New York Field Office

Riparian Habitat Restoration on Private Land

Streambanks Provide Important Wildlife Habitat

Our largest rivers and streams and their banks have always been in the public eye, whether as sites for industry, as places to recreate, or as food sources. However, smaller and more numerous tributary streams and their banks have been easy to overlook. Often nameless and too small for boating, swimming, fishing, damming, or development, they have not received much public attention until recently. Today we recognize that small tributary streams and their streambank, or riparian, habitats are important natural resources and take steps to protect and preserve them.

How did this happen? In part, from the science of ecology. Investigation into the source of excessive nutrients and sediments in our major coastal bays, like the Delaware and Chesapeake, led scientists upstream, miles away from the ocean, to small streams in farm pastures, backyards, rural villages, and towns. Their studies revealed that the pollutants wreaking havoc in bays and estuaries were coming from many and difference sources throughout the watershed.

Riparian Habitat Destruction Causes a Watershed Problem

Wildlife biologists, ecologists, naturalists, birdwatchers, hunters, and anglers recognize the diversity of wildlife found along streams or natural watercourses. In this transition area between water and land, the ecological sum of interaction between land and stream environments is greater than its parts. The ground's surface and subsurface water replenish a stream's supply. Riparian vegetation filters runoff from the ground surface, ensuring that most sediments and nutrients remain on land. It also moderates water temperature by shading the stream from the sun. Water evaporating from streams cools the surrounding air. Streams provide moisture required by riparian plants. Vegetation, along with terrestrial life forms, enter streams to decompose and provide nutrients for many insect and fish species. Stream organisms provide food for a host of land-dwelling species.

The Connecticut, Hudson, Delaware, and Susquehanna Rivers empty into estuaries and great bays along the Atlantic Coast. Bays, estuaries, rivers, and pasture streams are connected within a watershed. Protecting and preserving riparian habitat in these watersheds not only enhances fish and wildlife resources along the rivers and streams, it also helps ensure that bays and estuaries downstream will continue to sustain fish and wildlife resources.

Riparian Habitat Restoration Success Story

In 1994, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program began a partnership with the Central and Western New York Chapters of The Nature Conservancy and private landowners to preserve and enhance French Creek–one of the Conservancy's Last Great Places.

French Creek, beginning in the foothills of the Allegheny Plateau in the southwest corner of New York State, forms a 1,200-square-mile watershed with significant biological diversity. Its waters are home to 66 species of fish and 25 species of freshwater mussels. It supports 98 rare or endangered plant and animal species, including the endangered clubshell and northern riffleshell mussels. Workers have erected high tensile wire fence along portions of the creek to limit cattle access to the stream's banks. This will protect the streambank and the riparian habitat it supports.

Where You Fit In

Riparian habitat needs to be protected and restored. Because much of it occurs on private land, both landowners and our wildlife resources can benefit. Techniques like streambank fencing are low cost and provide many benefits. By limiting livestock access to streams, riparian vegetation returns and flourishes, pasture management is enhanced, risks to animal health and injury declines, and wildlife habitat and water quality in the watershed improve.

The Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program provides an opportunity for private landowners and organizations to restore and protect riparian habitat. Almost any landowner can qualify. The Service can help fence streams, seed and establish vegetation, and more. Landowners whose projects are selected sign a voluntary agreement with the Service to maintain the restored riparian site for a minimum of 10 years. Landowners need not grant public access to the site, but they must grant access for Service personnel to verify compliance with the terms and conditions of our agreement.

For further information, contact: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 3817 Luker Road, Cortland, NY 13045. (607) 753-9334.