the riparian areas. There are 44 miles of roads in the watershed including the Klawock-Hollis and Hydaburg Highways which bisect the watershed and connect the communities throughout the island to the Inter-island Ferry. Large woody debris was subsequently removed from the river system and the road system was a constant source of stream choking



Left to right: Tribal Council member Viola Burgess, Craig District Ranger Francisco Sanchez, and USDA Under Secretary Harris Sherman visit during the Harris River Celebration.

sediment. Landslides and other mass wasting events blocked or degraded salmon and trout spawning and rearing habitat.

Beginning in the early 2000s, the Craig Ranger District began collecting aquatic habitat and road condition data in the Harris with the goal of systematically identifying disturbances, and quantifying effects to aquatic and terrestrial resources to provide context for the restoration effort. A suite of restoration opportunities were identified and a comprehensive restoration plan developed. Restoration projects focused on reducing erosion from roads and landslides, eliminating fish barriers, promoting natural in-stream and floodplain processes, improving aquatic habitat complexity and diversity through large wood supplementation, improving bank stability and reducing diversion potential, improving hydrologic connectivity, and improving wildlife habitat.

After over a decade of hard work, the Harris River watershed is considered a triumph for restoration and

partnerships on the Tongass. The substantial accomplishments of the Harris River project demonstrate the integrated nature of this effort and could not have happened without the long-term commitment from a broad spectrum of public, private, and NGO partners and the overwhelming support of the communities of Prince of Wales Island. Upon completion, workers will have:

- Restored 11 miles of productive salmonid mainstream and tributary streams.
- Enhanced access to nine miles of stream and eight acres of ponds for coho salmon and steelhead trout through manipulation of a natural passage partial barrier.
- Stored or decommissioned eight miles of road to improve hydrologic connectivity and road fill stabilization to reduce sediment delivery to streams.
- Thinned 350 acres of riparian habitat to restore stream riparian functions and accelerate the long-term recovery of in-stream habitat and stream processes.



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- Thinned 150 acres of upland young growth to reestablish understory vegetation and multi-storied forest structure for wildlife.
- Placed more than 2,300 logs, including some with intact rootwads attached, in the Harris River and its key tributaries to improve fish habitat.
- Constructed a parking lot, two trailheads, and an extensive trail system primarily from old logging roads for interpretive use and to provide fishing access along the Harris River and major tributary stream.

As participants chatted in small groups in front of the high school Thursday morning, director of events Francisco Sanchez, the U.S. Forest Service District Ranger from Craig, stepped forward to start the celebration with welcoming remarks and the introduction of several honored guests including Harris Sherman, U.S. Department of Agriculture Undersecretary for Natural Resources and the Environment. Sanchez also introduced U.S. Forest Service Alaska Regional Forester Beth Pendleton, who accompanied Sherman throughout his Alaska visit.

Out at the restoration site, everyone gathered around as Forest Service Fisheries Biologist Sheila Jacobson spoke earnestly about the importance of improving habitat conditions, not only for enhancement of many species, but also for the benefits to sport, subsistence and commercial fisheries, jobs created and recreational uses.

Down the trail, Mike McClellan, a research ecologist for the Tongass National Forest Pacific Northwest Research Station specializing in trees and vegetation, spoke enthusiastically about different ways of thinning and pruning or introducing alder to enhance sustainable longevity of forest and riparian habitat.



Bob Gubernick talks to the crowd while wading in “Gàndlaay Hàanaa,” the Haida name meaning beautiful stream.

Light penetration to the forest floor is needed for a healthy understory of forage plants for wildlife, he said.

In order to interpret the stream restoration and forest research within the Harris River watershed, the Craig and Thorne Bay Districts’ Recreation Program constructed a half-mile-long interpretive loop with six interpretive signs near the popular Harris Recreation Area. The trail system was opened to the public during the Harris Watershed Celebration with a Prince of Wales style ribbon cutting—not by breaking a bottle of champagne over it, but by what else, sawing through a log with a chainsaw! Cheers went up all around as Katie Rooks, Recreation Technician, revved up the chainsaw, cut through the ribbon-laden log and officially opened the trail for the tour.

