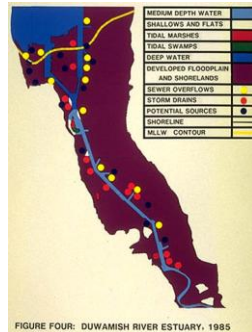
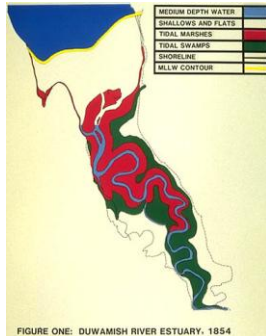


Alison Farmer

Bioregional Field Studies: the Duwamish River

Paper Four – April, 2008



Duwamish River in 1854 in its “wild” natural state and again in 1985 after man “tamed” the river. Which one looks more alive?

Over the last century the Duwamish River has had its wild spirit harnessed. It’s dangerous, ferocious seasonal torrents have been calmed, its meandering bends have been reined in and its wide shallow smiling mouth now stands as a deep puckered round look of pain – ouch!!

With all the danger behind them, man has been able to use this domesticated beast for his own growth and prosperity. As with many other animals in the past, we have found ways to use the river for transport and food. It does not matter about the look, only the function. Only when the function stops to we stop to take a look. In the 80’s & 90’s small groups who saw the Duwamish Rivers pain attempted to open our eyes, but it was not until the Chinook Salmon were listed as “threatened” under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1999 did we finally see. The salmon were clearly in danger and it has highlighted the discovery of a “dangerous” river system, this time however the danger is no longer its visible wild destructive power but its hidden corralled deadly toxins. The Lower Duwamish River was declared a Superfund site in 2001 by the Environmental Protection Agency and is one of the most polluted sites in the country. A new law against polluting a salmon habitat now stands as a protection for our own. We are all part of the same ecosystem and the same toxins that flow in the rivers outside us, now flow in the rivers within us. Heavy metals don’t float and are not being carried away; accumulations of mercury and PCB’s now threaten to suffocate our growth and our ecosystem.

A Superfund site has never before been cleaned up and discord between the Source Control Working group responsible for the pollution and a Focus Group of concerned parties threatened to leave the Duwamish open for further poisonous downfall. However, in 2004 the Department of Ecology became an umbrella for a brighter future. At the moment the Duwamish River Clean Up Coalition has managed to create little pockets of relief for the river and even though the pockets are still being regularly filled with contaminants, there are many people watching with their eyes now wide open. The Duwamish has always been alive and will always be dangerous; I personally would rather be able to see the danger.