The interpretive trail was constructed by the Recreation and Youth Conservation Corps crews, employing nine adults and six teens in a two-month effort. The interpretive trail connects to a two-mile hiking trail that stretches between two of the main island highways. As part

of the restoration effort, three new bridges were constructed over fish streams. The entire trail is now nearly connected, with one large section of the Harris River left requiring a bridge. The hiking trail offers access to beautiful fishing and picnicking sites along the newly restored Harris River. With new signage, parking, and trail surfacing, the Harris Recreation Area is now a magnet recreation destination for fishing and hiking.

Lunch was served at a covered picnic area followed by a renaming ceremony at Fubar Creek. Local entities, dissatisfied with the creek’s name, agreed to submit a proposal to the Alaska Historical Commission and the U.S. Board on Geographical Names to officially change the name to *Gàndlaay Hàanaa*, which means “beautiful stream” in the Haida language, a name proffered by the Hydaburg Tribal Council.

“Fubar,” an adjective describing something seriously or irreparably damaged, would no longer be an appropriate designation for this creek. Restoration work along the creek

now directs the flow back to its historic channel, reopening 1,000 feet of diverse salmonid spawning and rearing habitat.

Signers of the renaming proposal were Harris Sherman, Undersecretary, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture; Beth Pendleton, Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service Alaska Region; John Huestis, Craig Tribal Administrator, Craig Tribal Association; Donald Nickerson Jr., Vice President, Klawock Cooperative Association; Viola Burgess, Tribal Council, Hydaburg Cooperative Association; Richard Peterson, President, Organized Village of Kasaan; and Anthony Christianson, Mayor of Hydaburg.

Under the bridge, Gåndlaay Hàanaa teemed with salmon behind Bob Gubernick, a fluvial geomorphologist formerly with the Tongass National Forest's Petersburg Supervisor's Office, now relocated to Minnesota. Gubernick stood in the river speaking ardently about the restoration as salmon splashed behind him, en route up river. He pointed out that Alaska's watershed problems, if addressed early on, are in a great position to see a quick recovery of fish in the streams compared to the Lower 48, where it may take a decade before a stream is healthy enough to support fish.

The Nature Conservancy's Rob Bosworth joined Gubernick and the salmon in the river as onlookers stretched out across the length of the bridge in the afternoon sunshine. Bosworth expressed his thanks to all participants who had worked cooperatively to accomplish the restoration, saying the Nature Conservancy likes to be the glue that holds the family of partners together as a group effort that can accomplish much more than individual efforts.

Back at the Craig High School, a



Back row: Viola Burgess, of the Tribal Council, Hydaburg Cooperative Association; Don Nickerson Jr., vice president of the Klawock Cooperative Association; Anthony Christianson, mayor of Hydaburg ; John Huestis, Craig Tribal Administrator for the Craig Tribal Association; ; and Richard Peterson, president of the Organized Village of Kasaan. Front: Beth Pendleton, Regional Forester, Alaska Region; and Harris Sherman, Undersecretary of the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

banquet of salmon, halibut and other dishes awaited the Harris River hikers and numerous others who had arrived for the evening events. After dinner the Klawock Heenya Dancers honored the large crowd with several songs and dances. Presentations then followed in the auditorium. Gubernick talked everyone through a synopsis of the restoration efforts including a slide show filled with before and after photos. Several other speakers related their appreciation for all the energy and hard work put into the project, and their good feeling about the partnerships that continue to take shape among many different groups.

USDA Undersecretary Harris Sherman, regarding the watershed restoration efforts, said that the impressive work speaks for itself. Sherman sees a new vision for conservation in America, focused on forests as a repository of our water

resources and much more. He spoke of protection for wildlife, clean air, the high amount of carbon sequestered by forests and the critical importance of forests for fish. Undersecretary Sherman praised the increase in partnerships and collaborations between government agencies, conservation groups and other stakeholders.

Awards followed to congratulate and thank long-term participants in the Harris River Restoration Project for the U.S. Forest Service, the Nature Conservancy, Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game, the community of Hollis, the National Forest Foundation, the Alaska Tribal Leaders and Trout Unlimited. The numerous contractors who worked on the various projects were also thanked.

Nature photographer Amy Gulick ended the day's events with a slide show presentation relating to her new book, "Salmon in the Trees."